

Valentine

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Chapter 1

"Proto-Vulcan."

"Throwback."

"Genetic mistake."

"The defect is inoperable. There is no recommended course of treatment."

"The house of Sukaan would be diminished by his inclusion."

"Perhaps we were in error when we decided to suppress his first Pon Farr. We have only prolonged his suffering."

"The family elders were quite correct when they forbade him the Kahs'wan. One without the ability to think logically and control his emotions should not be given a voice in our house."

"He will not live long."

"He will not prosper."

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"Excuse me."

Valaan opened his eyes, and looked curiously at the young man who was speaking to him.

"The shuttle has landed. It looked as if you were asleep." The young man said hesitantly.

"I was. Thank you." Valaan said softly, then reached under his seat to pick up his small carry-on bag.

"Yeah. No problem."

As Valaan stood, he noticed that nearly everyone else had left the shuttle.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, then worked to hide any trace of emotion from his expression as he approached the shuttle's door.

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After retrieving his tattered duffel bag, Valaan stepped away from the shuttle, and noticed that there were about fifty or so people standing in loosely formed lines, facing a large, majestic building.

He quickly walked to take his place at the end of one of the lines and dropped his duffel bag on the ground at his side.

A Starfleet officer approached and looked over the group before briskly saying, "I am Commander De Gama. Welcome to the Starfleet Academy."

"Take a moment to look around you. One third of the people standing here will be gone before the end of the month." The Commander said seriously.

Valaan cautiously looked down the row of new cadets and thought about Commander De Gama's words.

"Of those that survive the initial cut, fully half will either choose to leave, or be asked to, before completing their training." Commander De Gama said ominously.

"This isn't a party. It isn't a social club. Those of you who are here dreaming about piloting a starship, keep in mind that 95% of your classmates have exactly the same dream. It comes true for about one out of every 300 graduates. Only the best of the best make it." Commander De Gama said firmly as he looked up and down the rows.

"If any of you aren't ready to dedicate one hundred percent of your effort, and attention toward your studies, the shuttles are right there. You'll be saving us all a lot of time and trouble if you just get on one now."

After a moment to look over the assembled group, Commander De Gama said, "Good enough. Then let's begin."

"This is Dr. White, he is a counselor as well as being a Lieutenant Commander. I'm going to ask him to take the first group of you who are here for the accelerated training course." Commander De Gama said seriously, then after a nod at Dr. White, he stepped away.

"E-1 Crewman training... stand by me when I call your name." Dr. White said as he took a few steps back from the gathering.

Valaan quickly picked up his duffel bag and was ready to go when called.

"Mitchell?" Dr. White asked, more to his padd than to the group before him.

"Yes sir?" A young woman asked cautiously.

"Just taking role. Stand over here by me... Harper?" Dr. White asked as he looked at the group.

"Yes sir." Answered a timid young man who looked to be on the younger side of 18 years old.

"I'm guessing that you're Valaan." Dr. White said with a glance in Valaan's direction.

"Yes sir." Valaan said, trying to keep from smiling as he moved to join the group.

From his cursory inspection, it seemed to Valaan that he was the only obvious nonhuman among the new cadets.

Dr. White glanced around the substantial gathering and asked, "Chu?"

"Yes sir." One of the young men said quietly before joining the increasing group at Dr. White's side.

"Carter?" Dr. White asked cautiously.

"Deidre Carter?" Dr. White asked again, then made a note on his padd.

"Sharan?" Dr. White called as he glanced over the group one time, then made another note.

"Wyndham?" Dr. White asked and another young man walked to join the group.

"Richardson?" Dr. White called out, then waited for a moment.

"Levis Richardson?" Dr. White called, a bit more loudly, then made a note on his padd.

"Those who weren't called, wait and someone will be here to attend to the next group shortly." Dr. White said quickly to the remaining people.

"Come along." Dr. White said, as he led his group into the building.

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After leading them onto an elevator, and selecting the floor that he wanted, the counselor turned and said, "I'm going to be the adviser for this group. All that means is that if you have any questions or concerns about what is expected of you at the Starfleet Academy, you may come and ask me. I'll do my best to answer your questions or guide you to resources so you can help yourself."

The group walked off the elevator into an empty hallway.

"Let me see..." Dr. White said as he looked at his padd, then smiled as he continued, "This is simple enough."

"As you probably know from the admissions literature you were provided, cadet officers share quarters, two to a room. Cadet Crewmen are housed in barracks." Dr. White said as he started walking.

"A duck with seven tongues lives here." He said as he stopped outside a door.

Bewildered looks flashed around the group.

Valaan fought to maintain an emotionless expression, then purposefully quirked an eyebrow of inquiry at Dr. White.

"Just a little mnemonic device to help you remember where you'll be living. A duck with seven tongues, Block D, room 7 T." Dr. White said as he opened the door.

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The group walked into the room and found four, two-tiered bunk beds jutting out from one wall. Between the beds were cabinets, each one had a small placard with a name.

"In the next few days, it's possible that you'll be receiving cadets to fill the other three beds. For right now, find your assigned bunks and stow your gear. As soon as you're ready, I'll take you on a brief tour, so you'll be able to find your way around." Dr. White said seriously.

Valaan walked down the rows of beds and spotted his name on one of the cabinets. Since his name was on the lower cabinet, he reasoned that his would be the bottom bunk.

"You have a small lavatory in here, the shower facilities are at the end of the hall." Dr. White said as he watched the group finding their bunks and stowing their belongings.

Valaan efficiently stowed his duffel bag, then walked to the end of his bunk to await further instructions.

"I'm on top of you." A young female cadet said as she walked to Valaan's side.

Valaan quirked an eyebrow at her in question.

She giggled and said, "I mean, I've got the top bunk."

Valaan gave a single nod, then waited as she quickly put her gear away. He had noticed that the cabinet above his was labeled 'Mitchell'.

Based on their momentary interaction, Valaan already knew that he liked her. She seemed to be a very friendly, and open type of person.

"It looks like all of you are ready. I think our first job will be to get you out of those civvies, and into some proper cadet uniforms." Dr. White said, then started walking toward the door.

"I'm Melanie." The young woman said as she fell into step at Valaan's side.

"I am Valaan." He said as they walked down the hallway.

Valaan was paying careful attention to where Dr. White was leading them in case he needed to find his way back to the barracks on his own for some reason.

When they finally stopped outside a door marked 'quartermaster', Melanie quietly said, "I think it's really great that you're going to be training with us. I thought that most Vulcans automatically went into the officer's training course."

"I believe that is most common." Valaan said quietly, not wanting to admit that he hadn't been able to meet the minimum test requirements for the officer's program.

"I'm going to leave you here while I try to locate our missing cadets. Once you've received your uniforms, return to the barracks and I'll meet you there." Dr. White said, then turned to leave.

One of the young men walked through the door that they were standing before, and the rest of the group followed.

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"My, you're a big one." The quartermaster said, as he scanned Valaan to get the measurements for his uniforms.

"Yes sir." Valaan said, fighting to keep any trace of offense from his voice.

The only outward manifestation of his difference from other Vulcans was his 'larger than average' stature.

"You don't call me sir. I work for a living." The quartermaster said firmly. "I'm a crewman, an E-5."

"How am I to address you?" Valaan asked cautiously.

"Well, if you **MUST** use a title, you can call me Petty Officer Altman, but if you're asking what I'd prefer, I'd rather that you just call me Phil."

"As you like." Valaan said in his best Vulcan formal tone, then added in a more casual voice, "Phil."

The quartermaster was a little bit surprised that the Vulcan had chosen to use his name, but before he could think too much about it, he noticed Valaan's measurements and shook his head, expressing his frustration.

"I'm afraid that we're not going to have any uniforms in stock that are going to fit you properly. We're not used to having to outfit a body builder... at least not one as big as you." Phil said frankly.

"I rarely find clothing made in my size." Valaan said with resignation.

"I'll go ahead and get you something for now. If you can tell me where your barracks are, I can get with you later about alterations." Phil said seriously.

The image of a duck with seven tongues flashed in Valaan's mind and he couldn't restrain a smile as he said, "D 7 T."

Phil looked on with surprise at the amused smile, but quickly made note of Valaan's barracks.

"If you'll wait over there now, I'll get the rest of the measurements before I go to get everyone's uniforms." The quartermaster said professionally.

"Thank you Phil." Valaan said sincerely, then stepped away so that Melanie Mitchell could step forward to get measured.

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"When you get back to your barracks, you should change into your uniforms. You're cadets now and you're supposed to wear your proper uniforms any time you're on duty... which is pretty much all the time." Phil said as he handed out the jumpsuit uniforms.

"All the time?" One of the young men, Cadet Chu, asked cautiously.

"If your group completes all your assigned tasks and tests, you may be granted a day pass as a reward. You can wear your civvies at that time. Otherwise, you'll be expected to be in uniform." Phil said seriously.

Cadet Chu nodded that he understood the answer.

"Valaan, your uniform isn't going to fit correctly, but if anyone asks, let them know that it's the best we can do at the moment. We should have fitted uniforms for you later today, or by tomorrow at the latest." Phil said to Valaan with a slight smile.

"Should anyone ask, I will inform them. Thank you, Phil." Valaan said gratefully.

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"Dr. White isn't here yet. What do you think we should do?" Cadet Chu asked as he looked around the barracks.

"We were instructed to change into our uniforms." Valaan said, consciously working to make his voice toneless and impassive.

"Yeah... Do you want to go in and change first?" Cadet Chu asked, directing his question to Melanie.

"Sure. It'll just take me a minute." She said, then walked to the bathroom at the far end of the room.

"We could change in here while she's doing that." Cadet Wyndham said cautiously.

"Yeah. Let's." Cadet Chu said as he started to undress.

Valaan undid the sash on his Vulcan desert attire and quickly shrugged it off.

"Oh man!" Cadet Wyndham said as he stared at Valaan.

"Is something wrong?" Valaan asked, self consciously.

"No, I just... I never thought a Vulcan could be so... big." Cadet Wyndham said in amazement.

"Most aren't." Valaan said, fighting to keep any tone of emotion out of his voice.

He quickly skinned off his worn soft linen pants, then stepped into his crewman's jumpsuit uniform.

One by one the others in the room got over their surprise at Valaan's appearance and began to change as well.

As Valaan was dressing, he caught a glimpse of something unusual. The youngest of the cadets, Harper, seemed to have something that looked like a medical device attached to his wrist. But before Valaan could see enough to identify what it was, Cadet Harper had pulled on the upper part of his jumpsuit and the device was hidden under his sleeve.

When Valaan finally got his own jumpsuit completely on, he began to close the front and realized what the quartermaster had been talking about.

While the jumpsuit was loose and ill fitting around his waist, the top of the jumpsuit was virtually sucked tight to his skin. To make matters worse, the legs of the jumpsuit uniform didn't quite make it all the way to his ankles.

"Was I in there that long?" Melanie asked with a chuckle as she walked out of the lavatory to find everyone else dressed.

"We just thought it would be faster if we changed while you were in there." Cadet Chu said frankly.

Melanie nodded, then turned her gaze toward Valaan.

"Are you sure you're wearing that thing right?" Melanie asked with a pained expression.

"I can't think of another way to wear it." Valaan said and wasn't able to restrain a small smile when he said it.

"I guess not." Melanie said with an answering smile, then whispered, "But just so you know, it looks pretty bad."

"The quartermaster said that more appropriate uniforms would be provided as soon as possible." Valaan said seriously.

Melanie thought for a moment, then said, "Oh yeah. I think I heard him say something to you about that. Well good. I'm glad you won't have to go around looking like that for the next few months."

Valaan nodded his agreement.

"Do you guys want to get unpacked while we wait for Dr. White?" Cadet Chu asked casually.

"It sounds like a plan." Cadet Wyndham said as he moved to his bunk.

Valaan gave a single nod, then walked to his locker.

"So what's your specialty?" Melanie asked as she started to take her clothes out of her suitcase and put them away.

"I qualified for engineering." Valaan said carefully, remembering how worried he had been that his test scores wouldn't be good enough to qualify him for anything.

"Oh, you're lucky. You'll probably get a posting right away. I'm medical. So it could take a while before they have a place for me." Melanie said casually.

"I see that you're making yourselves at home." Dr. White said from the doorway. "Good. Finish up and I'll show you around the academy facilities and let you know where to report in the morning."

Everyone hurried to finish unpacking, then as each was finished, they moved to the end of their bunks to wait for further instructions."

"All of you..." Dr. White began to say, then stopped when he saw Valaan and amended, "Most of you look very good in your uniforms."

"The quartermaster said that he did not have the required size of uniform for me in stock. He is arranging for alterations to be made and I should have more appropriate uniforms by morning."

"Good." Dr. White said with a pained look at Valaan, then said to the group, "Come with me and I'll show you around."

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The group walked around the lower levels of the academy and were taken on a tour of the classrooms and the public areas. Afterward, they went outside and were shown the practice field behind the dorm building.

Dr. White concluded the tour back inside the main building at the mess hall.

"Go ahead and get yourselves something to eat. At 18:00 hours, report to the auditorium for orientation. You'll also receive your study materials at that time." Dr. White said professionally.

He looked around to see that everyone understood what he was saying, then left them to have their dinner.

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"It looks good." Cadet Chu said as he led the way through the serving line.

"Yes. A nice selection." Melanie observed.

"I don't know what that is." Cadet Wyndham said as he pointed at a dish of dark orange vegetables.

"That is a Vulcan root vegetable. The name roughly translates into your language to mean... Hell's Radish?" Valaan finished uncertainly.

"I think I'll pass." Cadet Wyndham said as he moved his serving tray down the line.

"Aren't you going to have some?" Melanie asked Valaan when he also moved past the Vulcan food selection.

"No. I believe it would be best for me to adjust to eating Human food. I think it would be counterproductive for me to have Vulcan food at this time." Valaan said as he made two selections from the hot vegetable side dishes.

"Are you a vegetarian?" Melanie asked when she noticed that Valaan had bypassed the meat selections completely.

"Not strictly. But I grew up among vegetarians and never acquired a taste for meat." Valaan said casually.

"I guess that makes sense." Melanie said, then walked to the drink station.

Valaan walked past her to a well stocked salad bar and prepared himself a plate full of salad.

"That looks good." Melanie said as she moved to his side.

"Yes. The variety of fruits and vegetables provided is most appealing." Valaan said, then moved back to the drink station to get himself a glass of water.

"I see an empty table over there." Cadet Chu said as he motioned toward the far side of the room.

Valaan and Melanie fell into step, side by side, as they followed.

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"We have another cadet for your group. His ship was delayed." Dr. White said as he led an Andorian boy to the table.

He was a slender boy and appeared to be young, probably less than 18 years old. The black silky robe he was wearing hung loosely on his slender frame. His delicate facial features might have been considered attractive except for the cold, distrusting look in his eyes as he looked over the people sitting around the table.

"This is Cadet Crewman Sharan." Dr. White said to the group, then turned to the boy and said, "Why don't you get yourself something to eat, and your bunkmates can show you where to stow your gear afterward?"

"Yes sir." The boy said quietly and sat his silvery bag by an empty chair at the table before walking toward the serving line.

"Would you take Cadet Sharan to the quartermaster to get him some uniforms?" Dr. White asked hopefully.

"Yes. Of course." Cadet Chu said immediately.

"Let me know if he needs any help adjusting to being here." Dr. White said with concern, then rushed away.

"I wonder what's up with that?" Cadet Chu asked curiously.

"Yeah, they were all, like, 'you'll either fit in or leave', when we got here." Cadet Wyndham said speculatively.

"It doesn't matter. He's part of our group, so we'll work together to help him." Melanie said frankly.

Valaan smiled at her statement and nodded his agreement.

"I guess we should introduce ourselves." Cadet Chu said hesitantly. "I'm Richard Chu, you can call me Rich if you want."

Everyone smiled and seemed to be in agreement, then Melanie said, "I'm Melanie Mitchell, and I guess you can call me Mel."

After a moment, Valaan realized that he was next in line and quietly said, "I am Valaan. You may call me Valaan."

There were a few chuckles at the statement, then Cadet Wyndham said, "I'm Roger Wyndham and I guess you can call me Roger."

Smiles and nods went around the table, then everyone waited for the quiet, young looking teen to introduce himself.

"I'm Terry Harper." He said shyly, in a barely audible voice.

Silence fell over the group as no one seemed to have any idea of how to strike up a conversation with a group of complete strangers,

Sharan walked to the silent table and took a seat. He felt distinctly uncomfortable with the silence.

Finally he asked, "Should I sit elsewhere so you can feel free to talk?"

"No." Melanie said immediately, then quickly added, "We're not talking because none of us know what to say. We all arrived today, just the same as you."

Sharan looked around the table and his gaze finally settled on Valaan.

"I heard that Vulcans thought the duties of a crewman were better suited to other races and a waste of their abilities." Sharan said coldly.

"I had heard that Andorians believed that the duties of a crewman were beneath their dignity." Valaan said simply, then added, "It appears that we were both misinformed."

After a moment to consider, Sharan nodded and grudgingly said, "It appears that we were."

"I am Valaan, and if you should need any assistance, you need only ask." Valaan said carefully.

"That'll be the day." Sharan said with a snort of derision.

The others around the table were staring at the pair of aliens, not understanding the automatic animosity between them.

"He's only offering to help you." Melanie said gently.

"He's doing what all Vulcans do, he's acting like he's superior to everyone else." Sharan said angrily.

"Does that only go for Vulcans, or will you be upset if the rest of us offer to help you?" Roger asked quietly.

"I don't need anyone's help! I can do things for myself." Sharan snapped.

"Fair enough. We won't offer." Roger said reasonably.

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"If you're finished with your meal, we'll take you to the quartermaster to get your uniforms." Cadet Chu said in a neutral tone.

"I'll find it myself." Sharan said firmly.

"We're not doing this to help you. We're following our orders." Cadet Chu said seriously.

Sharan looked around the table, then picked up his tray and walked toward the drop-off window.

The rest of the group exchanged glances as they stood more slowly to do the same.

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After getting Cadet Sharan's uniforms, the group made their way back to the barracks.

"Your bed is over there, top bunk." Cadet Wyndham said as he made a casual gesture. "You need to change into your uniform so we can go to our orientation."

Cadet Sharan quickly stowed his gear, then began to take off the robe that he was wearing.

"The bathroom is right over there." Cadet Wyndham said frankly.

Sharan looked around the group and said, "I realize that I will have to conform to certain of your Human customs while I am here. But I refuse to behave as though I am ashamed of my body."

"It's just common courtesy when there is a lady in the room." Cadet Chu said seriously.

"If she's offended, then *she* can leave." Sharan said as he continued to undress. "I have a beautiful body that I am proud of."

"It's okay guys." Melanie said quickly, "I'm pretty sure that I'll be able to control myself."

A few smiles and snickers went around the room at the comment as everyone waited for Sharan to change into his jumpsuit uniform.

When Sharan was finished changing, Cadet Chu asked, "Are we all ready to go?"

Murmurs of agreement went through the group as they headed toward the door.

"Sharan." Melanie said as she walked to his side.

He looked at her with caution and seemed ready for another verbal battle.

"You do have a beautiful body. I'm glad you don't want to hide it." She said, then preceded him out the door.

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When the group arrived in the auditorium, they found other new students dressed in their cadet uniforms and talking in small groups.

After a few minutes of standing and waiting, a speaker on the stage told everyone to take a seat.

The welcoming speech was long and boring and provided very little useful information.

The speaker did make a point of telling the cadet crewmen, several times, that they would be expected at 06:00 on the practice field behind the dorm building.

At the end of the speech, an ensign called for them to form a line, then the slow process of getting their study materials began.

Some students were just given a data padd. A few were given 'tools of the trade' of their respective chosen fields.

Valaan's kit contained tools and a tester, as well as a myriad of different electronic and mechanical components.

Terry was the last of them to get outfitted.

As soon as he was ready, the group walked together to D 7 T.

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"I sleep nude." Sharan announced to the room.

"Well, it's against regulations, but I won't tell." Roger Wyndham said without concern as he gathered the things he would need to shower.

"As long as Mel doesn't mind, it's alright with me." Richard Chu said casually as he got sleep pants out of his locker.

"I've got three older brothers. Knock yourself out." Melanie said as she fussed over the things in her cabinet.

Valaan was uncertain if he should take his shower at the same time as the others, but decided that, given Sharan's behavior, any unintentional lapse in proper etiquette would likely be overlooked.

He got a pair of gray sleep pants, an oversized shirt, a towel and a small case of toiletries out of his locker, then joined Roger and Rich as they walked into the hall.

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"Hey, look! We've got lockers in here too. That'll be handy." Roger said as he placed some things on the counter by one of the sinks.

"And a fresher. This'll be a lot better than having to do laundry all the time." Rich said as he started to take off his jumpsuit uniform.

Valaan nervously began to remove his uniform, not entirely certain he was doing the right thing.

As soon as Roger was out of his clothes, he tied a towel around his waist.

"Valaan, do you know how to run one of these things? I've never used one." Rich asked as he stood naked in front of the fresher.

Trying to look casual, Valaan tied a towel around his waist, then walked to Rich's side.

"Drop your clothing in, then press the start button." Valaan said, then dropped his own clothing into the fresher.

"I guess you couldn't make it any simpler than that." Rich said with a chuckle.

"Is it okay if I come in?" Terry asked timidly from the doorway.

"You don't have to ask. Come on." Roger said with a cautious look at Terry, then walked into the shower room.

Rich followed as Valaan looked at Terry with concern.

"It appears that you are uncertain of what is acceptable behavior in this new situation." Valaan said quietly.

"Yeah." Terry said as he slowly started to undress.

"I am new here, just as you are, and I am just as uncertain. Be comforted in knowing that you are not alone." Valaan said, then picked up his soap and shampoo as he started to walk to the shower room.

"Thanks." Terry said sincerely.

Valaan noticed that Terry stopped just short of revealing the device on his forearm before glancing up at him.

Valaan only paused long enough to give him a single nod, then continued into the shower room.

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The shower room was divided into two banks of showers separated by a tiled wall. Rich and Roger had chosen the showers on the right, so Valaan automatically walked to the first shower on the left.

As Valaan started his shower, movement drew his attention and he noticed Terry walking slowly into the shower room with him.

Valaan made a casual gesture toward the hooks on the wall, just inside the door.

Terry nodded, then took off his towel and hung it on one of the hooks.

Valaan went back to showering, but turned suddenly when he heard Terry say, "Shit!"

He turned in time to see Terry slam his shoulder into the wall, then fight to maintain his footing.

"Do you need help, Terry?" Valaan asked cautiously.

"No. Just give me a second. I'm not hurt; just frustrated." Terry said as he rubbed his shoulder.

Valaan's look of concern prompted Terry to say, "I'm fine. Really."

After a moment, Valaan asked, "If at some point you are not fine, will you ask me for help?"

Terry took small, careful steps toward the shower as he seemed to be considering.

"Yeah. Okay." Terry finally relented. "If I need help, I promise that I'll ask."

"It appears that you did not bring soap. You may share mine." Valaan said quietly.

"Oh, um, thank you Valaan." Terry said hesitantly.

"You seem tense. Allow the warm water to relax you." Valaan said as he turned under the shower's spray.

After getting his shower set to a comfortable temperature, Terry closed his eyes and stepped under the water.

"Valaan." Rich said quietly from the doorway to get his attention.

"Thanks for helping him calm down." Rich said, then tilted his head slightly in Terry's direction.

Valaan smiled at the words of appreciation and gave a single nod, then went back to the business of showering.

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"Thanks for the soap and shampoo." Terry said, trying to sound casual even though he was obviously concentrating on each step he was taking.

"If we're going to share a room, we should be willing to help each other." Valaan said carefully as he started to dry himself.

"Is that logical?" Terry asked curiously as he opened his locker and took out a small pouch.

Valaan was surprised by the question, and finally answered, "I don't know. But if we are concerned for each other and help each other to succeed, our time here will be much more pleasant."

"Yeah. I think so too." Terry said with a smile, then sat heavily on the bench.

Valaan noticed that his jumpsuit uniform had been taken out of the fresher and was neatly folded and sitting on the bench in front of his locker.

As Valaan was beginning to get dressed in his sleep pants, he noticed Terry taking the small device out of the pouch.

Although Valaan didn't stop and watch what Terry was doing, by the time he was finished dressing, he had seen Terry put a device on both wrists and both ankles.

As soon as the last unit was attached and activated, Terry seemed to be transformed. Before it had seemed like every movement required absolute concentration, but since the devices were activated, Terry could move comfortably and casually, seemingly without any effort at all.

"Valaan?" Terry asked as he put his pouch and towel into his locker.

"Yes?" Valaan responded.

"Thanks for offering to help and... not asking a lot of questions and stuff." Terry said quietly.

Valaan nodded, then gestured toward the door.

Terry smiled at the reaction as he fell into step at Valaan's side.

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Terry and Valaan walked into the barracks to find the others sitting on their bunks, reading their data padds.

Both automatically went to their own bunks.

"I suppose *you* won't even need to study." Sharan said darkly, directing his statement toward Valaan from his place on the top neighboring bunk.

"Not unless I want to pass the classes I will be taking." Valaan said as he took his data padd from his locker.

"You mean you haven't memorized it all yet? What kind of a Vulcan are you?" Sharan asked with a sneer.

Valaan lowered his padd and said, "I am the kind of Vulcan who has to work hard and study to pass his classes. Now if you will excuse me..."

Sharan rolled his eyes dismissively, then went back to reading his own padd.

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Valaan was surprised to find that the padd was loaded with a general overview of all the classes offered at the academy and the complete text of all the class books he could possibly need.

He had thought that he would just be given the books for the classes he would be taking in the current term.

As he searched through the menu of the padd, there was only one folder that contained anything that was specific to him. In that folder he found a listing of his aptitude test results and a corresponding list of classes offered.

There were no instructions telling him which materials he should study to prepare for the next day's classes.

The door opening drew Valaan's attention away from his padd and he saw the crewman from the supply room walking into the room.

"Valaan?" Petty Officer Altman asked, as he looked around.

"I am here." Valaan said as he stood from his bunk.

"I brought your uniform." Phil said, as he offered it to Valaan.

"Thank you, Phil. I appreciate your extra effort on my behalf." Valaan said as he accepted the jumpsuit uniform.

"I was happy to do it. Now if you'll go ahead and try it on, I'll make sure that it fits before I order more uniforms for you." Phil said seriously.

"Yes. Of course." Valaan said, then took his uniform to the small lavatory so he could change.

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Phil nodded with satisfaction as he looked at Valaan critically. The custom tailored uniform fit comfortably across Valaan's broad, muscular chest, allowing him free movement, then tapered down to his narrow waist. The length of the uniform was even right, giving Valaan a very professional appearance.

Finally Phil said, "I'll put in the work order and have three more uniforms made for you. Stop by the quartermaster's office after dinner tomorrow and they should be ready."

"Thank you, Phil. I will do so." Valaan said gently.

Phil smiled at Valaan's quiet and respectful tone.

"If you run into any problems, just give me a yell. I've been around for a few years and I know how things work." Phil said in a quieter tone.

"I will remember. Thank you." Valaan said with a grateful smile.

Phil nodded, then left the room.

* * * * *

"You look a lot better." Melanie commented from her bunk.

"Thank you." Valaan said with sincere gratitude, then walked to his own bunk and picked up his padd again.

After looking through the course studies screen of the padd, Valaan barely heard Sharan whisper, "You *do* look better."

"Thank you." Valaan said in a voice so low that he knew that only Sharan's superior Andorian hearing would be able to pick it up.

Valaan glanced at the top neighboring bunk in time to see Sharan quickly look away.

"We're both new here, and we're both cadets." Valaan said in an absent tone as he directed his gaze toward his padd.

"The completion rate for crewman at the academy is less than fifty percent. We don't have to be friends, but if we are to survive here, it may be necessary for us to be comrades." Valaan continued hesitantly.

Valaan chanced a glance at Sharan's bunk and found him staring vacantly at his padd.

After a long silence, Sharan barely whispered, "When Andorians and Vulcans form alliances, the Andorians tend to end up worse off for having had the experience."

"Yes. History does tell us that." Valaan admitted.

Movement drew Valaan's attention as Sharan turned to look at him with surprise.

"But I am not asking you to make an alliance with me, nor am I offering to make one with you." Valaan explained as he looked Sharan in the eyes. "I am suggesting that we both work for the benefit of our team."

Sharan's eyes were distant and unfocused as he seemed to be considering the words.

"If it is necessary to help each other, to help the team, I will be willing to do so." Valaan whispered, not wanting to disrupt the tentative peace that they had established.

"For the sake of the team." Sharan said under his breath.

Valaan couldn't be sure if Sharan were agreeing to his terms or just voicing his thoughts.

After a long silence, Valaan finally concluded that it didn't matter and went back to reading his padd.

* * * * *

"Is everyone ready to call it a night?" Roger asked, breaking the long silence.

Valaan looked up from his padd and realized that he hadn't actually read anything for the past ten minutes. He had just been staring at the padd as his mind wandered.

"Yeah. I think I was a little bit asleep already." Melanie said with a chuckle from the bunk above Valaan.

"I'm ready." Rich said as he sat on the edge of his bunk and put his padd into his locker.

Valaan also put his padd away, then noticed that he was still wearing his uniform.

He picked up his sleep pants and was about to go to the lavatory to change when he noticed Sharan undressing.

No one seemed bothered by Sharan's action, so Valaan decided that changing in the main room would not only be a symbol of support that might be significant to Sharan, but might also serve to put the others at ease.

When Sharan finally removed the last of his clothes, he glanced around the room to see if anyone had an objection.

Either no one objected or they did a masterful job at hiding it.

Valaan finished changing into his sleep pants and climbed into his bunk.

"Goodnight everyone." Roger said as he turned off the light switch.

Rather than turning off, the lights began slowly dimming as Roger crossed the room, stopping at a dim illumination just short of going completely out.

Being in a strange room among strangers was a bit unsettling to Valaan, but despite the fact, sleep claimed him quickly.

Chapter 2

A strange rhythmic pulsing drew Valaan from the depths of his sleep.

"Whoever set the alarm for this early is gonna die." Rich said in a low raspy voice.

"Sorry." Terry said nervously as he fumbled to turn off his alarm clock.

Although the idea of more sleep was attractive to Valaan, his curiosity about Terry was enough to cause him to get up to start his day.

"I'm sorry I woke you, Valaan." Terry whispered in a rush.

"I'm not bothered." Valaan said gently.

Terry stopped his frantic movement as he looked at Valaan with surprise, then broke into a broad, cheerful smile as he said, "Good. I'm glad."

"Why do you want to wake up so early?" Valaan asked in a whisper, trying to be considerate of the other people in the room.

"I wanted to have breakfast and get an early start on studying. Like an early morning cram session. I seem to remember things better that way." Terry said hesitantly as he watched for Valaan's reaction to his reasoning.

After a moment to consider what he wanted to do, Valaan asked, "Would you like some company?"

"Yeah. If you'd like to, that would be great." Terry said happily, then looked around to see if his talking had disturbed anyone.

"I must attend to my morning ablutions, then I will be ready to join you." Valaan whispered carefully.

Terry looked at Valaan with question, then hesitantly asked, "Does that mean that you need to go to the john?"

Valaan smiled at the question and responded, "Something like that. It's just one term that I use to include all the things I do each morning before I start my day."

"Oh. That's handy. Give me a second to get my stuff together and I'll go do my ablutions too." Terry said, then hurried to his locker without waiting for a response.

Valaan smiled as he went to his bunk to spread it up and gather his own things.

"Are you going to shower?" Terry asked when he noticed Valaan getting his towel out of his locker.

"Just a brief rinse. It helps me to feel more awake and aware. I will only be a moment." Valaan said, as he skinned out of his sleep pants.

"I'll give that a try too. I think I'll need every advantage I can get today." Terry said quickly, his tone and nervous energy betraying his anxiety.

Unlike the previous evening, Terry didn't try to hide the devices as he took them off his wrists and ankles.

"Why are you so nervous?" Valaan asked as he paused to wait for Terry to be ready.

Terry looked at Valaan with surprise at the blunt question, then hesitantly responded, "I guess because this is all new to me. I feel completely out of place here."

Valaan chuckled as he said, "Believe me, Terry. I know that feeling."

Terry stared at Valaan with disbelief. Valaan chuckled? A Vulcan chuckled?

"Did I do something wrong?" Valaan asked with concern at Terry's look of awe.

"No. I'm sorry. I just... I always heard that Vulcans didn't laugh." Terry said quickly.

Valaan sadly nodded, then motioned to the shower room, indicating that he was ready to go.

* * * * *

When Terry and Valaan were both under the shower's spray, Terry hesitantly asked, "You're not like other Vulcans, are you?"

"No." Valaan said quietly. "I am different."

There was a long moment of silence.

When both had finished their rinse off, Terry quietly said, "It's okay to be different."

Valaan quirked an eyebrow at Terry, prompting him to expound on his statement.

"I mean... It's really okay. I like that you're able to laugh and smile. It makes it a lot easier to talk to you." Terry hurried to explain.

Valaan toweled himself dry as he said, "I'm glad you approve. I try to restrain my emotions, but... as you've seen, I don't do it very well."

"You don't have to hide your emotions with me. I think I'd rather know what you're feeling." Terry said thoughtfully as he took slow, careful steps back toward the locker room.

Valaan smiled and gave, a single nod before walking ahead of Terry to prepare for the day.

* * * * *

Once both were dressed in their uniforms, they made their way back toward the barracks.

"I was thinking that we could put our stuff away and grab our data padds, then try to figure out what we need to study during breakfast." Terry said as they walked down the hall.

"Yes. Although I skimmed through the study materials, I couldn't find anything to indicate which areas of study we should focus on in preparation for today's activities." Valaan said slowly.

"Me either." Terry said simply, then led the way into the barracks.

* * * * *

After arriving in the cafeteria, both walked through the serving line and made their selections.

Once they were seated, they began to look over their data padds.

"Do you have a list of classes that are gray?" Terry asked cautiously.

"Yes. If you select those classes, you'll see that they require you to select other, prerequisite classes before they are available to you." Valaan said slowly.

"Oh, yeah. I guess you're right." Terry said thoughtfully.

"It seems that I have the ability to select all the classes that are offered to new crewmen, even those that are not included in my specialty." Valaan said carefully.

"Yeah. Maybe this is like a menu for us to pick and choose what classes we want to take first." Terry said speculatively.

"Yes. I think you're right." Valaan said slowly.

"This general operations class looks easy, and I think it's required before you can take a bunch of the others." Terry said as he was reading.

"The protocol class appears to be much the same." Valaan said absently.

"I see three or four other classes that look that way." Terry said in concentration.

"Have you looked at the 'path' option?" Valaan asked curiously.

"No. What does that do?" Terry asked as he looked up from his padd.

"It appears that you can add a list of classes to the menu and it will show you the Starfleet postings for which you will be qualified." Valaan said in concentration.

Terry nodded, then started to select courses on his touch screen.

Valaan was reading over the overview of one of the courses, when Terry said, "Val, look at this."

Terry held out his padd and indicated a box at the bottom.

After a glance at Terry's padd, Valaan looked at the indicator on his own padd.

"It seems that this gives the date that we will be eligible for Starfleet service." Valaan said with realization.

"August, 2006?" Terry asked with a whimper.

"Yes. You have only one course of study added to the path, so if you were to take only one class per term, it would take until that date to complete the minimum requirements, even at the accelerated rate." Valaan said seriously.

Terry let out a sigh of relief and said, "Right. I wasn't thinking. Let's see if I can get that graduation date down a little."

After a long, silent moment, Valaan quietly said, "You called me Val."

Terry looked up from his padd, then thought back over his words. Finally he said, "Yeah. I guess I did. Sorry."

"No. I'm not offended. I was just curious to know why you chose to truncate my name." Valaan said slowly.

Terry shrugged and said, "I don't know. I just did it."

Valaan slowly nodded, then said, "I think I like it. 'Val' sounds much like a Human name."

"Yeah. I guess it does." Terry said consideringly.

Valaan smiled distantly as he said, "When I was young, I almost convinced myself that I was Human; that someone had made a mistake and switched me with a Vulcan child just after I was born. Of course, it is obvious that I am Vulcan, but... I suppose at the time, it was an attempt to explain and accept my... difference."

"Would you like to have a Human name?" Terry asked quietly.

Valaan looked at Terry with surprise, momentarily diverted from the initial point of their conversation.

At Terry's look of question, Valaan considered, then quietly admitted, "It seems silly, but I suppose that I would like that. It would be like the realization of a childhood dream."

"How would you feel if I called you Valentine?" Terry asked cautiously.

Valaan looked at Terry uncertainly, then reluctantly said, "Although I might enjoy that, the process of changing one's name might be laborious and I doubt that I could give a logical reason to justify it."

"My real name is Terrance, but nobody calls me that. If your friends call you Valentine, that's just as good as having your name 'officially' changed." Terry said carefully.

Valaan thought about the words, certain for some reason that it just couldn't be that simple.

"We'd better finish up so we can get to the practice field. I'd like to get there a little bit early." Terry said decisively.

"Yes. I think that would be good." Valaan said, turning his attention back to the padd in his hands.

* * * * *

Valaan and Terry arrived at the practice field, carrying their data padds, not having any idea of what they were going to be doing.

The moment they walked outside, Valaan knew that he was going to have difficulty. The temperature, though not terribly cold by Human standards, was very uncomfortable for him.

"Early birds." A burley man dressed in sweats said absently when he saw Terry and Valaan approach.

Before either could ask, the man said, "You can leave your gear over on the benches."

Valaan and Terry sat their padds where the man had indicated, then walked back onto the field and waited to be told what to do next.

"What are your names, cadets?" The man asked in an authoritative tone.

"Cadet Harper, sir!" Terry answered in a clear, firm voice.

Valaan was a little surprised by Terry's uncharacteristically bold response, but decided that he probably knew what he was doing and responded, "Cadet Valaan, sir!"

The man made a quick note on his data padd, then said, "Not every test you will be given will be announced."

Valaan fought the urge to look at Terry to see if he understood the meaning of the vague statement.

"If the others all pass, they'll never even know that this was a test." The man continued frankly.

From his tone of voice, Valaan assumed that he would not welcome questions.

"What's your name, Cadet?" The man asked as he looked past Valaan and Terry.

"Cadet Crewman Sharan, sir!" Sharan said as he fell into line at Valaan's side.

The man looked at his padd, then gave an impressed nod as he absently said, "Promising."

"You can stow your gear over there, Cadet Sharan." The instructor said with a casual gesture toward the benches.

Valaan fought to keep himself from visibly shivering. He was cold to the point that it was becoming distracting.

The instructor's mood seemed to change, if possible, becoming even more serious as he walked away. He sat his padd on the nearest bench, then returned to the increasing group of cadets.

In a somewhat louder voice than before he said, "In two minutes, we will begin a five mile hike. Anyone who hasn't joined us at that time will be

taking a much shorter hike... back to the barracks to gather his or her belongings."

The man glanced to an ensign who had just joined him and silently confirmed that the ensign would be letting any stragglers know that they had 'failed' the unannounced test.

Valaan chanced a glance to his side, past Sharan, to see that the next person in line was Melanie and beyond her were the rest of their bunkmates.

It seemed curious that the instructor hadn't asked the others' names when they arrived.

"I am Lieutenant Rybak. Each morning you will report to me at 06:00 so that when you've completed your academic studies, I can also assure Starfleet that you are in adequate physical condition to perform your duties."

"Cadets! Move out!" The Lieutenant called as he started walking.

* * * * *

By the end of their first mile, Valaan was finally beginning to feel less cold.

The pace that the instructor set was brisk, but not at all difficult for Valaan to keep up with.

Although he tried to keep his attention focused ahead of him, he couldn't help but notice that some of the others were carrying data pads and a few even had the cloth tool bags that they had been given after orientation.

Valaan was somewhat surprised when he realized that both Rich and Roger seemed to be winded after only three miles.

In contrast it seemed that Terry, who was so much smaller than the rest of them, seemed not to be having to exert the slightest effort.

"Let's pick up the pace! We're going to run the last mile!" Lieutenant Rybak called suddenly.

Valaan was only too happy to comply with the order. The increased pace might help him to finally feel somewhat warm.

* * * * *

"How many did we lose, Ensign Morrow?" Lieutenant Rybak asked as soon as they arrived back at the practice field.

"Eleven, sir." The young officer said hesitantly.

"More than usual." Lieutenant Rybak said absently as he accepted his padd from the Ensign.

"D 7 B arrived as a group." Ensign Morrow said regretfully.

"And left as a group." Lieutenant Rybak said absently, then asked, "Did they say it?"

"Yes, sir." Ensign Morrow said shyly.

Lieutenant Rybak shook his head in bemusement, then looked at the group of cadets who were all waiting patiently for his next words.

"Something to remember, Cadets." he said in a booming voice, "Life isn't 'fair'. Starfleet isn't 'fair'. Excuses are useless and counterproductive. If you're told to be somewhere, it's an order. If you can't follow orders, we don't need you."

After a momentary look around the group to see that his message had been received, Lieutenant Rybak looked at the Ensign and asked, "Do you have their class assignments?"

"Yes, sir." Ensign Morrow said smartly, then faced the group of cadets and said, "Your next class will begin at 09:00. Once I've told your group where your class is located, you are dismissed."

Valaan estimated that they had nearly an hour before they were expected to class. That would give him plenty of time to shower and prepare.

"...D 7 T, Room 310..." Ensign Morrow called out, then paused while Valaan's group left the field.

"I'll get our padds." Terry said as he hurried to the benches.

"Thank you, Terry." Valaan said with a slight smile as he walked to join the rest of his class group.

"No problem." Terry said cheerily.

"Here you go Sharan." Terry said as he handed Sharan his padd.

"Thank you." Sharan said in a slightly puzzled voice.

Terry smiled, then jogged over to give Valaan his padd.

* * * * *

The rest of the group were all obviously hungry and decided to go to the cafeteria before showering. Valaan and Terry shared a glance as they walked and silently agreed that they would go along.

As the group of cadets walked into the cafeteria, Terry quietly said, "Valentine and I were looking over the study materials before calisthenics and figured some things out."

"Valentine?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We thought that while he's on Earth, he should have a more Human sounding name." Terry said dismissively.

"Are you alright with that Valaan?" Melanie asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I agree with Terry that my true name sounds very... formal. You are all welcomed to address me as Valentine or Val, if you choose." Valaan said carefully.

"Sure. Whatever." Roger said as he broke away from the group and walked toward the serving line.

"We're going to get our food, then you can tell us about what you've found." Melanie said with a grin.

Valaan nodded his acceptance, then watched as the group walked away.

"That was alright wasn't it?" Terry asked quietly as he walked to the nearest unoccupied table.

It took a moment for Valaan to understand the reason for Terry's concern.

"Yes, Terry. It is quite alright." Valaan said with a gentle smile, then added more quietly, "Thank you."

* * * * *

"Okay, what have you guys found?" Rich asked as he approached the table.

"Do you want to explain it Val?" Terry asked casually.

Valentine took a moment to consider his words before saying, "Terry and I discovered the 'path' program on the padd. We reasoned that you can add the classes that you want to take into that program and it will calculate not only when you will be eligible for Starfleet service, but also for which positions you will be qualified."

"It's like a career planner for your entire time at the academy." Terry summarized.

"I saw that program there, but I thought it was just a file maintenance thing." Melanie admitted shyly.

"We also noticed that all the courses seem to be listed as being 1 month long." Terry said seriously.

"Yeah. I noticed that last night." Roger said thoughtfully. "I guess that's why they call this the accelerated course."

"There are some requisite classes that must be completed before one is eligible for Starfleet service, but there are other classes that can be taken at any time. It seems that you are allowed to take as many or as few classes as you would like." Valentine said as he looked at the group.

"Sounds good. I think I'll do better if I can pace myself." Roger said honestly.

"I would prefer to devote extra effort to completing my training as quickly as possible." Sharan said frankly.

After a moment, Melanie said, "Then I guess it's good that they have it set up this way, so you can both do things the way you want."

Valentine smiled at the statement and nodded his agreement.

"What about you Val? Are you going to be the tortoise or the hare?" Rich asked with a grin.

Valentine was pleased with himself, knowing that many Vulcans wouldn't understand the obscure reference.

"The hare, I think. Like Sharan, I am willing to devote the extra time and effort so that I may complete my training in as short a time as possible." Valentine said thoughtfully.

Melanie glanced from Valentine to Sharan, then slowly said, "Me too."

"Well, the rest of you can knock yourselves out if you want. I don't mind being called a tortoise. Just remember how that race ended." Rich said frankly.

"I'm on the tortoise team." Roger said simply.

"Me too." Terry said, then cast an apologetic look in Val's direction.

Valentine smiled at Terry to assure him that he didn't disagree with his decision.

"I guess we'd better get a move on if we're going to get cleaned up before our first class. Is everyone ready?" Melanie asked cheerfully.

"If we're all done, let's go." Rich said as he stood.

Sharan glanced uncertainly at Val for a moment before standing to join the others.

* * * * *

"Everyone, please find a seat and sign in on your terminals." A stern looking man in a Starfleet uniform said from the front of the room.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Gibbs. You will address me as such." He said firmly and seemed to be confirming that his message had been understood before he continued, "E-1 cadets. I don't know if you realize just what you're in for, but now that you're here, you'd better hang on with both hands and not let go for anything... or you're gone."

Glances flew around the room at the menacing statement.

"In the accelerated course, the washout rate is over 70%. I'm sure you don't understand why that is, so I'll explain it now."

"On the terminals in front of you, each of you have your aptitude tests. You also have a list of classes offered. You have class books on your padd. You also have a list of the required courses that all crewmen MUST pass."

"Your class group has scheduled times that you may visit the labs where you may gain practical experience in your field of choice. Be aware that there isn't any lab requirement for your standard classes. The labs are provided to allow you to gain hands-on experience to aid in your understanding of the course study materials."

"At the end of week two, three and four, there will be a test on the courses you've taken. Each concentrated course study is 30 days, at the end of that time, you will choose the next month's courses. You must pass at least one class every 30 days, or you're out. Period. If your grades drop to a point where it's impossible for you to pass, you will be asked to leave. It would be a waste of time, your time and ours, for you to continue." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said firmly.

As all the new cadets were digesting that information, Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said, "For the next month, I will be your facilitator."

After a long moment of puzzled silence, Rich finally asked, "You mean we're only going to have one teacher for all these classes?"

"No. I'm not a teacher. You're not in grade school anymore. No one here is going to hold your hand or try to force feed you information. You have been given all the requirements and the tools you'll need. I will be here from nine to noon each day to answer your questions and offer advice. But whether you pass or fail is entirely up to you."

"If there are no other questions..." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said, then paused.

"...It's time to sign up for your classes. You have until noon to make your choices. At noon, all the classes are locked in and you'll have 2 weeks to prepare for your first exam." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said firmly, then continued in a more relaxed tone, "If you have any questions during the selection process, I will be here for you."

There was absolute silence as everyone thought about what the next month held for them.

"You may begin." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said, then took a seat behind his desk.

"Excuse me." Roger said timidly as he raised his hand.

"Yes?" Lieutenant Commander Gibbs asked as he looked up from his terminal.

"Are we allowed to talk to each other?" Roger asked quietly.

"If you like. Just try to be respectful of your classmates and not be unnecessarily distracting." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said, then turned his attention back to his terminal screen.

Roger nodded, then turned to Rich at his side and began to whisper.

"Are you still planning to be the hare?" Terry asked quietly.

"Yes. It would seem to be more of a necessity given this new information." Valentine said distantly.

"I don't know. I think I'll do better if I'm able to focus more attention on fewer classes." Terry said in thought.

"There is that. But I believe that by taking more classes, there is less chance that I will be unable to meet the minimum requirement for the month." Valentine said carefully.

"You mean flunk out." Terry said in a whisper.

"Yes. That's what I mean." Valentine said frankly.

Terry looked at his terminal screen for a moment, then said, "I still think I'll be better off taking the path of the tortoise and just sticking with a few easy classes this first month, then when I'm more comfortable with doing things this way, I can pick up the harder classes."

"I think that makes good sense." Valentine said with a slow nod of his head. "I'm still going to take the maximum number of classes allowed, and try to complete my Starfleet service requirements as quickly as possible."

"I guess in about a month we'll see who made the right choice." Terry said with a speculative grin.

"I don't recall anyone saying that there was a right choice." Valentine said honestly.

Terry thought about it for a moment, then said, "I guess we'll know in a month."

* * * * *

As soon as the group all settled into their chairs in the cafeteria, Melanie quickly asked, "So who stuck to their original plan?"

"Full boat." Sharan said simply before taking a bite of his food.

"I too have chosen to take a full class load." Valentine said, not feeling especially sure of his choice.

"Me too." Melanie said with a sigh, then looked at the others with question.

"I signed up for General Procedure 1 and Protocol 1." Rich said frankly.

"Me too. They looked like the easiest courses offered." Roger said with a smile.

"I took both of those and Services 1." Terry said shyly.

"You're planning on going into ship's services?" Rich asked with surprise.

"Yeah. My placement tests said that that's where I would probably work out best." Terry said quietly.

"Mine said that too, but I went with my 2nd rank choice which was security." Rich said seriously.

"I'm going for communications tech." Roger said in a distracted tone.

"What about you Sharan? What department are you going for?" Melanie asked cheerfully.

"Communications with a specialization in dynamic adaptive translation software." Sharan said simply.

"Oh, so you and Roger could probably study together." Melanie said with a smile.

"No. We couldn't." Sharan said as he looked her in the eyes.

"Why not?" Melanie asked cautiously, sensing that Sharan wanted her to ask.

"Because I have chosen the 'Path of the Hare'." Sharan said to the group, then looked Melanie in the eyes as he explained, "I will have completed the first level communication classes and moved on by the time Roger chooses to take them."

"Oh yeah. I guess that makes sense." Melanie said, then glanced at Valentine and asked, "Did you go with Engineering?"

"Yes. I chose mostly general courses so I can learn the skills that are required in all areas of engineering, thus increasing my chances to receive a starship assignment." Valentine said seriously.

"So you and Sharan both took the 'Path of the Hare' but in opposite directions?" Terry asked curiously.

"How do you mean?" Sharan asked with interest.

"You both chose to get a 'full boat' of classes, but Valentine is trying for the broadest, most commonly needed skill set while you're going for just one, very unique specialty." Terry said thoughtfully.

"If it happens that there is no need for my specialty when my training is complete, then I can broaden my studies to make my transcript more diverse." Sharan said reasonably.

"And if, when my training is complete, my set of skills are too broad to allow me to stand out from other candidates, I will begin to focus on a specialty." Valentine said carefully.

"Instead of a race between the tortoise and the hare, it's going to be a race between the hare and the hare." Roger said with a chuckle.

"No." Sharan said seriously. "I am not in competition with any of you, only with myself."

"Well said." Valentine quickly responded. "If it helps any of you to motivate yourselves by competing against my achievements, feel free to do so. But please understand that my motivation will be to push the limits of my own abilities. I am not competing with any of you and will be willing to offer any assistance that you need."

"What about the other hare? Does that go for you too?" Roger asked curiously.

"Yeah. Absolutely." Melanie said with a nod.

* * * * *

"What are we supposed to do now?" Roger asked as he walked from the dropoff window in the cafeteria.

"Whatever we want, I guess." Melanie said with a shrug.

"Our class is only until noon. After lunch, we can work in the labs if we want... or study, I guess." Rich said uncertainly.

"I recall that it was mentioned in orientation that study rooms were available in the library. I think I'll go there and begin to read my class books." Valentine said seriously.

"I would..." Sharan began to say, then caught himself.

"If any of you are interested in joining me, you are welcomed." Valentine said, then turned and began walking away.

"Start as you mean to go on." Sharan said, then started walking quickly to catch up to Valentine.

"I guess I should go with the other hares. I'll see you tortoises later." Melanie said with a grin, then rushed to catch up to the pair.

Terry seemed to be undecided about what he should do, but reluctantly followed Rich and Roger back to the barracks.

* * * * *

"I thought we were training for starship duty. From the amount of walking and running they're making us do, you'd think they were training us to walk from planet to planet." Richard Chu grumbled as they walked down the hall.

"And your bitching about it every single day makes it so much easier." Roger muttered at his side.

"Did any of you find out anything from the other cadets about the tests?" Melanie asked abruptly, obviously anxious about the coming exam.

"There's nothing more to know. Every test is different. There is no way to know what the test will be like. One of the guys that I talked to said that even the people giving the tests don't know until the day of the test." Rich said with frustration.

"And they said that the tests are hard. Really, really hard." Roger added grimly.

"One of the guys who's been here for about four months told me that he's been through three class groups. The rest of his group would flunk out and they'd move him to another group." Terry said in an anxious voice.

"Have you heard anything Val?" Melanie asked curiously.

"No. I've been devoting all my time to studying. I haven't had much of a chance to socialize." Valentine said carefully.

"That's what you get for taking the hard classes right at the beginning." Roger said frankly.

"Guys, it's time." Melanie said nervously.

Glances of concern were exchanged before the group walked into their classroom for their first test.

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"Before we begin. I will explain how this test works." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said slowly.

"For each class module that you've taken, you will have one question. Each question has only one correct answer. Simply put, it's pass or fail. This test is one quarter of your grade for the term, which means, if you fail all your modules today, then you may be leaving us after next week's test... which will also be for one quarter of your grade."

"Begin." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said as he walked to take his seat.

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Valentine looked at the first question on his screen carefully. He slowly read through it, then read it again to be sure that he completely understood what it was asking.

Although he remembered studying the historic precedents and applications of the Starfleet codes, the one that the question was referring to was extremely obscure and little more than a technical note.

After carefully thinking through what he wanted to say, Valentine began to key in his answer.

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As Valentine finished answering his last question, he noticed that he was the last cadet in the room.

Lieutenant Commander Gibbs seemed to be engrossed in something on his terminal screen and didn't make any indication of noticing when Valentine stood and left the room.

In the hall, he found Terry standing just outside the door, staring vacantly as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Although Valentine had been trained all his life to avoid displays of emotion, he knew that there was only one thing that any 'feeling' being could do in this situation.

Valentine walked to Terry and pulled him into a hug.

"I failed. All three of them, I think." Terry whispered in despair.

"I'm sorry, Terry." Valentine said in a whisper.

"I... I never imagined that a test could be that..." Terry said in a diminishing voice that ended in a sob.

"Let's go to the barracks, I'm sure the others will be there. And I doubt that anyone is happy with this test." Valentine said as he shifted Terry to his side to walk with him.

"How do you think you did?" Terry asked quietly.

"There are three modules that I am certain that I answered correctly. Four more that I am not so certain of. And one that... I guessed." Valentine finished reluctantly.

"Thanks for being here for me Val." Terry said quietly as they walked.

"As I told you when we arrived, 'If we're going to share a room, we should be willing to help each other.'" Valentine said frankly.

"I'm seeing that now. I'm going to have to get really serious from now on or I'm going to be gone in 1 more week." Terry said as they walked into the barracks together.

* * * * *

"Where is Rich?" Terry asked as he looked around.

"I don't know. He finished his test before I did." Melanie said absently.

"How do you think you did?" Valentine asked Melanie quietly.

"I... I don't know. I'm pretty sure I passed the Medical Terminology module and I lucked out on the Protocol question, but the rest... I just don't know." Melanie said with a shake of her head.

"When do you think we'll get the results?" Roger asked quietly.

"Since the test was computerized, it is possible that the results are already posted." Sharan said frankly.

"I guess we'd better sign in and look." Melanie said with apprehension.

The door opening drew everyone's attention.

All of them were surprised to see an unfamiliar young man walk into the room with an empty carry-all container.

"Where is Cadet Chu's bunk?" He asked quietly.

"Right here." Roger said as he pointed.

The man nodded and walked to the indicated bunk.

"What's going on?" Melanie asked quickly, afraid that she already knew the answer.

"I've been sent for Cadet Chu's belongings. he's withdrawn from the academy." The crewman said frankly as he opened Rich's cabinet.

"But why? This was only the first test." Melanie asked helplessly.

"You'd have to ask him. I was just sent to gather his things." The crewman said quietly as he worked.

"He must have realized that since he only took two classes, that he had very little chance of being able to pass either course." Sharan said speculatively.

"How do you think you did Sharan?" Melanie asked, obviously wanting to change the subject.

"I believe that I passed at least some of the courses." Sharan said reluctantly.

"Grades are in." Roger said as he looked at his padd.

Valentine walked to his bunk and opened his locker to retrieve his padd.

"Good luck guys." The crewman said as he took the placard with Rich's name off his cabinet and attached it to the front of the carry-all.

"Thanks." Terry said as he nervously walked to his own bunk.

Valentine signed in on his padd and found the test results link available on his main menu.

Reluctantly, he selected the link and watched as the test results filled the screen.

He wanted to be happy at the news that he had passed six of his eight courses. But the two glaring red failures stood out and filled his vision.

"Shit." Terry whispered as his tears fell.

Valentine put his padd back in his locker then moved to Terry's bunk and sat beside him to offer him comfort.

Melanie glanced over to see Sharan sitting on the unassigned bunk, the other side from Valentine's. Sharan was staring at the padd in his hands with a lost, helpless look on his face.

Without really thinking it through, she climbed down from her bunk and moved to sit beside Sharan.

"We've got two more tests. We can still make it up." Melanie said softly.

"I just... I don't fail." Sharan said distantly.

"You haven't failed. You've just set the bar a little bit higher for your next test." Melanie said gently, hoping that she was saying the right thing.

After a moment to consider the words, Sharan reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"How are you doing Roger?" Valentine asked gently as he held Terry close to his chest.

"I failed them both." Roger said in a whisper.

Valentine held out an arm, inviting Roger into the hug.

Roger weakly smiled at the action, but slightly shook his head in refusal.

"The only way to prevent this from ending badly is to study. Starting now." Sharan said as he stood from Melanie's side.

After a moment, Melanie stood and said, "He's right. Sitting here feeling sorry for ourselves isn't going to help us pass the next one."

"Now that we know how hard these tests really are, we at least have an idea of how hard we have to work to prepare." Roger said with resignation.

"Yes. We should begin now." Valentine said as he shifted Terry to stand at his side.

After a moment to wipe his eyes, Terry straightened and said, "Let's do it."

Chapter 3

"Guys, I just heard that the cafeteria is going to stay open all night for students studying for the next exam. I'm going to head down there now before it fills up." Melanie said seriously.

"Hold on, Mel. We'll go with you. There's no reason for us to stay here and keep Sharan and Roger awake." Valentine said quickly.

"If you guys feel like studying with us, you're welcomed." Melanie said seriously.

"No. I think I've studied all that I can. I'm going to try to get a full night of sleep, so I'm well rested for the test tomorrow." Roger said steadily.

Melanie looked at Sharan with question, wanting to be sure that he knew that he was honestly invited.

"Perhaps later." Sharan said quietly.

Melanie reluctantly nodded her agreement, then led the way out of the room.

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"My brain is turning to jelly." Melanie said as she stared at her padd.

"My jelly still hasn't absorbed all the General Operations material, so I have to keep going." Valentine said frankly.

Terry and Mel chuckled at his statement.

"I need food. Would any of you like some more coffee while I'm up?" Valentine asked as he stood.

"Yeah. I could use some." Melanie said with a tired smile.

"What would you like in it?" Valentine asked automatically, even though they had had coffee together enough times that he was fairly certain of what she would want.

"She likes her coffee like she likes her men." Terry said with a grin.

Melanie looked at Terry with surprise at the statement then slowly asked, "What *exactly* is that supposed to mean?"

Terry froze, realizing that Melanie seemed not to be amused by the joke.

"Don't worry Terry, I know what you mean." Valentine said as he started away from the table.

After a few steps he stopped and said over his shoulder, "Although I'm not sure if they have coffee that is blue and sexually frustrated."

* * * * *

"I don't know how or when, but I'll get you back for that." Melanie said when she saw Valentine returning to the table carrying a large plate and a cup of coffee.

Terry was fighting to contain his chuckles.

"I have no words to express my regret for making that joke." Valentine said as he sat the coffee down beside Melanie. "But I do have nachos, which I will be willing to share with you, if you'll forgive me."

Melanie seemed to consider for a moment, then said, "You drive a hard bargain, but you're forgiven."

Valentine smiled as he placed the full plate of nachos in the center of the table.

Melanie picked up the coffee and seemed to be about to take a drink when she stopped and looked at Valentine with question.

"Strong, hot and just a little bit sweet." Valentine said with a barely restrained smile.

Melanie smiled at his answer, then took a careful sip of the coffee.

"Yeah. That's *exactly* what I meant." Terry said quickly.

Melanie flashed a look in Terry's direction, saying without words that she wasn't buying it for a second.

"How are you two doing on the studying?" Valentine asked casually.

"I think I've got a handle on the Protocol. But I'm still shaky on the Procedure." Terry said honestly.

"I'm swamped. I had no idea that taking 8 classes could be this hard. I really don't think it's possible to learn all this stuff so quickly." Melanie said frankly.

"But people do it all the time." Terry said quietly. "Every year they offer the accelerated course, and there's a graduating class... otherwise they wouldn't offer it."

"I always thought of crewmen as the grunts who do the dirty work. I never imagined that they had to go through this kind of training." Melanie said in wonder.

"I never considered what type of training crewmen went through. I just assumed that it was what they needed to know to do their jobs." Valentine said honestly.

"Well, I suppose it is that. But it also weeds out the people who are lazy or think that they can coast through the system." Melanie said thoughtfully.

"Would you mind if I join you?"

The trio turned as one to see Sharan approaching.

"Please have a seat." Valentine said immediately.

Sharan stopped by the table and looked at Terry and Melanie with question.

"We told you that you were invited." Melanie said frankly.

"Yeah. And you can help us with these nachos if you want to." Terry said cautiously, still not entirely comfortable with Sharan's volatile nature.

"I suppose such is the duty of classmates." Sharan said in a tone of long suffering and finally took the offered seat.

"Are you having trouble with any particular subject?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"No. But when I tried to go to sleep, my mind kept going over and over the facts that I had been studying." Sharan said quietly.

"That's been happening to me all week. I doubt that I've had one good night's sleep since the last test." Terry said honestly.

"None of us have." Melanie said in a weary voice.

"Except Roger. He goes to sleep every night and wakes up every morning like nothing has changed." Valentine said slowly.

"I hope he knows what he's doing." Melanie said before grabbing a nacho chip.

"It's nearly midnight. I suppose we'd better get to work if we're going to finish before morning." Valentine said reluctantly.

"I'm getting back to my General Procedure. I want to finish the chapter one more time before I try the practice quiz again." Terry said as he lifted his padd.

"Keep in mind that we'll need to be on the practice field before 06:00 for calisthenics." Valentine said grimly to the rest of the group.

"Don't remind me. Couldn't they at least let us take exam day off?" Melanie said as she dropped her forehead onto her arms folded on the table.

"Actually, I'm counting on our morning run to wake me up before we take our test." Terry said frankly.

"Terry, I swear to God, if you're cheerful in the morning I'll kill you." Melanie said in a growl, then lifted her head enough to look him in the eyes. "Do you hear me? I will fucking kill you."

"Got it Mel." Terry said cautiously, then shared an amused look with Valentine.

* * * * *

"Holy Christ!" Melanie gasped when she saw the questions fill her screen.

"This exam is timed. Correct answers are worth one point each, incorrect answers are worth negative three points each. Unanswered questions have no value. A seventy-five percent grade is required to pass. If you pass, you will be awarded the full value of 25% of your grade for the term for that module."

Valentine felt a cold numbness wash over him as he realized that he had nearly a thousand questions to answer.

"All or nothing." Terry whispered under his breath, sounding to be on the verge of tears.

"Begin." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said simply, then took his seat.

* * * * *

"If your terminal just froze, that indicates that your time has expired. Please exit quietly so as not to disturb your classmates."

Valentine couldn't even spare a glance of concern or encouragement as he worked his way through the seemingly endless barrage of questions.

* * * * *

"I... I..." Melanie stammered as she walked out of the classroom.

"Yeah. Me too." Terry said with sympathy as he rested against the wall, just outside the classroom door.

"I never imagined such a method of testing existed." Sharan muttered as he walked slowly into the hall.

"What do you think Valentine? Did you pass?" Terry asked timidly, not able to even guess at Valentine's mood from his expression.

"There were just too many questions. I don't know." Valentine said helplessly.

"Did Roger go back to the barracks?" Melanie asked as she noticed that he wasn't waiting in the hall for them.

"He got called to room 112 a few minutes after I got out of the test." Terry said ominously.

"Commander De Gama's office." Melanie said in a whisper.

After a long silent moment, Sharan hesitantly said what they all were thinking, "If our grades are such that there is no possible way to pass, we are asked to leave."

A tear escaped down Melanie's cheek as she stared vacantly down the hallway.

Valentine was about to offer his support when he noticed Sharan slowly and hesitantly raising his hand.

It was an effort for Valentine to restrain his smile as he watched Sharan place his hand on Melanie's shoulder and give it a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

* * * * *

"I'm Toko, that's Geneva and the twins are Kelsey and Ashley." The first of four cadets said as he walked into the room.

"That's nice, but what are you doing here?" Sharan asked in a barely civil tone.

"We're being consolidated in with you. The rest of our class group washed out." Toko said, then turned when Geneva slapped his arm.

"Oh yeah. And I'd better apologize to all of you right now. I never knew it before, but I guess I was born without any tact at all." Toko said frankly.

"You and Sharan will get along fine." Melanie said with a smile at Sharan to take any sting out of her words.

"Or kill each other." Valentine said frankly, trying to maintain a serious 'logical' expression.

Sharan rolled his eyes, then turned toward the new arrivals and said, "I sleep naked. If you have a problem with that, I don't want to hear about it."

"That was Sharan." Melanie said with a chuckle at their shocked expressions.

"I'm Melanie, this is Valentine and the guy on the bunk over there is Terry." Melanie said in a somewhat hospitable tone.

"Valentine?" Ashley asked timidly as she looked up... then up some more, absolutely dwarfed by his greater size.

"Or Val." Valentine said down to her, trying to look nonthreatening.

"Guys. We need to look at our test results." Terry said nervously from the edge of his bed.

"Yeah." Melanie whispered and walked to her cabinet.

"Do you want us to come back in a few minutes?" Toko asked cautiously.

"No. I think we all know that we passed, or we would have been called to Commander De Gama's office by now." Melanie said honestly.

"So, although it may not necessarily be 'good' news, we can be reasonably assured that it is not the worst news." Valentine said frankly.

"I see that someone has already assigned our bunks, so we'll just... unpack, while you do that." Toko said quietly, then turned and gave the rest of his group an urging look.

Valentine looked immediately toward Roger's cabinet to see that rather than 'Wyndham' it now had the name 'Garcia' on it.

"Are we ready?" Melanie asked as she held her padd, her finger poised on the button to download her test results.

"There is no ready." Valentine said simply.

Sharan gave an abrupt chuckle, then nodded his agreement.

"Let's do it." Terry said as he stood from the edge of his bunk.

"Good luck, guys." Melanie said, then pressed the button.

* * * * *

"Terry?" Melanie asked at his stricken look.

"I failed policy. I mean, completely. It's off my course list as if I never took it." He said as he stared at his padd.

"How did you do Val?" Melanie asked quietly, feeling that Terry was still too numb to be able to accept comfort.

After a moment to absorb what he was seeing, Valentine cautiously said, "It appears that I passed all but one of my courses."

"As did I." Sharan said, not able to express any joy in the light of Terry's failure.

"I failed one too." Melanie admitted reluctantly.

"So where do we stand?" Sharan asked as he looked around the group.

"I began with eight courses. I now have three that I have failed one module." Valentine said seriously.

"Val, I don't know if you've thought about this, but... as long as you passed them, I don't think it matters by how much." Terry said quietly.

"How do you mean?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"The last two tests were all or nothing, so the next one probably will be too." Melanie said, realizing what Terry meant. "It doesn't matter if you go into the next test with a perfect score or near failing. If the next one is for a full 50%. It's going to be do or die."

"And it is essentially the final exam, which probably means that anything covered in the entire course of study could be covered." Sharan interjected.

"No pressure." Terry said with a weak, defeated chuckle.

"Library?" Valentine asked as he looked at his classmates who had quickly become his friends.

Melanie nodded, then glanced at the newcomers and said in a louder voice, "We're going to the library to study, if you guys want to come with us."

"No thanks. Maybe next time." Toko said quickly.

Melanie looked at her three remaining classmates with question, then as one, they left for the library.

* * * * *

In the week that they had shared quarters, the two groups had barely spoken. There wasn't any animosity between them and the silence wasn't

uncomfortable. It just seemed that both groups realized that they didn't have the time or emotional energy available to invest in making new friends who might be gone in less than one week.

Kelsey and Ashley seemed to always be together, and didn't interact much with the other members of their group.

When Toko and Geneva were together, it seemed like her entire world revolved around him, and since his world revolved around him too, they appeared to have a lot in common.

Unfortunately, from the perspective of Valentine's group, what they did not have in common was a desire to study.

"Are we ready?" Melanie asked, then glanced at Sharan, waiting for his standard response.

What she didn't expect was for all three boys to say in unison, "There is no ready."

Melanie chuckled, then led the group into the classroom.

Toko, Geneva, Kelsey and Ashley followed Valentine's group into the classroom, but didn't make eye contact with any of them.

"If you'll take your seats, we will begin." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said professionally.

"This test will be a scaled grade... in other words, not 'all or nothing'. When your name is called, you will be taken before a panel of Starfleet officers and asked an essay question. You will answer that question as concisely and completely as you are able. Of course, you will be given one question for each of your courses. You will be graded not only on the correctness of your answer, but also your ability to convey information in a professional manner." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said seriously and noticed the color wash out of the majority of the students.

"If there are no questions. We will begin." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said as he moved to his desk and clicked something on his terminal.

The silence in the room was deafening as the students waited to see who was going to be called first.

"Cadet Crewman Ashley Landolt. Come with me." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said firmly, then walked to wait for her by the door.

"Good luck Ash." Kelsey said in a whisper.

Ashley gave her twin brother a nervous glance before walking out of the room.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Commander Gibbs returned to the room in time to hear Terry say, "I can't do this."

"Yes, Terry. You can." Valentine said firmly.

Lieutenant Commander Gibbs discretely took his seat and quickly keyed something into his terminal.

"I don't want to be around people even when they're not paying attention to me. I can't get up in front of people and talk." Terry said quietly.

"Then, perhaps, it is good that the academy gives this style of exam to first term students." Sharan said simply.

"Why?" Terry asked in a whimper.

"Consider what this test is actually asking you to do. It is something that you could reasonably expect to be asked to do in the course of your duties." Sharan said clearly.

"He's right." Valentine reluctantly agreed. "I don't like this method of testing any more than you do, but it is reasonable."

"When you go in to take your test, just imagine that you're working on a starship and doing your job, and that whatever the question you're asked is something your commanding officer wants you to explain to a visiting dignitary." Melanie said carefully.

Terry nervously nodded, not looking particularly assured.

"Or imagine them naked." Valentine said simply.

Terry and Melanie... even Sharan looked at Valentine with surprise at the suggestion.

"If memory serves, it is a time honored method for dealing with the fear of public speaking." Valentine explained calmly.

"Are you going to imagine them naked?" Terry asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I believe I will." Valentine said without any trace of embarrassment.

"So, does that mean that you're nervous about public speaking too?" Melanie asked curiously.

"I did not say that." Valentine said, fighting to keep his Vulcan, emotionless persona firmly in place.

"So you're just going to imagine them naked because..." Melanie trailed off as she fought down her chuckles.

"Correct. Just because." Valentine said simply.

Valentine's three friends broke into laughter at the statement, relieving at least a little of the tension they were all feeling.

"Cadet Crewman Valaan." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said as he stood from behind his desk.

Valentine looked up and realized that the Lieutenant Commander was calling him for his exam.

"Good luck Val." Terry said sincerely.

"Yeah. We're all behind you." Melanie said quickly.

Valentine turned to glance at his classmates and was surprised when Sharan looked him in the eyes and firmly said, "Do well."

* * * * *

Valentine walked nervously down the hallway beside Lieutenant Commander Gibbs and tried to remain calm.

"How are you doing?" Lieutenant Commander Gibbs asked quietly.

"I'm nervous, but I know the material, so I'm sure that I'll be able to answer their questions." Valentine said seriously.

"I think you'll be fine." Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said sincerely.

Before Valentine could respond, the Lieutenant Commander stopped by a closed door and motioned for Valentine to go into the room.

"Thank you, sir." Valentine said seriously, then straightened his posture as he walked into the room to face his next exam.

* * * * *

Even though his logical mind told him that the entire exam had taken less than an hour, the experience felt like it had lasted for the majority of the day.

Valentine knew that 'logically' he could wait for his classmates in their barracks, but he had no doubt that the others would choose to do the same

as him and wait outside the classroom for everyone to be finished with their exams.

"How did it go?" Melanie asked as she walked down the hallway.

"I believe it went well." Valentine said quietly, but his tone of voice betrayed his uncertainty.

"Yeah. I want to believe that, too." Melanie said with a nervous chuckle.

"I am concerned for Terry. Although I am certain that he knew the material, his nervousness might have affected his ability to convey the information." Valentine said seriously.

"I know. But I can't think of anything else we could have done to help him." Melanie said honestly.

"Are you guys talking about me?" Terry asked as he walked down the hall from the opposite direction from Melanie.

"How did you do?" Melanie asked quickly, sounding desperate to know.

"I don't know for sure, but I think maybe I passed." Terry said in an uncertain voice.

"How can you not know?" Melanie asked in frustration.

"I answered their questions, and I'm pretty sure that I answered them right, but I bumbled and stammered so much, that I'm not sure if they're going to pass me or not." Terry said anxiously.

"Lieutenant Commander Gibbs said that this was a scaled grade. So even if you lost points for your delivery, you may still pass the course." Valentine said carefully.

"I guess, since I haven't been called to Commander De Gama's office, that maybe I passed." Terry said hopefully.

"Either that, or he's still listening to the others do their exams." Melanie said frankly.

"Does that mean that Commander De Gama was in your exam?" Valentine asked with surprise.

"Yes. Does that mean that he wasn't in yours?" Melanie asked curiously.

"No. I had an Admiral, Admiral Hanson, I think. Also a commander and a lieutenant commander." Valentine said frankly.

"An Admiral? Wow! And I thought I had it bad with two lieutenant commanders and a lieutenant." Terry said honestly.

"Did you imagine them naked?" Valentine asked curiously.

"No. When the time came for the test, I didn't even think about that." Terry said with a chuckle.

"Just so you know, it doesn't help... especially with Admiral Hanson." Valentine said with a grim look.

"Is there room for another in your gathering?" Sharan asked as he approached the group.

"We're just waiting on you." Melanie said with an inviting smile.

"How do you think you did?" Terry asked quickly.

"I am Andorian. So, of course, I excelled." Sharan said with false bravado.

"I am pleased." Valentine said sincerely.

"I thought you'd do good." Terry said with a smile.

"You're the most outgoing one of us. This exam was made for you." Melanie said as she gestured down the hallway for the group to walk with her.

"I must admit that the number of questions was a bit intimidating, but thanks to our diligent study, I feel confident." Sharan said happily.

"Then let's go to the cafeteria to celebrate." Melanie said with a devilish grin.

"Does this mean the rest of you did well?" Sharan asked curiously.

"We're not as confident as you, Sharan. The rest of us will have to wait and see the scores to be sure." Melanie said honestly, then added, "But I think all of us would enjoy celebrating the fact that you did well."

"Yes." Valentine said immediately.

Terry nodded his agreement.

"But we'll need to swing by the barracks to get our padds before we celebrate. We're going to want to see the grades as soon as they come down." Melanie said seriously.

"Left turn." Valentine said as they approached the hallway intersection that would take them to their barracks.

The group stayed in formation and turned as one.

"What's wrong, Kelsey?" Valentine asked as soon as they entered the barracks.

"Ashley." Kelsey said in a distant voice.

"What's happened? Did she do bad on the exam?" Valentine asked quietly.

"I guess the stress was too much for her. From what she said, right in the middle of the second question, she lost it. She just... broke down." Kelsey said quietly.

"Where is she now?" Melanie asked with concern.

"I don't know. She said she was going to drop out and then she ran out of here... I looked for her, but I don't know where she went." Kelsey said as he finally looked up to meet Valentine's eyes.

"What are you going to do?" Sharan asked in a reasonable tone.

"If she goes through with it, I'll probably drop out too." Kelsey said in a small voice.

"Why would you do that? If you can make it here, why would you just give up?" Sharan asked in disbelief.

"I only came here because she thought it would be such a great experience for both of us. Without her, there's no point." Kelsey said frankly.

After a long moment of silence, Sharan finally said, "Then you should go."

Valentine thought that although Sharan's words might seem cruel on the surface, they were the words that needed to be said.

"Sharan is right. You've made it this far, so you obviously have the intelligence and skills to make it in Starfleet. But if you aren't devoted to it, then it's all wasted effort." Valentine said frankly.

"Thanks for being honest." Kelsey said as he slowly stood.

"If you change your mind and decide that you want to complete your training, we'll be here for you. Just because your sister left, doesn't mean that you'd have to face this alone." Melanie said seriously.

Kelsey gave her a quick, pained smile, then slowly started walking toward the door.

"I don't feel much like celebrating now. Why don't we just check our scores?" Terry asked as he walked to his bed.

"You don't mind do you Sharan?" Melanie asked quietly.

"Not at all. But if my grade is better than I anticipated, I may choose to celebrate anyway." Sharan said boldly as he walked to get his padd out of his cabinet.

"I passed it!" Terry said joyfully.

"I did not." Valentine said as he stared at his padd.

"Don't tell me you flunked out!" Melanie said with surprise.

"No. I did not flunk out, but I failed environmental control 1... completely." Valentine said quietly.

"So you passed seven out of eight, right?" Melanie asked in confirmation.

"Yes. Not by a significant margin, but I did pass them." Valentine reluctantly agreed.

"Then I think we have a reason to celebrate. All four of us survived the first final." Melanie said frankly.

"What about you Sharan? Do you feel like celebrating?" Valentine asked, noticing that he hadn't spoken since he looked at his grade.

Sharan stared at his padd for a moment longer, then a look of resignation came over his face.

"Yes. I believe I have cause to celebrate." Sharan said firmly.

"Not as good as you'd hoped?" Melanie asked with concern.

"No. Not as I had hoped... but still sufficient." Sharan said solidly.

"Well, after the month we've had, sufficient is pretty damned good. Let's go party!" Melanie said as she started toward the door.

Valentine gave Sharan a momentary look of concern and was gifted with a reluctant, grateful smile in return.

"Come on guys." Terry said urgently from the door.

* * * * *

"Hey Geneva! We're celebrating surviving the exam, would you like to join us?" Valentine asked when he saw her wandering through the mess hall.

"No, thank you. Have you seen Toko? I haven't seen him since the test and I'm starting to get worried." She said seriously.

"I'm sorry, but we haven't seen him." Valentine said regretfully.

"What about Kelsey and Ashley?" Geneva asked cautiously.

"We saw Kelsey..." Valentine said hesitantly, not feeling like he should reveal what Kelsey was thinking of doing.

"You're obviously thinking the same thing that we are." Sharan said frankly. "Go to the barracks and check to see if their belongings are still there. Then you'll know."

"One of us can go with you if you want." Terry offered quickly, not wanting the timid young girl to feel all alone.

"No. But thanks for offering. I can do this." Geneva said bravely, then forced herself to walk away from the table.

"I think she's going to bail out." Sharan said honestly.

"If Toko's gone, I think she will too." Melanie said regretfully.

"I'm glad we didn't have to go through that this time." Terry said quietly as he looked around the table.

"Yeah. I'm glad too. I've grown attached to you guys." Melanie said with a grin.

"There you are! Just who I was looking for." Dr. White said as he approached the table.

"Which one of us?" Sharan asked suspiciously.

"All of you, actually." Dr. White said frankly.

"What can we do for you?" Valentine asked curiously.

"The question is, 'what can I do for you?'" Dr. White said with a grand smile.

"I'll bite. What can you do for us?" Melanie asked hesitantly.

"I'm glad you asked." Dr. White said with a smile. "What would the four of you think about having one fun-filled, luxurious evening, off-duty?"

"Really? You can do that?" Melanie asked with a yelp of excitement.

"Yes. I'm happy to say that I can. You four still have to be back in the morning, bright and early for your calisthenics, but tonight you can get out and let off some steam." Dr. White said with a grand smile as he handed out four identical cards.

"Why?" Sharan asked suspiciously. "I mean, why us?"

"Because, Cadet Crewman Sharan, your group has learned in one month what some of our regular classes have yet to discover after a year at the regular pace." Dr. White said happily.

"What is that?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"We're a team." Terry said in realization.

Dr. White touched his nose, then pointed at Terry, as if they were playing charades.

"So, because we came together as a team, you're giving us a day pass?" Sharan asked in confirmation.

"And because you passed your classes. Don't forget that!" Dr. White said cheerfully over his shoulder as he walked away.

"What do you guys want to do?" Melanie asked quickly.

"I have no idea. It's my first time on Earth." Valentine said honestly.

"Mine too." Sharan said frankly.

"Mine too." Terry admitted reluctantly.

The other three turned to look at Terry with question.

"I grew up in a colony. I never visited Earth before I arrived here to start classes." Terry said shyly.

"So *that's* why you're so nervous around people." Valentine said with a chuckle. "You could have told us."

"I know how some people feel about 'colony rats'... I just figured that I'd try to blend in." Terry said in a diminishing voice.

"Mel, how would you like to show three extra-terrestrial visitors your world this evening?" Sharan asked in an exaggerated voice.

"I would be delighted to." Melanie said with a radiant smile.

"Let's go get into our civvies and hit the town." Sharan said happily as he started clearing away his dishes.

"I'm not sure my clothing is suitable..." Valentine said in a diminishing voice.

"Val, you're a Vulcan. On Earth. No one will think twice about what you're wearing. They'll just think it's your native clothing from your home." Melanie said seriously.

"It is." Valentine said quietly.

"We'll take a look at it before you go, but I'm sure it'll be fine. Let's go, we're burning leave time." Melanie said as she motioned for the three extra-terrestrials to follow her out of the mess hall.

* * * * *

"You look comfortable." Melanie said frankly when she saw Valentine in his traditional Vulcan desert attire.

"I feel out of place." Valentine said quietly.

"Welcome to my world." Terry said with a chuckle.

"It's Mel's world. The rest of us are just visiting." Sharan said playfully.

"Thank you Sharan." Val said seriously. "I suppose I should feel out of place because I *am* out of place."

"Come on guys. Let's get down to the shuttle pad and see if we can hitch a ride into town." Melanie said as she checked to see that she had everything she wanted to take with her.

"Do you know where we're going?" Terry asked curiously.

"Does it matter?" Sharan asked bluntly.

After a moment to consider, Terry shrugged, then responded, "I guess not."

As Melanie approached the door, she nearly walked into a crewman who was entering.

"Oh, excuse me." He said quickly, then quietly asked, "Do you mind if I come in?"

"For what?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"I'm here to collect some personal belongings." The crewman said in a hesitant tone.

All four classmates looked at the cart the young crewman was pulling and each noticed the two carryall containers.

Immediately, all four looked at the lockers to find that Kelsey and Ashley's lockers had already been emptied.

"Come on in. We were just leaving." Melanie said quietly.

"Thank you." The crewman said as he continued on into the room.

"Shuttle pad." Melanie said to her companions, then started out the door.

Valentine looked back into the room in time to see the young crewman open Toko's locker.

* * * * *

"Where are we going now?" Sharan asked as the group stepped off the shuttle at the Starfleet spaceport.

"Over there. I need to get some advice on the best way to get us where we're going." Melanie said as she started walking with purpose.

The three boys shared a glance of question at her response, then quickly followed.

Melanie walked up to the information desk in the spaceport and waited for the older woman behind the counter to acknowledge her.

All three watched and waited as Melanie talked to the woman behind the counter.

Finally Melanie turned with a smile, then said, "This way guys. We need to catch a cab."

* * * * *

"Um, I hate to be a nuisance, but where are we going?" Terry asked cautiously as the taxi van pulled away from the spaceport.

"Pier 39." Melanie said simply, then noticing the identical befuddled looks on all three of her friends' faces, she continued, "While I was still at home, I did some research about San Francisco so I'd have an idea about what there was to do to fill the countless boring hours when I was out of classes and had nothing but free time."

All three boys smiled at her statement, understanding what she meant.

"Pier 39 at Fisherman's Wharf made the top of my list of 'must see' sights. And if I'm remembering right, the Aquarium of the Bay should be open until 7 tonight... I mean, if you guys want to go." Melanie said, not leaving any doubt about her own preference.

"Forgive me for asking, but what is the admission fee to participate in this activity?" Valentine asked hesitantly.

All his friends immediately picked up on his discomfort by the way that he reverted to his more formal, 'Vulcan' pattern of speech when asking the question.

"About fifteen dollars each, I think." Melanie said apologetically.

"I am afraid..." Valentine began to say when Sharan interrupted.

"I will pay for all four of us."

"You don't have to do that Sharan." Melanie said quickly.

"As I recall, this entire affair began as *my* celebration, so it is my prerogative to pay, if I wish." Sharan said firmly as if daring any of them to defy him.

"That's incredibly generous of you, Sharan." Melanie said with an appreciative smile.

After a moment of indecision, Sharan turned to face his companions in the van and said, "I will say this once, so pay heed."

All three looked at Sharan uncertainly at the ominous words.

"I am a self-sufficient person. Due to circumstances... that I would rather not discuss, I have learned to achieve my goals through hard work and determination. Since meeting all of you, I have discovered that it is not a sign of weakness to accept help from others and that being part of a team can be rewarding in ways that I could not have imagined before." Sharan said in a somewhat formal tone.

In a quieter voice, Sharan continued, "You are my friends."

Chapter 4

There had been little conversation among the group as they walked through glass tunnels and various other attractions of the aquarium. The underwater environment was so foreign to all of them that each of the friends was caught up in the wonder of the experience.

It wasn't until they were outside and walking away, that the foursome seemed to split into two pairs, separated by a respectful distance.

"How are you doing Val?" Terry asked with concern at his pensive expression. "You look like something's bothering you."

"I'll be fine." Valentine said quietly.

"What's wrong? Was all that water making you nervous?" Terry asked, only half seriously.

Valentine smiled at the question and said, "No. Being here, doing this with all of you made me consider how drastically my life has changed, since coming to Earth."

"If you feel like talking about it... you know... I'm here. I'll listen." Terry stammered.

Valentine smiled at Terry, then glanced at Melanie and Sharan who were walking ahead of them before saying, "Before I left Vulcan, I tried to anticipate what it would be like for me on Earth. The reality is very different from what I expected."

"In a good way, I hope."

"Yes. In a very good way." Valentine said with a smile, then continued, "As you noticed when we first met, I am not like other Vulcans. Since I was unable to master the mental disciplines or the intellectual prowess that is accepted as the norm for Vulcans, I felt very alone for most of my life."

Terry stared at Valentine for a moment, then quietly said, "Yeah. I know how that is."

"Were you also shunned for being different from those around you?" Valentine asked curiously.

"Sort of. I mean, I was born and raised in a domed city... a Tellarite mining colony. My dad is a geologist and my mom is an environmental specialist. We would go to Tellar a few times a year, but not much further away than that. So I never really got much of a chance to spend time around Humans other than my parents." Terry said uncomfortably.

Valentine put an arm around Terry to give him a quick, affectionate hug.

"I'm glad I ended up bunking with you Val. I don't know if I would have made it through the first month without all your help and encouragement." Terry said honestly.

"I'm sure you would have, Terry." Valentine said gently. "But I'd like to think that our friendship made it a more pleasant experience than it would have been otherwise."

"Yeah." Terry said with a chuckle, "I think that's a pretty safe bet."

"Are you guys hungry?" Melanie asked from ahead of them, then gestured toward a restaurant they were approaching.

"Yeah." Terry said immediately.

Valentine noticed that he still had his arm around Terry and tried to inconspicuously release Terry from the hug as he said, "Yes. I am also hungry."

"Val?" Terry said as he stopped walking.

Valentine turned and looked at Terry with question.

"You guys go on, we'll catch up in a minute." Terry said more loudly toward Melanie and Sharan.

Melanie and Sharan looked at Terry curiously for a moment, then both nodded in acceptance before continuing.

There was a long moment of silence as Terry struggled within himself about what he wanted to say, and how to say it.

Valentine watched his expression carefully and understood that whatever Terry was considering, was serious.

"Val. I like you." Terry said as he forced himself to look into Valentine's dark eyes.

"I like you too, Terry." Valentine said simply.

Terry shook his head as he muttered to himself, "I'm messing this up."

Valentine had no idea of what Terry was trying to say, but could tell that his inability to express it was causing him frustration.

"I don't know if you even think about stuff like this..." Terry said, then shook his head, obviously not knowing what his next words should be.

Even though Valentine didn't know what was bothering his friend, he could clearly see the emotional turmoil and only knew of one thing he could do to try to help.

Valentine took a step forward and pulled Terry into his arms.

Terry closed his eyes as a tear of frustration escaped down his cheek.

"Val, I think I might be falling in love with you." Terry said, not sure if even Valentine's superior hearing could catch the muttered whisper.

Valentine froze for a moment, trying to analyze his feelings toward Terry before responding.

"Val?" Terry asked in fear, not knowing what the silence meant.

"Terry." Valentine whispered as he put his hands on Terry's shoulders and guided him slightly out of the hug.

There was a long moment of frozen silence as Terry searched Valentine's eyes, trying to find any hint of what Valentine was feeling.

Without a word, Valentine bent down and kissed Terry full on the mouth.

Terry seemed to be in shock, unwilling to take the chance of moving, afraid that it would break the spell that held them in that perfect moment.

Finally, Valentine slowly pulled away, looking deeply into Terry's light brown eyes to gauge his reaction.

"Wow!" Terry gasped.

Valentine smiled, then a look of regret ghosted into his expression as he said, "I know that I love you, Terry. But I would never want to lie to you. I can't honestly say that I'm 'in love' with you."

"Good." Terry whispered.

Valentine quirked an eyebrow at the unexpected response.

"I don't know if I'm 'in love' either. But if you're willing, maybe we could find out together." Terry said quietly.

"I would like that." Valentine said as he pulled Terry close to his chest again.

After a moment of enjoying the hug, Terry reluctantly said, "Mel and Sharan are probably already eating. We should go."

"From the way Melanie and Sharan have been looking at each other, they may very well be having the same discussion that we are." Valentine said seriously as he guided Terry to his side so they could walk with their arms around each other.

"I hope so. I think they'd be a great couple." Terry said as he felt joy at being held so affectionately.

After a moment, Valentine hesitantly said, "Kissing is not a custom of the Vulcan people."

"I didn't know that." Terry said honestly, then glanced up, hoping to get a hint of what Valentine was thinking.

"Did I do it right?" Valentine asked in a whisper.

Terry smiled and hugged Valentine a little tighter to his side as he said, "You did it great."

Before they could say anymore, they had arrived at the front door of the restaurant and found Sharan and Melanie waiting for them just inside.

* * * * *

"It'll be about five minutes until they have a table for us. What are you guys up to?" Melanie asked with a sparkle of curiosity dancing in her eyes.

"Val and I were just talking about... um... I don't know how to explain it." Terry said nervously.

"We have expressed our affection for each other. I am not familiar enough with the nuances of Human socialization to know how such a relationship would be classified." Valentine said in a formal tone, which told the friends that knew him that he was feeling uncomfortable.

"I don't know either." Terry said with a reassuring smile as he looked up at Val.

"Well, if you have affection, then I'd say you're at least friends. Agreed?" Melanie asked seriously.

Both men nodded in unison.

"Are you planning on dating? And if you are, will you still be seeing other people?" Melanie asked as she watched both for their reactions.

"Just each other." Terry said, then looked up at Val and quietly continued, "If you want to."

"Yes, Terry. I would like that." Valentine said as he draped his arm around Terry's shoulders.

"Then it sounds to me like you two are boyfriends." Melanie said happily.

"Well, we **are** friends. And next to you, I look like a boy." Terry said playfully as he looked up at Val.

"Next to you, I feel like one." Valentine said with a joyful smile.

Terry was about to respond when he noticed Sharan's serious expression.

"Is there a problem, Sharan?" Terry asked gently, feeling that after Sharan's earlier declaration of friendship, that the question might not be taken as a challenge.

"Yes." Sharan said seriously, then at Terry's look of surprise, he continued, "Excuse me. What I meant to say is, no, I have no problem with the two of you being boyfriends. But, yes, I have a problem."

"Oh. Um, thanks." Terry said in a flustered voice, then asked, "Is it anything I can help with?"

"No." Sharan said quietly, then turned to Melanie and said, "Mel, I should have told you as soon as I realized that I liked you. But since I didn't, it gives the impression that I didn't realize my attraction until the subject was introduced by Val and Terry."

"Um, Sharan." Valentine said hesitantly, "I don't know if you thought you were hiding your emotions from us, but it was obvious how you felt about Mel from the first day."

"Really obvious." Terry said with a nod and a chuckle.

Sharan seemed surprised by the statement, but soon overcame it and turned to Melanie to say, "Regardless of how obvious my feelings might have been. I regret not telling you sooner. I really like you Mel."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." Melanie said with a chuckle, then when she noticed the expectation in Sharan's eyes, she quietly said, "I like you, too, Sharan."

"Your table is prepared if you would like to follow me." A waiter said from beside the group.

"Come on guys. Let's eat." Melanie said with a grand smile, then held out her hand to Sharan.

After a moment of hesitation, Sharan took the offered hand and walked with Melanie into the dining room.

Terry and Valentine shared a smile at the sight.

There seemed to be a moment of indecision, but Terry finally offered his hand to Val. Terry's hand looked like the hand of a child compared to Valentine's much larger one, but his grasp was firm as they walked, hand-in-hand to catch up to the others.

* * * * *

After being seated and given their menus, Sharan noticed the look of concern on Valentine's face.

"Order whatever you like. I'm buying." Sharan said to the group, then raised his menu and said in a whisper that only Valentine's Vulcan hearing could detect, "Please Val, enjoy this day."

Val glanced at Sharan, indicating that he heard, then went back to trying to decide what to order.

"Thanks Sharan. I really appreciate it." Terry said sincerely.

Noticing the look of concern in Valentine's eyes as he continued to study the menu, Sharan came to a decision.

"My parents were archaeologists." Sharan began, drawing everyone's attention. "About three years ago they made an amazing discovery, the find of a lifetime."

"The crypt they found was from an ancient civilization that no one had ever encountered before. I remember their call like it was yesterday. As soon as they made their discovery, they called me so they could share it with me... they were so happy." Sharan said distantly.

"What my parents didn't know at the time was that the fall of that civilization was brought about by a plague. Even though they took what they believed were reasonable precautions, the plague which lay dormant in the crypt, was so infectious and easily transmissible, that not only they, but the entire archaeological team became infected. Fortunately, when the first of the team members fell ill, the medical personnel on site instituted a complete quarantine, otherwise there's no telling how far it would have spread... Even now, the planet is still quarantined." Sharan said, then looked around the group to see that they were still listening.

"The disease is an incredibly adaptive mutagenic virus. The moment any treatment was introduced, the virus adapted to nullify it, sometimes within

minutes. It took weeks for the disease to run its course with my parents, and I spoke to them every day. I could see them getting sicker and weaker as the disease devoured them." Sharan said quietly.

"We'll need a few more minutes." Melanie said, drawing Sharan's attention.

The waiter gave a quick nod, then withdrew.

"Go on." Terry said gently to Sharan, with a look of compassion in his eyes.

"They died." Sharan said simply, then added, "I was fourteen."

"I'm so sorry." Melanie said as she laid her hand over Sharan's.

"I was able to convince my grandparents that I was old enough to take care of myself... and so I have. My parents amassed considerable wealth before the discovery that killed them. I have never had to want for anything that money could buy." Sharan said quietly, then looked around the table again.

"What the money couldn't buy me is what I've found with you. For the first time since their deaths, I don't feel alone. So please, don't be concerned when I offer to pay for things. I know that you can't buy true friends, but this is something I can do to express my caring for all of you." Sharan said quietly, seeming to direct his last statement to the salt shaker in the center of the table.

"Thank you for explaining. I understand, now." Valentine said with a quick smile at Sharan, then looked back at his menu with no trace of his former hesitation.

After a moment, he quietly added, "But I don't know what to order. All these choices are so... alien."

Melanie chuckled at the choice of words, then asked, "Would you mind eating some seafood?"

Valentine considered for a moment, then said, "I would be willing to try."

"Fine, then look at that meal selection at the bottom. Just pick one thing from each category, it doesn't matter what. If you don't like something, you can trade with one of us." Melanie suggested helpfully.

"Yes, I will do that." Valentine said as he read over the section of the menu that Melanie had indicated.

"I'm going to do that too." Terry said decisively.

Sharan nodded his agreement to the plan.

Once their orders were placed, Valentine noticed that Melanie once again had her hand resting over Sharan's on the table.

"As you may have noticed, I'm not a 'typical' Vulcan." Valentine quietly said.

"From the way you look, I figured that you're probably half Vulcan... I just don't know what the other half is." Terry said honestly.

"No." Valentine said with a gentle smile at his new boyfriend, "I am a full Vulcan. The doctors concluded that through some quirk of genetics, an ancient recessive pattern of our ancestors became dominant in me. So not only am I larger and stronger than other Vulcans, but my brain structure is significantly less developed."

"I don't understand." Melanie said cautiously.

"I have little telepathic ability. I am not able to control my emotions as other Vulcans do. And I have, thus far, been unable to attain a true understanding of logic." Valentine said in a diminishing voice.

"Good." Terry said as he reached under the table to take Valentine's hand.

Valentine looked at him with surprise.

"I like you just the way you are," Terry said with a grin.

After a moment to absorb the words, Valentine quietly said, "You are the first person to ever say such a thing to me."

"Well, he won't be the last." Melanie said from across the table. "I like you just the way you are, too."

Sharan nodded his agreement to Melanie's statement.

"Thank you." Valentine said shyly, then continued, "Since Sharan introduced the subject of money, I felt that I should explain... I am only here due to the generosity of a retired Starfleet officer who agreed to sponsor me. That is why I have to be very careful about the money I spend."

"What about your family?" Melanie asked gently.

"I have not spoken to them since I left their home. That was nearly five years ago." Valentine said distantly. "But had I asked for their support, they would have refused, claiming that my 'deficiencies' would bring shame to their house."

"You said 'their' house." Sharan said quietly.

Valentine slowly nodded, then after a moment to consider his words, explained, "I was forbidden the Kahs'wan, which means that in Vulcan

society, I am seen as a child. I have no say, no voice, no house. That is why when I turned fifteen, I left their home."

"You ran away?" Melanie gently asked.

"No. I did not run." Valentine said simply.

Just as Melanie was about to explain what she meant, Valentine continued, "I chose to relieve them of the burden of providing for me and the shame of having a child who could never fulfill even the least of their expectations."

"When I told them my intentions and my reasoning, they did not disagree. So I did not run. I left." Valentine said distantly.

"How did you survive on your own?" Terry asked as he squeezed Valentine's hand under the table.

"There is a segment of Vulcan society that no one talks about, what I suppose you would call 'outcasts'; Other people like me who, for whatever reason, have no house and no voice. It seems strange to me that those who have endured so much hardship have such a great capacity for acceptance. It wasn't an easy life, but since I am strong, I was able to barter my labor for food, clothing and adequate shelter. Once my most basic needs were met, I began to dream of a future." Valentine finished with a smile at his friends.

"Starfleet?" Terry asked to confirm.

"Yes. Although it seemed to be an unattainable goal at first, it was the only possibility that I could conceive that offered a future that would allow me to someday fulfill my ultimate dream." Valentine said distantly.

"What's that... I mean, if you don't mind telling." Terry asked gently, recognizing that it was something very personal.

Valentine looked around the table at his friends, then quietly said, "I want to make a difference."

At the curious looks of his friends, he continued, "On the last day of my life, I want to be able to look back and know that in some way, no matter how small, the universe is a better place because I existed."

"Wow." Terry muttered as he looked at Valentine with admiration.

"Although I never considered my motivation in such terms, I suppose that my ultimate goal is much the same as yours." Sharan said frankly.

At Valentine's curious look, Sharan continued, "I had the family support and finances to pursue any path that I wanted, but rather than take any of

those 'easy' paths, I decided that I wanted to achieve something. I didn't want what was handed to me or passed down to me, for once in my life I wanted to have something that I earned for myself."

"I had so many choices, but the one that stood out above all others was Starfleet service. It was the chance for 'me' to do something. Not my money. Not my family influence. It was a chance for 'me' to make a difference." Sharan finished with a smile at Val.

Movement in close proximity to their table drew their attention and everyone watched as the waiter placed appetizers on the table before each person.

* * * * *

"So Val, what do you think?" Melanie asked expectantly.

Valentine considered the flavor of the lobster bisque before saying, "There is an underlying sweetness to this that I find displeasing."

"Then switch with me. I've got a crabcake on watercress salad, maybe you'll like that better." Melanie said as she scooted her dish to him.

"I would not want to take your food." Valentine said cautiously.

"I just picked one at random, same as you. Come on, switch so we can enjoy it before the main course arrives." Melanie said insistently.

As Valentine traded appetizers with Melanie, Sharan asked, "Terry, do you like yours?"

"Yeah. I have no idea what Arancini is, but it tastes great." Terry said with a wide smile.

"I'm glad." Sharan said peacefully.

* * * * *

As the group waited for the main course to arrive, Terry said, "I guess it's my turn to tell."

"You don't have to." Melanie said honestly.

"It's alright. I've wanted to tell all of you about me for a while now, it just never seemed to be the right time." Terry said with a smile at her.

He turned his attention to all three of his friends as he said, "Even though I'm Human, legally I'm a Tellerite because I was born on a Tellerite colony world. I guess working at the mining colony was a great opportunity for my parents when they were first starting out. You know, really good money and

impressive titles for a pair of kids fresh out of college. Anyway, by the time their careers were established and I was born, it had become their home and they didn't want to leave."

"I don't know if you know anything about Tellerites, but... well, arguing is kind of like a sport to them. Because of that, I didn't really spend that much time around anyone but my parents. I went to school by subspace and got to know a lot of people from a lot of different species, but... well, people tend to come and go a lot in a situation like that. Because of that and the physical distance between us... I never really got close to anyone." Terry said thoughtfully.

"What drew you to Starfleet?" Melanie asked curiously.

"My parents' dream was 'their' dream. I wanted to join Starfleet so I could see something other than the colony and maybe discover a dream of my own." Terry said simply.

"Was your mining colony on a high gravity planet?" Sharan asked curiously.

"Yes. How did you know?" Terry asked with surprise.

"During calisthenics I have noticed that you are far stronger and have greater stamina than the other Humans." Sharan said simply.

"I've noticed too." Val said honestly.

"Well, yeah. Where I'm from has a lot higher gravity. It's about 2.4g compared to Tellar. I haven't done the conversion comparing it with Earth. But that's why I wear these." Terry said as he pulled back his right sleeve to reveal the small device on his forearm.

"What is it?" Val asked, anxious to know after being curious for so long.

"Why don't you try it and see if you can figure it out?" Terry said as he deactivated the unit and unhooked the strap.

"It won't hurt you to be without it?" Val asked cautiously.

"No. Trust me." Terry said with a grin, then glanced at Sharan and said, "You can try one too if you want."

"What does it do?" Sharan asked hesitantly.

"Nothing bad. Just don't let Mel try it, it's possible that it **could** hurt her." Terry said as he removed the device from his left arm.

"What do I do?" Val asked as he pulled back the long sleeve of his robe and moved the device to his forearm.

"Just strap it on and press the button by your wrist." Terry said with a smile.

Everyone was startled by the sound of a ::thump:: from Sharan's side of the table.

Sharan slowly lifted his hand that had slammed down on the table, then he started examining the device on his forearm.

"Do you see what it is now?" Terry asked with a smile.

"It seems to be a weight." Valentine said as he lifted his arm experimentally.

"Well, they use the same technology as gravity plating to distribute the weight evenly instead of only on my wrists and ankles, but yeah, for all intents and purposes, they're weights." Terry said with a smile.

Valentine turned off the unit as he quietly said, "When I saw you without these in the shower room, I thought perhaps you had some sort of neurological or muscle disorder."

"No. My only muscle disorder was being born and living my whole life on a high gravity planet. Without the compensators, I feel almost like I'm floating. I stumble and fall into things. If I were to try and scratch my nose right now, I'd probably slap myself in the face." Terry finished with a chuckle.

"But with your compensators, you don't have any difficulty?" Valentine asked carefully as he handed the compensator back to Terry.

"No. Well, at least not with the gravity. The air pressure and atmosphere are different from what I'm used to, but I spent some time in the Federation Dome back at the colony before I left, so I could acclimate before I came to the academy. I notice it, but it doesn't cause me any problems."

A pair of waiters arrived and cleared the appetizer dishes as they placed the main course.

* * * * *

Melanie watched with concern as Valentine took a small bite of his main course. She knew that he wasn't used to eating any meat.

After a moment, Val looked up with surprise and said, "This is very good."

"What did you get, anyway?" Terry asked curiously as he looked at Valentine's plate.

"Swordfish." Val said as he cut himself another bite, then asked, "What is yours?"

"Seared Mahi Mahi." Terry said, then quietly continued, "From the description, it looked like the least scary of the choices."

"You can taste mine if I can taste yours." Val said with a smile.

Melanie sputtered a little as she tried to giggle around a mouth full of food, then after swallowing, finally said, "I hope you were talking about the food."

"What food?" Val asked, feigning ignorance.

"Here." Terry said as he offered a piece of the Mahi Mahi on his fork.

Val placed his hand over Terry's and guided the fork to his mouth.

After a moment to consider, Val finally released Terry's hand and said, "I like that too. Try mine."

Melanie and Sharan watched as Terry guided Val's hand holding the fork to his mouth.

"Would you like some of mine?" Sharan asked her quietly.

"We ordered the same thing, Sharan." Melanie said with regret.

"So?" Sharan said as he offered her a bite of one of his broiled prawns.

Melanie mimicked Val and Terry's action by guiding Sharan's hand holding the fork to her mouth, then after a moment to consider, she said, "I think I like yours better."

* * * * *

"My turn." Melanie said, drawing the attention of the others at the table.

Their incomprehending looks prompted her to add, "...to tell why I came to the academy."

"My favorite aunt, Janice, served... actually, is still serving on the Enterprise. She's the best and happiest person I know, so I decided that I'd like to pattern my life after hers... well, except that I want to go into medical. I don't think I'd enjoy ship's services... and my aptitude tests agree with me." Melanie rambled.

"Patterning your choices after someone you admire is not only a great tribute to them, but seems like a smart way to start out until you find your own path." Sharan said thoughtfully.

"I bet your aunt is pleased." Terry said with a grin.

"When she found out that I was accepted, I thought she was going to explode with happiness. I can't wait until she's back on Earth so I can tell her about everything that's happened."

"How did your parents feel about your decision?" Sharan asked curiously.

"They thought it was a good choice. From the first time I brought it up to them, they've offered me their encouragement and support." Melanie said happily.

"That's good. I'm happy for you." Terry said honestly.

"What about you, Terry? How did your parents' feel about your choice?" Valentine asked curiously.

"I think they didn't want me to go, but they knew that Starfleet would be good for me. By the time I was ready to leave for the academy, they were happy for me and accepted it." Terry said contentedly.

"Excuse me, but were you just talking about the Starfleet Academy?" someone asked from the next table.

"Yes." Terry said cautiously.

"I'm going to start there tomorrow, is there any way I could ask you some questions?" The young man asked hopefully.

"We're just about to have dessert, but you're welcomed to join us if you like." Terry said, then glanced at the others to see that it was alright with them.

"Thanks. We're waiting on our food to arrive, so I'll just take a minute." The young man said quickly as he pulled his chair over between Melanie and Terry. "I'm Giovanni."

"It's nice to meet you, Giovanni. What's your specialty?" Sharan asked seriously.

"I've been accepted into the accelerated officer's program. I'm going to be a helmsman." Giovanni said with joy.

The four friends exchanged a look, then Melanie said, "We're probably not going to be much help. We're all taking crewman's courses."

"That's okay. I just wanted to know what it's like at the academy. What can I expect?" Giovanni asked quickly.

"Expect to work hard." Terry said immediately.

"Don't let anything distract you from your reason for being at the academy. You will need to work toward your goal to the exclusion of all else." Sharan said seriously.

"And remember that one of your greatest assets at the academy will be your classmates. Surround yourself with those people who will motivate you and appreciate your encouragement. Do not allow someone with a bad attitude or a lax work ethic to divert you from your pursuit of your goal." Valentine said as he looked the young man in the eyes.

"Remember that life isn't fair, Starfleet isn't fair, when you're told to be somewhere, it's an order, not a request." Melanie said frankly.

"It sounds tough." Giovanni said with a little apprehension.

"It is." Terry said honestly. "But if you can stick with it and not give up, it will all be worth it."

Giovanni glanced over his shoulder and saw a waiter placing the main course on his table.

"Thanks guys. I appreciate the advice. Hopefully I'll see you at the academy." Giovanni said as he stood.

"You probably will. Enjoy your meal." Terry said with a smile at the happy young man.

After watching Giovanni go back to his own table, Melanie quietly asked, "Is that what we were like?"

"It seems like a lifetime ago, yet it was only a month." Sharan said distantly.

"It's been worth it." Terry said with an affectionate smile at Val.

"Yes." Val said as he returned the smile, then looked up as the waiter approached with their desserts.

* * * * *

"What do you want to do next?" Terry asked as the group were all getting ready to leave.

"How about we walk along the pier for a little bit to see some sights, then head back? I don't know about you guys, but I would absolutely **love** to get a full night of stress free sleep." Melanie said as she automatically walked to Sharan's side and took hold of his hand.

"Yes. That sounds like a very good idea." Val said as he followed her example and offered his hand to Terry.

"It's your world, lead the way." Terry said happily, then took hold of Valentine's much larger hand.

Some of the patrons of the restaurant gave curious glances at the large Vulcan publicly displaying affection, but Terry and Valentine's attention was only on each other.

* * * * *

"That's Alcatraz. And over there is the Golden Gate Bridge." Melanie said as she gestured across the bay.

"It is so beautiful here. The pictures that I have seen didn't do it justice." Valentine said as he draped his arm around Terry's shoulders.

"I always thought that my parents were being sentimental about Earth, because it was their home. I guess I didn't think it was really as nice as they said it was." Terry said distantly, then asked, "Are you alright, Val? It feels like you're shivering."

"I am a bit cold. I am used to a much warmer climate." Val said quietly, trying to minimize his discomfort.

"Let's ask if the others are ready to go. I think I've seen enough." Terry said quietly as he looked up into Val's eyes.

"One thing, first." Valentine said, then leaned down to kiss Terry gently.

Automatically, Terry reached up to place his arms around Val to pull him closer.

"Now I'm ready." Val whispered against Terry's lips.

"Yeah. Me too." Terry said before reclaiming Val's lips with his own.

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"Before we get back to the academy, I just wanted to say thank you to Mel for choosing such a wonderful place to visit and to Sharan for paying for it." Terry said as he snuggled against Valentine's side in the back of the taxi van.

"Yes. I had a great time. Much better than my best expectation." Valentine agreed in a gentle voice.

"It was our pleasure guys." Melanie said happily as she hugged Sharan with one arm.

"But we will expect you to respond in kind if we should ever find ourselves on Tellar or Vulcan." Sharan added with a grin.

"Absolutely." Terry said with a chuckle as Valentine nodded his agreement.

There was a long moment of silence as each of the group were lost in their own thoughts.

Finally, Melanie quietly asked, "Are we all ready for another month of this?"

"There is no ready." Terry said as he clung to Valentine a little more tightly.

"That's right. We just have to do it." Valentine said, then leaned down to place a gentle kiss on Terry's dark blond, slightly wavy hair.

"I think that says it all. We've all committed to this. We either continue on, or nothing we've done so far matters." Sharan said frankly.

Melanie nodded as the cab pulled up to the curb in front of the spaceport.

* * * * *

The group of four were surprised when they walked into their barracks to find four other people already in there.

"Hello?" Melanie said cautiously, as she separated herself from Sharan's side.

"Hey." A young teenage boy said as he lounged on his bunk. "I'm Troy. I think I've seen you around."

"I have noticed you in calisthenics." Valentine said in a neutral tone.

"Yeah, and I've seen you in the cafeteria. Have you been consolidated into this barracks?" Terry asked with his arm still around Valentine.

"Yup. I'm the last survivor of D7A. Juan and Phillipa are from D6K. That guy with the headphones over there hasn't spoken to us, but his cabinet says 'Horton'." Troy said, still sitting on his bunk.

"I'm Terry... Harper." Terry finished by pointing to the placard on his cabinet, then continued, "This is Val, Mel and Sharan."

"Nice to meet you. I can't believe how many people we lost in one month. There can't be more than twenty five of our original group left." Troy said seriously.

"We've been through six, so far, in this barracks." Valentine said as he guided Terry to walk with him to his bunk.

"Boyfriends?" Troy asked curiously as he looked at them.

"Yeah. As of today." Terry said happily.

"Congrats. Juan and Phillipa are a couple too." Troy said as he gestured absently in their direction.

"So are Sharan and Mel." Terry said with a smile.

"I guess that leaves me with..." Troy began to say as he glanced at 'Horton' who was rolled on his side, facing away and still wearing headphones, "...um, on my own."

"Don't worry Troy, we'll make sure you don't feel left out." Terry said with a grin.

"Guys, please trust me when I say that I'll probably want to be left out of certain things." Troy said frankly.

"Got it, Troy." Terry said with a chuckle.

"I think Terry was just saying that the rest of us won't pair off and ignore you." Valentine said gently.

"Thanks." Troy said, looking at Valentine with astonishment.

"He's nicer than the average Vulcan." Terry said with a grin, then winked up at his large boyfriend.

"Well good. I think this is going to be an interesting month." Troy said with a smile.

"Excuse me. Someone has left their soiled undergarments on my bunk." Sharan said in a menacing voice.

"Oops. Sorry. I wondered where those went." Troy said quickly as he stood and snatched them from the edge of Sharan's bunk.

"Do I want to know?" Terry asked quietly.

"I was the first one to get moved in here today. I guess maybe the unpacking got out of control." Troy said as he quickly stashed the underwear in his locker.

"I suspect that, while we have been out, a monkey has been spanked." Valentine said ominously.

A burst of laughter drew all attention to Phillipa who was now burying her face into Juan's chest.

"Ya never know, maybe more than one." Troy said with a guilty grin as a blush rose up his cheeks.

"We're going to need to do class selections tomorrow. I think it might be a good idea to do a little planning tonight." Sharan said thoughtfully.

"You're right, Sharan, as usual." Terry said with resignation as he walked to his locker to retrieve his padd.

Valentine, Melanie and Sharan each picked up their own padds, then looked around, trying to decide the best way they could make plans together.

"Guys, you can use my bunk." Terry said as he walked to sit with Valentine.

"We're planning our schedules, the rest of you are welcomed to join us if you want." Terry said over his shoulder.

"We've already planned ours. But... would you mind if Phillipa and I went up to my bunk?" Juan asked shyly, indicating the bunk above Terry's.

"Go for it." Terry said with a chuckle, then looked over at Troy and asked, "Do you want to join us for some schedule planning?"

"No more monkey jokes?" Troy asked cautiously.

"I don't know. You'd have to ask the big guy about that." Terry said playfully.

"I will promise not to introduce the subject." Valentine said in a valiant attempt to sound emotionless.

"Alright then." Troy said as he scooted off his bunk, took one step, then scooted onto Valentine's bunk and swung himself around so that he ended up right beside Terry.

"I think the best way to start will be in the 'path'." Sharan said as he looked at his padd.

"Oops. I guess I'll need that." Troy said as he rolled backward and swung his legs around again so that he ended up rolling off the edge of the bunk and landing on his feet.

Valentine and Terry smiled at each other at the younger boy's energy.

"How old are you, Troy?" Melanie asked with a grin.

"Fifteen and one third." Troy said as he hopped back onto the bunk.

"That's kind of young for the academy, isn't it?" Melanie asked with concern.

"Yeah. But I had nothing better to do." Troy said as he settled in beside Terry again.

"What about high school?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"Been there, done that, got the diploma. I even knocked out a few college courses before I was accepted to the academy." Troy said happily.

"If you can do all that, why aren't you in the officer's course?" Melanie asked curiously.

"Because I don't want to be an officer." Troy said simply.

At Melanie's disbelieving look, Troy said, "Some people think I'm smart. I don't see it. I can remember things and I'm a good test taker. But I'm **not** a leader. If I can make it through the E-1 training and get a good posting somewhere, then I'll probably start working my way up through the enlisted ranks. I like the idea of working along side people and training them. I think I'd hate sitting at a desk and planning out the jobs for all my little 'crewmen' to do."

"I think you are smart." Sharan said simply.

At Troy's look of surprise, Sharan continued, "You know your strengths, capabilities and your own mind. I respect your decision."

"Kewlness." Troy said with a grin.

"Perhaps we should begin our scheduling so we can enjoy the remainder of our evening." Valentine said in an attempt to get everyone back on task.

"Yeah. I know that some of us are looking forward to a long, stress-free night of sleep." Terry said with a smile at Melanie.

"Yup. Let's do it." Melanie said as she looked at her padd again.

* * * * *

"Crap!" Troy said as he worked on his padd.

"Problem?" Terry asked as he looked at what Troy was doing.

"It looks like I'm going to have to get 'special permission' to overload my classes again. It's such a pain." Troy muttered.

"Overload? What's that?" Terry asked curiously.

"You have to get permission to take more than eight classes. I thought when I did it last time it was a one time thing and I could just load up my schedule again this time. But noooOOOoooo. Now I'll have to go talk to all the guys with the funny jewelry on their collars and convince them that I really do know what I'm doing." Troy said with frustration.

"How many classes are you planning on taking?" Melanie asked curiously.

"Twelve, well, at least that's how many I'd like to take. I won't know for sure until I can plug them into the path and see if there are any conflicts. Last month I had two classes that I had to get waivers on because I hadn't completed the prerequisite classes, yet. Of course, I didn't know that until I got permission to do the overload and plugged them into the path, so I had to go through the whole 'special permission' thing again to get the prerequisite waivers." Troy said as he worked through the screens on his padd.

"I guess if you survived the tests last month, then they shouldn't have too much trouble with you overloading again this month." Valentine said carefully.

"Survived?" Troy said with a laugh, "I smoked them bitches! The only thing I didn't ace was that oral essay final. I lost points for being a smartass."

"Not you." Terry said with a chuckle.

"It was TOTALLY worth it." Troy said with a mischievous smile.

"Is there anything you can do tonight or will you have to wait until tomorrow to do everything?" Valentine asked curiously.

Troy sat thinking for a moment, then let out a sigh of resignation before saying, "I **could** go to the library and look up the requisite details on all the classes that I'm interested in... and that I've completed... and the college credits that transferred over, then chart out the whole mess and manually do what the path program usually does with a few 'drag and drops' and a click."

"You said you **could** do that, but what **will** you do?" Sharan asked curiously.

"Oh, I'll end up doing it. I'm just going to bitch and whine about it a little bit longer before I go." Troy said honestly.

Valentine worked to keep all emotion out of his expression as he said, "I see the logic of your approach."

Troy looked at Val with surprise, then broke into uncontrollable laughter.

All four friends watched as Troy fell back on the bunk clutching his stomach and laughing himself silly.

"You... you... are so awesome!" Troy hooted.

"Troy, would you like some company at the library?" Terry asked with a smile.

"I thought you were talking about going to bed early."

"No. I mean, yes. I was talking about that, but no. Not me." Terry said quickly.

"Dude, I think I need to diagram that sentence a few times before I understand it, but... if you want to come along, it'd be great to have the company." Troy said with appreciation.

"May I also accompany you?" Val asked cautiously.

"You already told me that you're boyfriends." Troy said seriously.

At Val's expectant look, Troy rolled his eyes and said, "That means if I invite him, you're automatically invited. And vice versa."

"Thank you." Valentine said with a happy little smile.

"I can see why you like the big guy, Terry. You ready?" Troy asked as he swung his legs around, rolled sideways and tumbled off the edge of the bunk onto his feet.

"Yeah. Would you two like to go to the library, too?" Terry asked hopefully.

"I think we might enjoy some quiet time together more than a trip to the library." Sharan said with a tender glance at Mel.

"Got it. Have fun." Terry said with a grin, then walked to join Valentine and Troy who were waiting for him buy the door.

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"What a ghost town." Terry said, as he looked around the large open room.

"I guess this is the one day of the month when no one needs to be in here." Troy said as he walked directly to the reference section.

"Do you need any help?" Valentine asked quickly.

"Nah. I know what I need. It'll just take a sec." Troy said as he glanced at the books.

"Do you want to do it in a study room?" Terry asked curiously.

"That depends on what you mean by 'it'." Troy said with a grin as he selected a book from the shelf.

Terry chuckled and said, "The only 'it' that I was planning on offering you was to hang out with you while you plan your schedule."

"Yeah. Then a study room would be good." Troy said as he grabbed another book.

"Policy makes it six. I think that's as much as I'm going to be able to stand." Terry said as he added the last of his classes into the path program.

"Do you think I should attempt to take the environmental control course again? Perhaps using what I learned the first time through the course, I would be able to pass it the second time." Valentine asked hesitantly.

"How important is it?" Terry asked as he walked to Val's side.

"It isn't. It's a specialty class that only leads to other, more specialized environmental control classes." Valentine said thoughtfully.

"Unless you really want to be in environmental control, I think you should skip it and take something that you can really use." Terry said frankly.

"The only thing that concerns me is that it was my only specialty class. All my other classes were general studies." Valentine said with concern.

"You can always go back later and pick it up if you find out that you have an empty block in one of your later schedules." Troy said as he concentrated on the books in front of him.

"Yes. That makes sense to me. I would prefer to focus on General Engineering rather than the specialized classes. Once I've fulfilled the minimum requirement for Starfleet service, then I can take classes in individual fields to enhance my desirability as a potential member of a crew." Valentine said thoughtfully.

"Would you mind if I look at that?" Troy asked as he finally looked away from his work at the table.

"I would not want to take you away from your scheduling efforts." Valentine said hesitantly.

"I could stand a minute or two away from it." Troy said dismissively, then held out his hand and asked, "May I?"

"Of course." Valentine said as he handed the padd to Troy.

After a moment of looking over the padd, Troy absently said, "It looks like you nailed down the most important classes last term."

"The only one I failed was Environmental Control." Valentine said quietly.

"Hey, let me try something." Troy said suddenly, then started working on the padd.

"What are you doing?" Valentine asked hesitantly.

"You said that the goal was to qualify for Starfleet service, right?" Troy asked seriously as he was working on the touch screen at a rapid pace.

"Yes. I should be able to complete that requirement in two terms, then I can begin to broaden my skills." Valentine said cautiously, as he watched Troy work.

Troy broke into a wide grin, then handed the padd to Valentine as he said, "Tell me what you think of that."

Valentine began to read the padd, then his eyes widened in astonishment.

"What is it Val?" Terry asked with concern.

"Troy found a series of classes that would qualify me for Starfleet service at the end of the coming term." Valentine said in wonder.

"He what?" Terry said in surprise, then turned to Troy and asked, "How?"

Troy smiled with pride at his accomplishment, then said, "The trick is lab studies. You'll notice that nearly all those classes include practical lab components. Those classes carry more weight than the textbook only classes."

"Does that mean that Val is going to have to take eight classes AND eight labs?" Terry asked cautiously.

"No. It doesn't work that way. These classes are designed to teach the different disciplines with a hands-on approach. So instead of having to do a ton of reading about how to do a thing, you go into a lab and actually do it. You end up learning about the same thing. But the really great part is that there are quite a few things that you can do that will apply for credit in two or more classes." Troy said happily.

"I don't understand what it says about the unscheduled testing requirement." Valentine said thoughtfully as he read through the class descriptions.

Troy shrugged and said, "That's just their roundabout way of saying that you may be asked to actually do one of the lab projects for a grade. Usually labs are just there to help you figure out stuff that the reading didn't explain well. A cadet can make it through three or four terms without ever setting foot in a lab. But if you take one of these classes, you might be asked to prove not only that you can answer a question of how to do something, but actually give a demonstration."

"I don't know if that's better or worse than the other way." Terry said cautiously.

"I don't know either. But it's faster." Troy said frankly. "If Valentine's goal is to become eligible for Starfleet service as quickly as possible, I think this is the only way."

"Thank you, Troy." Valentine said when he finally looked up from the padd. "If I can complete these classes, I will be eligible for Starfleet service at the end of the month." Valentine said as he studied his padd.

"Are you going to do it?" Terry asked with concern. "You'll be able to leave in one more month?"

"I will meet the absolute minimum requirement for active Starfleet service. However, I would only be qualified as 'general labor' with no qualification in any engineering department or specialty." Valentine said as he looked up from his padd.

"Still, I think it's the way to go." Troy said as he looked back at the large table strewn with papers.

"How are you doing with your stuff, Troy?" Terry asked with concern.

"I'm good. I know it looks like a mess, but I've just about got the hard part done."

"I think we're almost finished with our stuff. Is there anything we can do to help you?" Terry asked cautiously, not wanting to distract Troy from his work too much.

"No. I've just about got all the pieces mapped out, so all that's left is to put them together." Troy said as he concentrated on his writing.

After a moment, Troy looked up from his work and said, "Even though this part isn't hard, it might take a while. So you guys can go back to the barracks and sleep or relax or something if you want."

Before Terry could respond, Valentine said, "If we are disturbing you, please say so. We will not be offended and we will leave you to complete your work. However, if you are not bothered by our presence, I believe we would both like to stay. We enjoy your company."

Troy seemed to consider for a moment, then quietly said, "I enjoy your company, too. I'd like it if you'd stay."

* * * * *

"So what does all this mean?" Terry asked when Troy stopped shifting pieces of paper around on the table.

"Basically, that pile in the middle represents the classes I'm going to sign up for tomorrow, as soon as I talk to everyone from the groundskeeper to Commander De Gama and get their approval." Troy said honestly.

"And you had to go through all this to get that?" Terry asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. I could have written a program to do it, but after writing it, I'd have to plug in all the variables and in the end it would have taken longer than this did." Troy said seriously.

"So what do you need to do now?" Terry asked as he looked at the scraps of paper that honestly looked like scattered rubbish to him.

"Well, the result of all that..." Troy said as he gestured toward the table.

"...is this." He continued, holding up one neatly written piece of notebook paper.

"So we can just throw it all away?" Terry asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. If you wouldn't mind. I'll go put the books back where I found them." Troy said as he picked up the reference books from the table.

"Hold on!" Terry said in a commanding tone.

"What?" Troy asked from the doorway.

"Can I see that piece of paper again?" Terry asked seriously.

"Sure." Troy said in a puzzled voice as he fished the folded piece of paper out of his pocket.

"What do you need it for?" He asked curiously.

"I don't. I just wanted to be sure that I saw you leave the room with it, in your hand, BEFORE we started throwing away large amounts of paper." Terry said frankly.

Troy broke into a smile as he said, "Good call."

"We'll be done here in a minute." Terry said as he walked to the corner of the room and picked up the large paper recycle bin.

* * * * *

"So you're done with everything you can do tonight, right?" Terry asked as they walked out of the library.

"Yeah. At 09:00 I'll start jumping through all the hoops to get my schedule set up. It'll probably take me all morning." Troy said sourly.

"Well, we've still got a few hours before bedtime. Do you have any plans?" Terry asked curiously.

Troy considered for a moment before saying, "No. Not really. Did you have something in mind?"

"I just feel like relaxing. It's too early to sleep, but I think it'd be nice to just get comfortable and basically do nothing for a while." Terry said honestly.

"Count me in." Troy said with a smile.

"I feel conspicuous in my 'civvies'. Perhaps we could shower and change first." Valentine said as they walked.

"A hot shower sounds like a perfect way to start." Terry said with a grin up at Val.

After a few steps, Terry noticed that Troy had stopped walking and was staring at them.

"Problem?" Terry asked cautiously.

"Um, it's about the shower thing..." Troy said uncomfortably.

"Join us. Don't. Whatever makes you comfortable." Terry said casually.

Troy seemed to be lost in his thoughts as Terry and Val waited for his decision.

"Is it because we're gay?" Terry asked cautiously.

Troy blinked with surprise at the question, then said, "No. Actually, I wasn't even thinking of that."

"Then what's wrong?" Val asked gently,

"It's just... you know I'm young..." Troy said uncomfortably.

"Yeah." Terry said cautiously, not sure what problem Troy was having.

"I just... I guess all my growth hormones went to my brain." Troy finished as a blush rose up his cheeks.

"Terry tells me that he feels that, due to my size, he looks like a boy in comparison." Val said gently.

Troy looked from Val to Terry and nodded that he understood what Val was saying.

"So if you would like to join us, you would have someone sympathetic to what you are feeling." Val finished with a smile.

After a moment, Troy reluctantly said, "I guess I could try. For the last month, I've been trying to avoid showering with the other guys because I didn't want to get stared at or picked on."

"We wouldn't allow anyone to torment you, Troy." Valentine said sincerely.

"Thanks. It's going to be nice to have some people around that I can trust." Troy said happily.

"You've got 'em, Troy." Terry said with an honest smile.

Chapter 5

"You know, you don't have to do this." Terry said as he led the way into the locker room.

"Yeah. I kinda do." Troy said uncomfortably as he walked to his locker.

"We really won't be bothered if you want to go first or wait until we're done." Val quietly assured.

"Guys, this is kind of like a phobia thing for me. I've been dodging it for a month, but I really need to face it and get over it. I know I just met you, but... for some reason I really trust you guys and I'd appreciate it if you'd help me get past this." Troy said shyly.

"Well then, let's shower." Terry said with a comforting smile directed at the younger boy.

"Yeah. Okay." Troy said nervously as he fumbled to open his crewman's jumpsuit.

"Relax, Troy. It's going to be fine." Terry said gently as he started to undress.

"As I recall, Terry was also nervous the first time we showered together." Valentine said as he opened his robe.

"I never showered with anyone before. I had no idea how I was supposed to act." Terry said with a chuckle at the memory as he took off his compensators.

"Yeah. I know how that is." Troy said timidly as he worked the sleeves of his jumpsuit off his shoulders.

"Valentine was here for me, just like he's here for you. He not only let me know that it's alright to be nervous, but that I wasn't alone in being uncertain about what to do." Terry said gently, then slid down his pants.

Troy forced himself to look away from Terry and was confronted by the sight of Valentine pulling down his underwear.

"Are you alright, Troy?" Terry asked with concern.

Troy blinked, then quickly said, "Sorry! I didn't mean to stare!"

"It's fine, Troy." Terry said gently, "In fact, look."

Troy turned his attention back to Terry to see him fully naked.

"See? Nothing scary here." Terry said, then slowly turned to show off his naked body.

"But what if I... um..." Troy stammered with his hands still holding his jumpsuit at his hips.

"Get a boner?" Terry asked cautiously.

A blush rose up Troy's face as he shyly nodded.

"It happens. Just try not to worry about it. We're not going to." Terry said gently, then started taking slow, careful steps toward the shower room.

"That's right Troy. Please just relax in the knowledge that we aren't going to be offended or make fun of you, no matter what happens." Valentine said reassuringly.

"You're among friends." Terry added with a smile as he stopped in the shower room doorway.

"Friends. Right." Troy said in a voice that was quite a bit calmer than before. "Here it goes."

Valentine and Terry watched as Troy pulled his jumpsuit and underwear down in one move.

After a moment, Troy chanced a look at Terry and Valentine's faces to see their reactions.

"Um, Troy. I don't know how to tell you this..." Terry said hesitantly.

Troy braced himself for whatever Terry was about to say.

"...there's nothing wrong with you."

Troy blinked with confusion, sure that he hadn't heard correctly.

"Terry is correct. You look perfectly normal." Valentine said gently.

"I'm not... too small?" Troy asked timidly.

"Troy, you're fifteen. You look just like I did when I was fifteen. I promise, there's nothing wrong with you." Terry said seriously.

"Really?" Troy asked in wonder.

"Really." Valentine said with a smile.

"If that's settled, are we ready to shower?" Terry asked seriously.

"Yeah, just a second." Troy said as he rushed to sit down and pull the jumpsuit and underwear off over his feet.

* * * * *

"So were you always shy, or is this a recent thing for you?" Terry asked when Val and Troy joined him in the shower room.

"I don't know. I think it's just because I go to school with people so much older than I am. If I was around other people my age, then maybe it wouldn't be so bad." Troy said speculatively.

"I guess I can understand that." Terry said as he started his shower.

"Would you guys rather I go over there or something?" Troy asked, pointing to the other bank of showers.

"You're welcome to join us, Troy. We're not going to be doing anything more than showering either way." Valentine said honestly.

"Oh. I just thought because you're boyfriends..." Troy trailed off with a shrug.

"We've been boyfriends less than a day. I don't know about Val, but I know I'm not ready for the naked stuff yet." Terry said frankly.

Troy walked over to the hooks and hung up his towel before saying, "But you're naked with him now. I don't get the difference."

"If we were at home, we might shower together and do things. But this isn't the time or place to do stuff like that. Not only is it something private that we shouldn't do in a public place, but depending on what we did, it might be a violation of the rules and could get us kicked out of here." Valentine said seriously, then smiled when he realized that Troy was so engrossed in their conversation that he was showering with them, completely unashamed.

"Besides that, I think with all the studying and things going on right now, we're going to need to take it slow. If we try to rush the relationship, we could end up getting really distracted by it." Terry said thoughtfully.

"I guess that makes sense. The last thing any of us needs right now is something else to distract us." Troy said with a chuckle.

"By the way, how are you doing over there, Troy?" Terry asked with a grin at Valentine.

After a moment to consider, Troy smiled and said, "I'm fine. Awesome!"

Terry chuckled, then said, "I'm glad to hear that."

"Thanks for helping me, guys." Troy said happily.

"We'll be here whenever you need us." Valentine said gently.

"Same here. You ever need me, I'm there." Troy said firmly.

* * * * *

"So would you guys like to swing by the cafeteria for a snack?" Troy asked as they walked down the hall, away from the showers.

"Sounds good." Terry said casually.

"Yes. Perhaps we could go to the barracks and invite the others, as well." Valentine said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I think I'd like to get to know your classmates. They seem like they're alright." Troy said with a smile.

* * * * *

Valentine, Terry and Troy walked into the barracks to find Dr. White standing just inside the door.

"There you are! I was just about to have you paged." Dr. White said happily.

"How may we be of assistance to you?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"Come on in, I need to have a talk with all of you." Dr. White said as he made a sweeping gesture to usher them into the room.

Valentine, Terry and Troy walked past Dr. White and fell into line with the others at the foot of the bunks.

"For those of you who don't know me, I'm Dr. White. I am a counselor, a Lieutenant Commander and the adviser for your group." Dr. White said as he looked up and down the row of cadets. "I actually stopped by to introduce myself to the new people. I had planned on having this meeting during your classtime tomorrow, but since you're all here..."

"It's something of a tradition that following the final exams, the advisers visit to give you an evaluation of your performance during the previous term. Although some of the feedback may seem a bit harsh, keep in mind that these criticisms are being told to you for your benefit. Withholding or sugar coating the truth will not give you the tools you need to improve on your performance." Dr. White said frankly.

"Cadet Crewman Horton." Dr. White said as he looked up from his padd, then his eyes focused on the greasy, disheveled young man. Horton was short and slender, but the fact that he stood with a stooped posture made him look even smaller, like he might slink away at any moment and hide under something when no one was looking.

"Go back and reread the rules that you were given when you were accepted into the academy. They clearly outline the standards of personal hygiene that cadets are required to maintain. As you are, you are a disgrace to Starfleet, to the academy and to yourself. Get a haircut and report to class tomorrow morning, and every morning, showered, clean shaven and in a clean uniform. Failure to do so will result in your immediate expulsion. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." Horton said in a shocked voice.

"It has also been noted that in the past month you have become increasingly withdrawn and antisocial. I won't order you into counseling, but I highly recommend that you schedule some time to meet with me, or another of the counseling staff."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir." Horton said quietly.

"Cadet Crewman Evans." Dr. White said as he looked down the line of people and his gaze stopped on Troy.

"According to your file, you have incredible potential." Dr. White said, then glanced at the padd he was carrying. "You have a photographic memory and exceptional organizational skills."

"However, your performance in the final exam was a colossal disappointment and demonstrated your biggest failing." Dr. White said as he looked Troy in the eyes.

"Here's the bottom line. Acting spoiled and full of yourself isn't cute. It isn't professional and it won't be tolerated. Either get serious or withdraw and come back when you've grown up a little." Dr. White said seriously.

"Yes sir." Troy said quickly, then in a softer voice he added, "I'm sorry."

Dr. White's expression seemed to ease at the words and he said more gently, "You've come here to train to do an adult job among adults. You don't have to be 'on' all the time, but during class time, from nine to noon each day, make an effort to behave as a professional."

"Yes sir. I will." Troy said more solidly.

"Good." Dr. White said with a smile, then glanced at his padd again before saying, "Cadet Crewman Lopez and Cadet Crewman Rosinante?"

Juan and Phillipa looked at Dr. White with apprehension.

"According to your preliminary test scores, you are both capable of performing better than you've been doing. The bottom line is, you two squeaked by this time. But it gets harder from here on. You need to make a decision, either you need to buckle down and get serious or switch tracks and take the regular program where you'll be able to work at a more relaxed pace. Since a new regular term begins tomorrow, you would be able to withdraw from the accelerated course without penalty as long as you finalize the change before noon tomorrow." Dr. White said frankly.

"Are you saying that we should change?" Phillipa asked quietly.

"No. I'm saying that you have a choice. If you want to complete your classes at the accelerated pace, you'll need to commit to working harder than you have been. If you want to take it at a slower pace, that option is available to you until noon tomorrow. After that, you'll have to wait four months for the next term to begin." Dr. White said carefully.

"Thank you, sir. We'll think about it." Phillipa said respectfully.

After a glance at his padd, Dr. White said, "Cadet Crewman Harper?"

Terry fought to remain calm as he waited for Dr. White's next words.

"Well done." Dr. White said with a smile.

Terry's eyes went wide, that being the last thing he expected to hear.

"Though you appear to have started off badly, you've shown steady improvement and your performance in the final exam impressed the panel." Dr. White said proudly.

"It did?" Terry squeaked.

Dr. White chuckled, then said, "You were asked some particularly challenging questions and you demonstrated an impressive knowledge and complete understanding. Although it was mentioned that your public speaking skills could use some work."

Terry blushed at the comment, but the pride could be seen in his eyes.

"We'll be having a public speaking workshop in a week or so, would you like me to send you the information?" Dr. White asked curiously.

"Yes sir, I'd like that." Terry said enthusiastically.

Dr. White nodded, as he made a note on his padd.

"Cadet Crewman Sharan." Dr. White said as he looked up.

Sharan looked at Dr. White with question.

"You're doing an outstanding job. You've taken on a challenging workload and handled it well. The only thing that I have of significance to note is from your final exam. It was your attitude that cost you points."

"I'm sorry sir. I don't understand." Sharan said carefully.

"I know. And it really isn't your fault. It's sort of a cultural thing. But the fact is, you were evaluated as a crewman, not as an 'Andorian' crewman." Dr. White said seriously.

"Sometime in the next week I'd like for you to contact my office and schedule a time to meet with me. I'm sure that it will only take a session or two to help you recognize the differences in cultural norms that are causing the difficulty."

"I will do that. Thank you sir." Sharan said respectfully.

"Cadet Crewman Mitchell and Cadet Crewman Valaan." Dr. White said with a smile.

Melanie and Valentine waited anxiously for his next words.

"Well done. Both of you." Dr. White said happily. "The stakes are a little bit higher in the accelerated course. Both of you failed a class, but rather than let that discourage you, you used it as inspiration to not only work harder, but to encourage your teammates."

Melanie and Valentine smiled proudly at the praise.

"Now don't let this go to your heads. You have a night off to relax, but tomorrow it's time to get back to work. Remember your dreams and keep your eyes on the prize." Dr. White said with a smile.

"Yes sir." Valentine said firmly.

Dr. White took a step back and addressed the entire group, "Regardless of what criticism I've just given you, the fact is that you have survived the first term. That's a milestone that you can be proud of."

After a moment for that to sink in, Dr. White continued, "One other thing, tomorrow you'll need to report to the gymnasium, room B for your calisthenics at 06:00. Everyone got that?"

When everyone indicated that they understood, Dr. White smiled and said, "I hope all of you have a good evening. And remember to contact me if there's anything I can do to help you."

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Troy?" Valentine asked with concern.

"Can you believe that guy? I mean, ouch! Harsh!" Troy said uncomfortably.

"I believe he was saying what needed to be said." Valentine said frankly.

"Do you think he's right about me?" Troy asked uncertainly.

"I think that he looks at all the talents and abilities that you possess and he recognizes what great things you can, one day, accomplish. When he sees you doing something that will close off pathways to your success, he does the only thing that he can, to try to make you acknowledge what you're doing." Valentine said carefully.

"But do you think I act like a spoiled kid?" Troy asked quietly.

"No Troy. I haven't thought that even once, since I met you." Valentine said gently, then added, "But I'm not a Starfleet officer and I was not in your final exam."

Troy looked down, then slowly nodded.

"If it would help, I would be willing to do the exercise that Dr. White suggested with you." Valentine offered quietly.

"Exercise?" Troy asked cautiously.

"Between nine and noon, you are to behave as a professional. If it would be of help to you, I would be willing to show my support by doing the same." Valentine said seriously.

Troy considered for a moment, then slowly nodded his agreement.

"So what's the plan, guys?" Terry asked as he put an arm around Val's waist.

"I decided to support Troy by also behaving professionally during class time tomorrow." Valentine said frankly.

"Hey, that sounds like a good idea. Count me in." Terry said with a smile.

"Thanks Terry." Troy said shyly.

"No problem. But if we're going to be acting professional tomorrow, I'm going to need a haircut. I'm starting to look shaggy." Terry said honestly.

Troy looked at Terry's hair for a moment, then slowly said, "I think that maybe a more adult haircut would be a good way for me to make a fresh start."

"Yeah. In fact, it's probably a good idea to show that you're really serious about changing your ways." Terry said thoughtfully. "I think the hair stylist is only going to be in for another hour, so we'd better go."

"Just a second." Valentine said, then walked across the room to the bunk where Horton was once again lying on his side, facing the wall.

"Cadet Horton, some of us are going down to the hair stylist if you would like to accompany us." Valentine said seriously.

Horton didn't make any indication if he heard Valentine's words.

"Is he coming with us?" Terry asked curiously as he approached.

Before Valentine could answer, Horton's voice sounded from the bed. "Yes."

"We will leave when you are ready." Valentine said simply.

"I'm ready." Horton said as he took off his head phones and stood from his bunk.

"I am Valentine. These are my friends Terry and Troy." Valentine said slowly and courteously.

"I heard." Horton said gruffly.

"And you are?" Valentine prompted.

"Mike." Horton said grudgingly.

"Come on Mike. We'd better get down there if we're all gonna get haircuts tonight." Terry said as he started walking toward the door.

Horton looked uncertain for a moment, then reluctantly followed.

* * * * *

As Valentine walked into the rec hall, he looked around curiously. He had only been in there once before, during the initial tour of the building with Dr. White on their first day.

"Oh good, they're not busy." Terry said happily as he walked directly to the small hair salon at one side of the room.

"Good evening gentlemen." A woman in her mid-thirties said pleasantly as they entered.

"Good evening." Terry said with a friendly smile.

"Will all of you be wanting standard hair styles today?" She asked professionally.

"Yeah. I guess so." Terry said uncertainly.

"Mike had better go first. He's the one under orders." Troy said from Terry's side.

"Right." Terry said decisively. "Mike, go ahead and we'll wait."

"My helper is in the back, if two of you want to take seats, we'll have this done in no time." The woman said pleasantly before retreating into the back room.

"Go on, Troy. Val and I will go next." Terry said with a smile.

"Yeah. Try to stay out of trouble." Troy said with a wink, then turned to Mike and said, "Come on. The sooner we start, the sooner we'll be finished."

* * * * *

"What would you think about this style for me?" Valentine asked as he showed Terry a picture in one of the hair style books that were sitting in the waiting area.

"Really?" Terry asked with surprise as he looked at the hair style that was longer than the Starfleet standard and definitely different from the typical Vulcan hair style.

"The length of the hair on the sides would... somewhat hide... the tops of my ears." Valentine said in a diminishing voice.

"It might." Terry said as he considered the picture, then turned to Valentine and started to fuss with his hair to see if it was long enough to be styled that way.

After a moment, Terry said, "I think it could work. But do you think that it will look professional enough?"

"It is still regulation." Valentine said as he pointed at the caption at the bottom of the picture.

"Well, if it's regulation and you like it, then you should go for it." Terry said frankly.

"But do you like it?" Valentine asked curiously.

Terry looked at the picture again, then up at his boyfriend before saying, "Yeah. I think it'll look great."

Valentine smiled, then put an arm around Terry to give him a casual hug.

* * * * *

"What do you think?" Troy asked as he approached the pair with his new 'Starfleet standard' style haircut.

"It looks good." Valentine said immediately.

"Very professional." Terry said with a grin.

"Yeah. Now if I can just get the attitude under control, I might be able to pull this off." Troy said thoughtfully.

"Come over here, Troy." Terry said as he stood.

Terry led him to a floor to ceiling mirror right beside the entry door.

"Troy, I'd like for you to meet Crewman Evans." Terry said in introduction.

Troy stared at his reflection for a moment, then straightened his posture and tried to put a serious expression on his face.

"You want to look professional, not constipated." Terry said with a chuckle.

"I don't know how." Terry said helplessly.

"Just remember that the guy you're looking at is Crewman Evans. He's intelligent, friendly and he really knows what he's doing. He's the kind of guy that you can respect and that you want to listen to." Terry said carefully.

Troy tried a few different expressions in the mirror, then finally asked, "How's this?"

Terry looked him over one time, then said, "I think that will work. When you get more comfortable acting professionally, you won't have to try so hard. It's still you, just when you're being Crewman Evans, you'll be the you that other people can look at and trust that he's mature and responsible enough to do his job."

"I'm ready for whoever is next." A younger woman said from beside them.

"Go on Val, yours will probably take longer since you're not going for the standard cut." Terry said with a smile.

"Yes. Thank you Terry." Valentine said gratefully, then picked up the book to show the woman the picture of the style he wanted.

"I want to thank you, too, Terry. I really appreciate all your help." Troy said timidly.

"It's just what friends do, Troy." Terry said happily.

After a long, silent moment, Troy quietly said, "I'll have to take your word for it."

"Why is that?" Terry asked curiously.

"I've never really had any friends, before." Troy said frankly.

"That's hard to believe. You're such a happy, friendly guy. It's hard to imagine anyone not wanting to be your friend." Terry said honestly.

"When I was little, I had friends, but as I grew up and people started saying that I was smart, other kids didn't want to be around me. They didn't know how to talk to someone who could read one of their class books in a day and remember everything. After that, I started getting moved farther and farther ahead in school and I didn't really get to know anyone along the way." Troy said distantly.

"Do you want to know a little secret?" Terry asked with a grin.

"Sure." Troy said as he turned away from his reflection to look Terry in the eyes.

"Val and I went through stuff a lot like you did. Even though it was for different reasons, we both grew up feeling very alone." Terry said quietly.

Troy looked deeply into Terry's eyes for a moment, desperately searching them for his truthfulness when the moment was broken by Mike saying, "The old lady is ready for the next one."

Terry and Troy watched as Mike continued past them and out the door of the salon.

"If you want to look *really* professional, maybe you should stick close to Mike. ANYONE would look professional next to him."

"Thanks Terry." Troy giggled, then turned to look at himself in the mirror again, trying to perfect his professional attitude as Terry left to get his hair cut.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Troy?" Valentine asked as he approached.

Troy turned and was about to answer, but stopped with surprise at Valentine's new hair style. His hair was now combed back and feathered on the sides which hid the very tops of his ears. Although the new style revealed more of his forehead, accenting his eyebrows and other more Vulcan traits, the style itself gave him a softer, more Human, appearance.

"Does it look okay?" Valentine asked cautiously.

Troy blinked, then shook his head and started walking around Valentine to see the hair style from different angles.

"The stylist said that it would still be possible to cut my hair to the standard Vulcan style if I wanted." Valentine said hesitantly.

"No. Don't do that. I was just trying to get used to it." Troy said quickly. "It really does look good. It's just so different that it's kind of a surprise."

Valentine looked at himself in the mirror, then back at Troy uncertainly.

"I say live with it for a few days, and if you don't like it, you can come back and get the standard cut." Troy said frankly.

"Yes. That sounds like a good idea." Valentine said seriously, then added, "You look very professional with your new style."

"Thanks. I didn't think I'd like it, but now I'm getting used to seeing me like this and I feel like I look more professional." Troy said happily.

Valentine looked around, then asked, "Where is Mike?"

"He left right after his haircut. I'm guessing he went back to the barracks." Troy said frankly.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Terry asked as he joined the group in the waiting area.

Valentine turned and smiled at Terry. "You look very nice."

"Thanks. You both look good too." Terry said happily, then asked again, "Are we ready?"

Valentine glanced at Troy and found him looking at himself in the mirror again. "Yeah. Let's go."

* * * * *

As the trio walked into the barracks they were greeted by Melanie saying, "You guys look great!"

"Thanks." Troy said shyly as he broke away from the group and walked to his bunk.

"Where's Horton? Didn't he go with you?" Juan asked from the bunk above Terry's where he and Phillipa were laying, spooned together.

"He went with us, but he left after his haircut." Terry said frankly, then added, "Maybe he went to take a shower."

"Do you think someone should go and check on him?" Troy asked cautiously.

"No." Terry said immediately. "I get the feeling that Mike took a big step by coming with us at all. If we start hovering over him and checking up on him... well, I'm guessing that his reaction would be bad."

Everyone seemed to be willing to accept Terry's assessment and were just as happy to let the subject drop at that.

"We were talking about going to the cafeteria, is anyone in the mood for a snack?" Troy asked casually.

"Actually, I think I'm ready for some sleep." Melanie said simply, then looked at Sharan with question.

"Yes." Sharan said firmly, then guided Melanie to stand from Terry's bunk where they had been sitting side by side.

"I'm not really hungry." Terry said apologetically to Troy. "I think I'd enjoy sleep a lot more than food, right now."

Troy considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I think I could handle a little bit of extra sleep."

Melanie pulled Sharan into a quick hug, then gave him a quick, firm kiss.

"I'll be back in a minute." She said, then broke out of the hug and walked to her cabinet to gather some things.

"Do you mind if I come with you?" Phillipa asked as she sat up from behind Juan on the bunk.

"No problem." Melanie said with an inviting smile.

The boys watched as Phillipa climbed down from the top bunk and rushed to also gather her things.

* * * * *

When the girls had left the room, Terry turned back to the group and asked, "So Sharan, how are things going with you and Mel?"

"Very well." Sharan said happily, then added, "Better than I could have imagined."

"Good. I was hoping that you two would figure it out." Terry said with a smile.

"You were?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"Sure. You're my friends. I think you two will make each other happy." Terry said honestly.

"I too considered the possibility and concluded that such a relationship would be beneficial for both of you." Valentine said in a somewhat formal tone.

"Thank you." Sharan said sincerely.

"Well, if you guys don't have any more plans for tonight, I'm going to get ready for bed." Juan said frankly.

"No. I think our only plan is a long night of sleep." Terry said honestly as he opened his cabinet and took out his sleep pants.

Juan looked around the room, uncertain if it was acceptable to change in the open until he saw that everyone else was starting to change out of their uniforms.

After removing his shoes, Terry stood to skin out of his uniform.

"What are those?" Juan asked curiously when he saw the compensators on Terry's forearms.

"Weights." Terry said simply.

"Terry comes from a high gravity world." Valentine explained as he stepped out of his uniform.

Juan's eyes went wide when he saw Valentine standing only in his underwear.

"Val is bigger than the average Vulcan." Terry said simply, then turned to Valentine and gave him a quick smile.

"At least." Juan muttered, then realized that he was staring and went back to changing his own clothes.

"Oh wow." Troy said as he stared at Sharan's completely naked body.

"Is there a problem?" Sharan asked bluntly.

Troy blinked, then stammered, "No... I just, wow."

Valentine chuckled at the response, then turned to Sharan and said, "Take it as a compliment, Sharan."

"I will." Sharan said to Val, then turned to Troy and said, "Thank you."

"Yeah. Sure." Troy said with an embarrassed blush rising up his cheeks.

"Aren't you going to put something on?" Juan asked when he noticed that Sharan was climbing up to his bunk completely nude.

"No." Sharan said simply.

"Sharan likes to sleep nude." Valentine said casually as he folded his uniform and put it into his locker.

"Oh, um... and that's okay with the rest of you?" Juan asked uncertainly.

"Sure. If I didn't always feel cold here, I'd probably sleep that way too." Terry said frankly.

"You also feel cold?" Valentine asked with surprise, "I thought Tellar had a cold climate."

"Well, Tellar *is* cold, but my colony world wasn't. Since I never lived on Earth, I guess I never realized how much I adapted to the heat." Terry said dismissively as he climbed into his bunk.

"Andoria is quite cold, so I likewise adapted to that temperature as being the norm. This climate is uncomfortably warm for me." Sharan said from his bunk, covered only by a thin sheet.

"So you guys wouldn't mind if I..." Juan started to ask, but faltered.

"I know that Mel won't mind, so the only person that might object would be Phillipa." Valentine said seriously.

"Or Mike." Troy added with a grin.

"I sincerely doubt that Mike would have any opinion on the subject." Valentine said with a smile at Troy.

Juan seemed to consider for a moment, then took the final step and pulled off his underwear.

He quickly put away his clothes, then scurried up to his bunk above Terry's.

Terry and Val shared an amused glance at Juan's timid actions.

"I didn't expect you all to be in bed." Melanie said as she and Phillipa walked into the barracks, dressed in sleepwear.

"It seemed like the thing to do." Valentine said as he relaxed back in his bunk, just enjoying the free feeling of not having any outstanding tasks demanding his attention.

"Lean down here for a second, Sharan." Melanie said as she walked beside the bunks occupied by Troy and Sharan.

Sharan looked at her curiously, then moved to the edge of the bunk and leaned down a little to be drawn into a tender kiss.

After a long moment, she broke the kiss and whispered, "Good night."

"A very good night." Sharan said gently as he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Juan." Phillipa said as she walked to the edge of the bunks that were occupied by Terry and Juan.

"Yeah." Juan said with a grin as he leaned down to mimic the performance that Melanie and Sharan had just given.

Terry and Val exchanged a look, but both were comfortable where they were, so they were content with staring into each other's eyes for a long, peaceful moment.

The door opening disrupted the tranquil mood as Mike Horton walked in looking freshly showered, clean shaven and in an absolutely foul mood.

"I guess that's all of us. Goodnight guys." Troy said, dutifully ignoring Mike stuffing some things into his cabinet.

Goodnights were exchanged as Phillipa walked across the room, then paused by the light switch.

"Does anyone need the light on?" She asked as she looked around.

There were several negative responses. Phillipa paused to look at Horton, who was in his bunk wearing headphones and lying on his side facing the wall.

She switched off the lights, then made her way up to her bunk as the lights slowly dimmed.

* * * * *

The sound of Terry's alarm caused Valentine to wake with a smile.

"Is it already time to get up?" Troy asked in a sleep muffled voice.

"No Troy. Terry and I prefer to wake early. You can sleep for another hour." Valentine whispered to Troy in the next bunk.

Valentine noticed Troy slowly open one eye. A moment later, the other one reluctantly opened.

"You may sleep longer if you wish, or you are welcome to join us." Valentine offered sincerely.

Troy blinked a few times, then a smile ghosted into his expression as he said, "I'll join you."

Valentine nodded, then got out of his bunk so he could prepare for his day.

* * * * *

As soon as they were out in the hall and the barracks door was closed, Terry happily said, "Good morning, Troy!"

A chuckle was Troy's first reaction, before he responded, "Good morning. Why are you in such a good mood?"

"Terry always wakes up in a good mood." Valentine said with a smile.

"Which drives Mel and Sharan crazy, for some reason." Terry said with a grin.

"Well, it's better than waking up all pissy and mean." Troy said frankly.

"Speaking of Mike..." Terry said slowly.

"Which we weren't." Valentine interjected.

"But we should." Terry countered.

Troy and Valentine both stopped with matching looks of question.

"He needs an attitude adjustment." Terry said frankly. "Left like he is, it's just a matter of time before he pushes someone's buttons and causes them to go off."

Valentine slowly nodded his agreement to the assessment.

"I don't want for any of us to get in trouble. And we don't need the distraction." Terry continued thoughtfully.

"So what should we do?" Troy asked quietly.

"That, I don't know." Terry said frankly. "But I just thought it was important that we all understood that it's not going to work the way it is."

Valentine nodded his agreement.

"Can we talk about this later?" Troy asked hopefully. "I gotta pee."

"Yeah." Terry chuckled, then started walking toward the locker room again.

* * * * *

Terry and Valentine were both at the sinks shaving when Troy joined them again.

"What now? Breakfast?" Troy asked cautiously.

"Sort of. More like a light snack. We'll have our actual breakfast with the others after calisthenics." Valentine said casually.

"But before any of that, we'll have a quick rinse in the shower." Terry added.

"Do you have a razor, Troy?" Valentine asked curiously.

Troy chuckled as he said, "No. I don't need one."

"You may use mine... right there." Valentine said as he pointed to a single golden whisker on Troy's chin.

"Really?" Troy asked as he looked in the mirror with excitement.

"You'd better go ahead and shave, Troy. You wouldn't want to look scruffy and unprofessional." Terry said with a smile.

"Yeah. I guess I need to." Troy said happily, then accepted the razor from Valentine and turned it on.

Both Terry and Valentine watched fondly as Troy carefully shaved off the single whisker.

* * * * *

"You guys sure do shower a lot." Troy said as Terry and Valentine started getting undressed.

"Yeah. But that's better than not showering enough." Terry said frankly, then paused before saying, "I didn't say his name."

Valentine and Troy both smiled at the comment.

"Besides, being under the shower is the only time I feel really warm all day." Terry said as he took off his compensators.

"It also helps us to be more awake and aware before calisthenics." Valentine said as he tied a towel around his waist.

"I thought you two just liked being naked together." Troy said with a devilish grin.

"That too." Valentine admitted with a slight green blush rising up his cheeks.

Troy and Valentine walked past Terry who was taking small, slow steps into the shower room.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Troy asked with concern, when Terry finally joined them.

"Yeah." Terry said as he hung up his towel.

Troy watched with concern as Terry slowly and carefully walked toward the showers.

"Would you like to try something?" Terry asked Troy cautiously.

"Um, when a naked guy asks me that question, I'm pretty sure the answer should always be 'no'." Troy said frankly.

Terry smiled, then said, "It's nothing like that, I promise. I just want to show you something."

Troy's expression was priceless and Terry couldn't help but giggle.

"Do this." Terry said as he crossed his arms and gripped his forearms.

Reluctantly, Troy did as Terry had asked.

Terry put one hand under Troy's joined arms, then slowly started to lift.

Troy leaned forward to balance himself as he felt his feet leave the floor.

"That's why I have to wear the weights." Terry said as he lifted Troy two feet off the floor using only one hand.

"That's awesome!" Troy said in amazement.

Terry smiled as he carefully lowered Troy back to the floor.

"It's a double edged sword. I may be stronger than other people, but without the compensators, I can barely walk without jumping into the air or ramming myself into the walls." Terry said as he started his shower.

"Still, it must be nice to be special like that." Troy said frankly.

"You mean 'special' like having a photographic memory or being able to take twelve accelerated classes at once?" Terry asked in a challenging tone.

"That kind of special isn't as much fun as it sounds." Troy said quietly.

"Double edged sword." Terry said casually. "Accept the good. Deal with the bad."

"We all have our advantages and challenges." Valentine said carefully. "What distinguishes us is how we choose to deal with them."

Troy looked at Valentine for a moment, then slowly nodded his acceptance of the words.

"We'd better get going if we're going to have our snack before calisthenics." Terry said as he turned off his shower.

"Yeah. And remember that we're meeting in the gymnasium." Troy said thoughtfully.

"Maybe we're finally going to do something other than running." Terry said speculatively.

"I like the running. It warms me." Valentine said frankly as he walked slowly, matching Terry's pace.

"Yeah. Come to think of it, it does me too." Terry said with a smile.

"Well, if we *are* done with running, we could still go for a run in the mornings, maybe between calisthenics and class." Troy said speculatively.

"Yeah. Depending on how exhausting the calisthenics are, we could do that." Terry said happily.

* * * * *

Troy, Valentine and Terry arrived at the gymnasium early and found a young man waiting for them in room B.

"Are we in the right place?" Terry asked cautiously.

"Yes. If you are second term cadets from D7T, you are." The young officer said pleasantly.

All three were captivated by his pale skin and dark, nearly black eyes.

The officer was slender, completely bald and seemed to exude an aura of exotic sensuality.

"I am Lieutenant Aieyu (*pronounced I'-A-U*). I will be your instructor. If you have no objection, I would like to dispense with formality and address you by your first names." He said with an alluring smile.

"My name is Valaan, but you are welcome to call me Valentine or Val if you wish." Valentine said in an entranced whisper.

"For this was on seynt Volantynys day. Whan euery bryd cometh there to chese his make." Aieyu said distantly, then smiled warmly at Valentine.

At Valentine's look of confusion, Aieyu said, "Chaucer, from '*Parlement of Foules*'. It's nice to meet you Valentine."

"Yes. It's a pleasure to meet you as well." Valentine said in an overwhelmed whisper.

Aieyu smiled gently at the response, then looked at the others inquiringly.

"I'm Terry and this is Troy." Terry said breathlessly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Terry. I've been looking forward to working with you." Aieyu said with a beaming smile.

"You know me?" Terry asked timidly.

"I have reviewed all the information available on the incoming class so I could develop an instructional plan tailored to your individual needs." Aieyu said in a warm, inviting tone that wrapped Terry in warmth.

"And Troy, I have something special planned for you." Aieyu said with a twinkle of delight flashing in his eyes.

"You do?" Troy squeaked.

Aieyu broke into an ebullient smile as he said, "Yes. I believe that I have much to offer in your instruction."

Troy felt himself trembling with excitement at the words, but before he could think clearly enough to respond, the sound of movement drew everyone's attention to the door.

"Ah, the rest of you are here. Please come in." Aieyu said warmly.

Phillipa and Melanie froze just inside the door of the gymnasium as they stared at Aieyu with wonder.

Sharan and Juan stopped and exchanged looks of uncertainty as they assessed the instructor that stood before them.

Horton strode past them and fell into line at Troy's side with a look that was between impatience and disgust.

"I am Lieutenant Aieyu. Please gather around so we may begin."

The four that were stopped just inside the door walked haltingly to join the group by the instructor.

"I should tell you before anyone becomes concerned that my 'Oath of Celibacy' is on record." Aieyu said frankly.

After a moment to see if anyone needed clarification of the statement, he continued, "I prefer to conduct class on a first name basis. If you object to this, or prefer that I call you by another name, I will, of course, respect your wishes."

No one made a sound as Aieyu waited for another moment.

"Before we begin, I need to announce that your 09:00 class will be in room 304." Aieyu said, then waited to see that everyone had heard before continuing.

"For the next month, I will be training you in hand-to-hand combat." Aieyu said simply.

Looks of surprise went around the group at the announcement.

Aieyu smiled at the reaction, but didn't comment on it.

"Valentine and Terry, in deference to your exceptional strength and lack of any formal training, I believe that you would work well as partners." Aieyu said seriously.

Neither Terry nor Val could do more than stare and slightly nod.

"Sharan and Melanie, due to the level of fighting skills that you've already attained, I believe that you would be evenly matched." Aieyu said with a smile at the pair.

"You can fight?" Sharan asked Melanie with surprise.

"Second degree black belt in Karate." Melanie said with a timid smile.

Sharan stared at Melanie with surprise for a moment, then broke into a wide grin.

"The next team will consist of Juan and Mike." Aieyu said as he glanced at them to see that they were paying attention.

"I would prefer that you call me Horton." Mike said flatly.

"As you like, Horton." Aieyu said warmly, then continued, "Which leaves our final pairing to be Troy and Phillipa."

Troy glanced at Phillipa uncertainly, then at Juan with apprehension.

A slight nod from Juan served to put Troy at ease.

"I'm going to meet with each team to outline the training program that I've developed for you, and when I'm done you will be dismissed. Sometime today you will need to stop by the quartermaster's office to requisition suitable attire for our workouts. That will be sweat suits for some and shorts and tank tops for others, choose what will make you most comfortable."

* * * * *

"We have a **Deltan** hand-to-hand combat instructor." Troy said with amazement as he walked to join Terry and Valentine outside the gymnasium.

"On the surface, it does seem to be an unlikely choice. But after meeting with him about his plans for our instruction, I believe that he will be an excellent instructor. I am excited about taking this class." Valentine said seriously.

"Excited... yeah. That's the part I'm worried about." Troy said frankly.

"Try thinking about it this way. You need to be able to block out distractions while you're in a combat situation. Maybe going through this will help you with that." Terry said helpfully.

Troy seemed to be lost in thought, so Valentine and Terry silently waited for him to work through whatever was on his mind.

When Troy noticed, he quietly said, "When we walked in there, I felt stuff that... I'm not sure what it means."

"It means that you were attracted to him." Terry said frankly.

"Attracted?" Troy said in an almost hysterical squeak. "I think my boner got a boner!"

"You weren't the only one who felt that way." Valentine said with a sympathetic smile at his younger friend.

Troy looked down as he muttered, "But what does that mean about me?"

"That you're Human." Terry said simply.

At Troy's look of surprise, Terry continued, "Aieyu is Deltan. His pheromones and empathy make him sexually attractive to Humans."

"And Vulcans." Valentine added quietly.

Terry smiled at Val, as Troy said, "Horton didn't seem to be too attracted."

"I think he was. His reaction to it was just aggressive." Terry said frankly.

"I believe Sharan and Juan had similar aggressive reactions, though less obviously." Valentine said speculatively.

"Yeah. I guess their instincts would tell them that Aieyu was a competitor for their mates." Terry said thoughtfully.

"You make it sound so animalistic." Troy said cautiously.

"Mating is a primal urge." Terry said simply.

Troy nodded, then broke into a smile as he said, "It's going to be an interesting month."

"I think that's a safe bet." Terry said with a chuckle as he moved to Valentine's side and gave him a gentle squeeze of a hug.

Mike walked out of the gymnasium with a sour look on his face.

"Hey, Mike." Terry said casually.

"Or would you prefer that we call you Horton?" Valentine asked seriously.

"No. You guys can call me Mike, just not him." Mike said with a disturbed look back at the gymnasium.

"That guy gives me the creeps." Mike said gruffly, then walked past the group, back toward the main building.

Terry, Valentine and Troy exchanged amused glances, then noticed Juan, Phillipa, Melanie and Sharan coming out of the gymnasium.

A tide of friendship and camaraderie carried the increasing group of friends toward the main building to begin their next adventure.

Chapter 6

"Well, looky here. I guess Horton didn't drop out after all."

"Good thing. I've been wantin to get a piece of that since day one."

"The lab rat looks really pretty today."

"I bet he smells nice too."

"Come on precious, I bet you wanna show me how much you missed me, don't'cha?"

"Awww, Stan. Can't you see that he's shy? I bet he just needs to be encouraged."

"C'mon Horton. Why don't you give me a kiss. Right... down... here."

* * * * *

As Valentine walked into the side door of the main building, he heard what sounded like a scuffle and taunting whispers from a side hallway beneath the staircase to his right.

"I'll catch up to you. I need to check something." He told Terry as he went to investigate.

After breaking away from the group, it only took a moment for Valentine to realize what he was seeing.

Mike was being forced to his knees as five larger and stronger cadets were mocking and taunting him.

"Stop!" Valentine called as he rushed forward.

The five looked up with surprise as the large Vulcan approached.

"This ain't none of your business. We're just havin some fun." One of the cadets said as he turned to fully face Valentine.

"It doesn't look like it's too much fun for Mike." Valentine said as he came to a stop. "Let him go."

"Do you think you can take all of us?" The cadet asked in a challenging voice.

"He won't have to." Terry said as he stopped at Valentine's side and turned off the compensators on his wrists.

"Let. Him. Go." Valentine growled.

"Or what?" The cadet asked as he tightened his grip on Mike's shoulder.

"Screw this!" Terry said, as he stepped forward and grabbed the cadet's wrist.

Valentine noticed that Mel and Sharan were now on either side of him and looked to be ready for anything.

"Don't let them hurt Terry." Valentine said under his breath, then quickly added, "And don't let them get away."

Terry's crushing grip on the cadet's wrist forced him to let go of Mike.

Valentine glanced over his shoulder, then asked, "Troy, would you and Phillipa get Mike back to the barracks?"

"Sure thing, Big Guy." Troy said immediately.

Valentine then looked Mike in the eyes and quietly said, "Come on, Mike. Go back to the barracks with Troy and Phillipa. Remember that we've got class soon and you'll need to be calm and be professional."

"Right." Mike said in a trembling voice, then rushed past Valentine.

As soon as Mike was far enough down the hall that he couldn't hear, Valentine quietly said, "Juan, go get Dr. White and bring him here."

"Are you sure?" Juan asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Do it now." Valentine said firmly.

"What do you think you're gonna do to us?" The cadet asked as he tried to jerk his hand away from Terry.

"We're going to prevent you from hurting anyone else." Valentine said coldly.

One of the cadets moved toward Terry, but as soon as he was within reach, Terry flicked him away as though he were a fluff in the wind.

"Fuck this. I'm outta here." Another of the cadets said as he tried to rush away.

Before he could take two steps, Sharan was blocking his escape.

"Hey Val, are you any good at that Vulcan nerve pinch thing I've heard about?" Melanie asked playfully as she watched the five cadets in front of her carefully, ready to move in an instant.

"No. I am not. I'm afraid that the consequence of my attempt to use that technique could prove to be fatal." Valentine said, then dodged to one side to prevent the escape of another of the cadets.

"I'm okay with that." Melanie said as she grabbed the man by the arm, and in one swift move sent him hurling to the floor at the feet of his buddies.

"Perhaps, but I believe that beating them to a bloody pulp would be more satisfying." Valentine said frankly.

"Now you're talking." Terry said as he released the wrist of the cadet that seemed to be the leader, then stepped back to Valentine's side.

The cadet cradled his wrist and looked around nervously. When he realized that there was no escape, he whined, "Come on guys, it was just a joke."

"Yet, I'm not laughing." Valentine said dryly.

"Is there a problem?" A voice called from behind them.

Valentine turned to see Dr. White approaching with Juan at his side.

"I believe we have discovered the source of Cadet Horton's difficulties." Valentine said frankly.

"Have you now?" Dr. White asked with interest.

"These guys were ganging up on Mike and had him forced down on his knees in front of this guy's crotch." Terry said frankly.

"I can imagine that a person would not want to look their best when being sexually propositioned and tormented in this manner." Valentine said reasonably.

"Yes. He might even become sullen and withdrawn." Dr. White said in a voice of resignation.

"Cadets Rice, Bolton, Lutz, Fuller and Mendoza, report to Commander De Gama's office." Dr. White said firmly.

"But it was just a joke." One of the cadets whined.

"Cadets, that wasn't an idle suggestion. Move." Dr. White said firmly.

"Do you need for us to go with you to give statements?" Terry asked quietly from beside Valentine.

"Let's see how this goes first. If we can get one of them to open up and unburden his soul, we won't even need Cadet Horton to give a statement."

Dr. White said quietly, then gestured for Valentine's group to walk with him back toward the main hall.

"What about Mike? Doesn't he need to see a counselor after something like this?" Melanie asked from Valentine's other side.

"People deal with things in a lot of different ways. If Cadet Horton would like some suggestions about how to get past something like this, of course I'd be willing to do whatever I can. But the only way my counseling will be of benefit is if he comes to me seeking my help." Dr. White said frankly. "I'd better get to Commander De Gama's office to start sorting this out."

"We should get back to the barracks to check on how Mike is doing." Melanie said as they parted company with Dr. White at an intersection in the hallway.

* * * * *

As the group walked back into the barracks, they noticed that Mike was on his bunk, curled nearly into a fetal position with his headphones on and was facing the wall.

"How's he doing?" Melanie asked Troy with concern.

"He's been like that since we got here." Troy said helplessly. "Phillipa and I tried to talk to him, but he just won't listen."

Valentine walked to the edge of Mike's bunk and sat down.

"Mike." He said quietly as he gently placed a hand on Mike's shoulder.

"Don't touch me." Mike hissed.

"As you like." Valentine said softly as he removed his hand. "If you will answer two questions, I promise that I will leave you alone."

There was a long silent moment as Mike considered, then he quietly said, "Two questions."

"Do you remember why you are here? What it is that you hope to achieve?" Valentine asked gently.

After another long, silent moment, Mike reluctantly answered, "Yeah. I remember."

"Good. Then you know why you need to get up off your bunk and get ready for class." Valentine said seriously.

"Yeah." Mike said with resignation, then slowly began to uncurl himself and sit up. "What was your other question?"

"I've noticed that you're usually wearing headphones. What are you listening to?" Valentine asked curiously.

"That's your second question?" Mike asked incredulously.

"I've been curious." Valentine said frankly.

Mike reluctantly broke into a smile as he said, "1980's pop music. It... transports me... takes me away from everything for a while."

"Although I can understand the appeal of such a thing, I think that if you are going to succeed at the academy, you will need to be here." Valentine said apologetically.

Mike slowly nodded, then quietly asked, "What did you do to those guys?"

"We called Dr. White and he is going to deal with them." Valentine said frankly.

Mike got a pained look as he said, "Dr. White knows? He was the *last* person I wanted to find out about it."

"May I ask why?" Valentine asked curiously.

"Because now he'll probably want me to have therapy or treatments or something." Mike said irritably.

"No. He already told us that if you need his help, he will, of course, be willing to do whatever he can. But unless you ask him, he will assume that you are able to deal with this on your own." Valentine said frankly.

"He said that?" Mike asked with surprise.

"Yes. From what I have observed, he wants all of us to be self sufficient and will only involve himself when absolutely necessary." Valentine said simply.

"I'll remember that." Mike said thoughtfully.

"I believe it is nearing time for breakfast. Are you going to join us?" Valentine asked pleasantly.

"I... um... yeah. I guess." Mike said cautiously as he looked past Valentine at the others who were doing their best to look like they weren't paying attention.

"Let's go then." Valentine said as he stood.

"Yeah." Mike said as he scooted over on his bunk, then stood at Valentine's side.

As Valentine was about to step away, Mike put a hand on his elbow to get his attention.

"Thanks."

* * * * *

"I guess I'll be the bad guy and ask the question." Melanie said as the group walked out of their barracks. "Who were those guys?"

Mike looked at her uncertainly for a moment, but something in her expression actually put him at ease. She wasn't judging him or looking down on him, she was just curious to know about what had happened.

"They were my old class group." Mike said hesitantly.

"Wait. So how did you get in with our group if they didn't flunk out?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"I asked to be moved to another group." Mike said simply. "They assumed that I flunked out. You guys thought that the rest of my class group had flunked out. No one had to explain anything."

"But didn't you have to explain to someone about why you wanted to change class groups?" Troy asked curiously.

"No. There's a form that you fill out. As long as you're willing to wait until the end of the term, no one asks any questions at all." Mike said frankly.

"It would have been nice if Phillipa and I had known about that, we would have filled out that form on the first day." Juan said frankly.

"Did you two have problems?" Troy asked curiously.

"You could say that." Juan said with a roll of his eyes.

"They put us in with a bunch of punks." Phillipa said bluntly, much to the surprise of everyone present.

Juan chuckled as he nodded in agreement.

"The only good thing about them is that they were stupid punks. They all flunked out by the end of the term. That's how we ended up with you." Phillipa finished with a smile.

"What about you Troy? Did you end up with punks too?" Terry asked with a grin.

"No. I got a bunch of superior, know-it-all, star jock, 'look at me, I was on the honor roll back in Dog Fart, Montana', assholes. They were so busy

telling each other just how smart and popular and everything that they were before the academy that they didn't study. It was actually kind of sad to watch them crash and burn, one after another... it seems that none of them had ever failed at anything before. They never saw it coming."

"What the..." Melanie asked as they walked into the cafeteria to find it crowded with people.

"It wasn't like this on *our* first day." Terry said with confusion.

"Our first day wasn't the first day of the new regular term." Juan said frankly.

"So this is all the new regular term people, all the new accelerated term people and just a few like us, people who survive for more than a month." Troy said with a grin.

"We'd better jump onto a line and hope there's some food at the end of it. We don't have all morning." Melanie said apprehensively.

"Perhaps we should divide and conquer." Valentine suggested carefully.

"What do you have in mind?" Sharan asked curiously.

"Two of us get main courses for everyone, two get side dishes, two get drinks, and two get a table and hold it for us." Valentine said seriously.

"Mike and I are on drinks." Troy said quickly.

"Tables." Phillipa said with a grin.

"Terry and I would be honored to get side dishes." Valentine said with a warm smile.

"I hope you all like what I'm going to pick out for you, because that's what you're getting." Melanie said with a chuckle.

"You know of my preferences." Valentine said with a grin at Melanie.

"You'll get what you get 'Mr. Divide and conquer'." Melanie said playfully.

* * * * *

"What is it?" Terry asked as he looked at the plate of food Melanie placed before him.

"Does it matter?" Valentine asked simply.

"If I'm expected to eat it, it does." Terry said frankly.

"Bitch, bitch, bitch." Melanie said with exasperation as she picked up the plate.

"May I?" Sharan asked as he put out his hand for the plate of food.

Melanie handed it to him and watched as he placed it in the middle of the table. After that, he placed the rest of the main courses that they had selected from the serving line.

"These are the selections available. Take what you like." Sharan said to the others around the table.

Valentine and Terry exchanged a look, then scooted all the side dishes toward the center of the table.

When all was said and done, everyone at the table seemed to be happy with the divide and conquer strategy. Once everyone had made their selections, each pair had to fill in the others on their foraging adventures. By the time the topic had been exhausted, the meal was nearly over.

"I hate to think of how crowded the shower rooms are going to be this morning." Troy grumbled as they left the table.

"We didn't work out today, so there's no reason we should have to shower again." Valentine said carefully.

"Hey, yeah!" Troy said happily, "I'm just so used to automatically showering after breakfast that I didn't even think about it."

"Does everyone have their schedule set up for the next month?" Melanie asked cheerfully.

"Thanks to Troy, I do." Valentine said happily.

"What did Troy do?" Melanie asked curiously.

"He worked out my schedule so that it's possible for me to qualify for Starfleet service at the end of this term." Valentine said happily.

"He what? How did he do that?" Melanie asked with surprise.

"He asked me what my goal was, and when I told him, he looked through the classes and put together the best selection to reach that goal." Valentine said with a smile.

"Troy, do you think you could do that for me?" Sharan asked reluctantly.

"Sure, if you can tell me what you want to do, I'll work it out the best way that I can. I'm getting pretty good with the scheduling tricks." Troy said with a proud grin.

* * * * *

"Let's see what you've got, Sharan." Troy said as soon as they were back in the barracks.

"You saw everything that I've got last night... remember, I even thanked you for the compliment." Sharan said with a sly grin.

"Oh yeah, you did." Troy chuckled. "But how about this time you show me your bare naked class schedule?"

"If you like, I'm not shy." Sharan said as he brought up his class information on his padd.

"Hey Mike, do you have your schedule made out yet?" Terry asked casually.

"Yeah. I did it last night. It's pretty simple, I don't see what the big deal is." Mike said honestly.

"Well, it isn't a big deal for me. I'm just going to take the classes that I need to take until I've got all the credits that I need to graduate. But Val and Sharan are trying to do something else. They're both trying to qualify for Starfleet service before graduating."

"Why?" Mike asked curiously.

Terry shrugged and said, "You'd have to ask them."

* * * * *

"So, tell me, what is it you were trying to do with this?" Troy asked as he read through Sharan's path program.

"I wish to take all possible courses in my specialty, which is dynamic translation software, while also attempting to complete my Starfleet service requirements." Sharan said carefully.

"Then what's the deal with all these language classes?" Troy asked with a pained look.

"I thought they were necessary for the translation protocol." Sharan said hesitantly.

"Only if you're wanting to be an old fashioned, stone age, linguist. But if you're going to be a programmer specializing in translation software, you need to focus on the programming side of your training and let the computer handle the translating.

"I must have misinterpreted the requirements." Sharan said quietly.

"Yeah, they're written about as clear as mud." Troy said with a chuckle, then thoughtfully added, "At least you took a good solid base of classes last term, that helps. And I see that you've received some college credits for programming, that works for you too."

"Have you found something?" Sharan asked hopefully.

"I think it's going to depend on your threshold for dealing with bureaucratic bullshit." Troy said as he looked up from the padd.

"How do you mean?" Sharan asked hesitantly.

"How to put this..." Troy muttered as he worked through the menus of the padd. "I have seven classes loaded into your path, but you can't add the eighth class because it requires you to complete another class first."

"So I'll have to wait until next term to take the other class?" Sharan asked carefully.

"Sure, if you want to think inside their bureaucratic little box, you could do that." Troy said with a mischievous grin.

"I take it that you have another option in mind." Sharan said speculatively.

"Yeah. You see, this prerequisite class is just some stupid archaic thing about one programming language being derived from another even though they're actually two completely different and independent languages now..."

At Sharan's puzzled look, Troy rolled his eyes and said, "You know what? It doesn't matter. You need to get an override so you can take those two programming classes at the same time. If you can do that, you'll qualify for service at the end of this term."

"I will?" Sharan asked with surprise.

"Well, don't get your hopes up too much. You will be qualified to do *exactly* one thing. If no one needs you to do that one specific thing, then you'll be here at least one more term, learning general skills. I've heard this referred to as an 'all or nothing' gamble, they don't encourage students to do it." Troy said frankly.

"What will I need to do to get the override?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"Go with me while I get my overrides. I need to get three of them. I did this last term, so I know everything that you have to do." Troy said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Is everyone ready for class?" Valentine asked as he looked around the barracks.

"We've got our schedules planned out, what else do we need?" Melanie asked simply.

"Some of us have made a commitment to behave professionally during our class time hours. I just wanted to be sure that we were all prepared both physically and mentally for the task." Valentine said simply.

"I can do professional." Melanie said thoughtfully.

"I am always professional." Sharan said frankly.

Juan and Phillipa shared a look, then Juan announced, "Count us in."

"Give me a minute." Phillipa said quickly, then rushed to the lavatory.

"How about you, Mike? Are you ready?" Valentine asked quietly.

Mike looked down at himself, then up at Val and asked, "Am I?"

Valentine looked him over one time, then said, "Head up, shoulders back, chest out."

Mike did his best to stand with proper posture, but somehow gave the impression of being uncomfortably contorted.

Terry walked up beside Mike and said, "Imagine that there's an invisible string coming up from the top of your head. Feel that string being pulled up and let your body fall into line underneath it."

Mike looked uncertain, then tried again to straighten his posture.

"Let me pull the string, maybe that will help." Terry said with a smile, then put his hand over Mike's head and pretended to be pulling up on an invisible string.

"Up." Terry coaxed.

Mike stood straighter and even went up on his toes a little.

"Good. Hold it there." Terry said happily.

"Yes." Valentine said with approval. "You look... confident."

"I'm ready." Phillipa said as she rushed back into the room with her hair now pulled back from her face which looked very clean and professional. "Mike. I don't know what you did while I was in there, but keep doing it. You look good."

Mike actually smiled at the compliment.

Valentine looked over his bunkmates one last time to see that everyone was ready, then led the way out of their barracks.

* * * * *

"What a striking group." The female officer said as everyone took their seats.

"I will be your facilitator this term, I am Lieutenant Brandt. Since you are second term students, I'm sure you already know what our main focus will be today. I also wanted to mention that there will be lectures and workshops given throughout the term on certain topics that are related to many of your specialties. Attendance is, of course, completely optional, but more than a few students have come away from these events with a greater understanding of their study materials." The Lieutenant said seriously.

"For those of you that wish to celebrate the upcoming holidays by taking time off from the academy, simply get with me and I will arrange for you to get a pass. For those who don't, classes will continue without interruption." She said seriously.

"Now, if there are no questions of relevance to everyone, I'll let you get to the business of scheduling and I will be here if you have any questions or concerns." Lieutenant Brandt said in a pleasant tone.

As soon as she had taken her seat, Troy got up and walked to her desk.

"Cadet Sharan and I both need to get special permission to do some overrides on our classes." Troy said quietly.

"Let me see what you're wanting to do, maybe it's something I can help with." Lieutenant Brandt said helpfully.

Troy fought to maintain his professional demeanor as he took his hand written schedule out of his pocket.

After a moment of looking at the tentative schedule, she asked, "What was your name Cadet?"

"Cadet Crewman Evans." Troy said confidently.

Lieutenant Brandt brought his previous term grades up on her terminal, then looked up at Troy with wonder.

"I'm a good test taker." Troy offered quietly.

"I'd say so." Lieutenant Brandt muttered, then handed his schedule back to him.

"Considering what you achieved last term, I doubt that anyone will have a problem approving this." She said respectfully.

"Thank you for looking it over." Troy said courteously, then asked, "May Cadet Sharan also go with me?"

"Yes, of course." Lieutenant Brandt said pleasantly.

* * * * *

"So, what did we end up with this term? Any tortoises?" Melanie asked as they walked out of the classroom.

"What?" Phillipa asked with a giggle.

"Last term we had tortoises, who took only a few classes and hares who took a full load." Melanie explained happily.

"I think that compared to Troy, we're all tortoises." Sharan said frankly.

"Did you take your full load, Troy?" Melanie asked Troy curiously.

"Yeah." Troy said shyly.

"Then what the hell are you doing out here? You should be studying!" Melanie said playfully.

"Oh, I will be soon. Trust me." Troy said with a smile.

"What about you Mel, did you take another full load?" Valentine asked curiously.

"Yes. but since I trudged through most of the required stuff last term, I actually have classes about stuff I'm interested in this term. I'm looking forward to it." Melanie said happily.

"Terry?" Valentine asked to his side.

"I took the six classes I was planning on. I think I'm going to be alright." Terry said peacefully, then looked back and asked, "How about you Mike?"

"I... um, took eight classes. Six of them are lab studies." Mike said hesitantly.

"I have five lab studies. Maybe we'll be able to work together on some of them." Valentine said happily.

"Really?" Mike asked in amazement.

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind." Valentine said cautiously, not understanding what was bothering Mike.

Apparently, Mike noticed because he quickly explained, "My last class group thought I was stupid for wanting to work in the labs so much. They called me 'Lab Rat'. But I just learn things a lot better by doing them instead of reading about them."

"I think that I will also learn more in the lab environment. I didn't have cause to visit the labs last term, so maybe you could show me around." Valentine asked hopefully.

"Yeah. And the lab techs are great, I hope they're all still here this term. Every one of them knows just about everything there is to know about their labs." Mike said with excitement.

The rest of the group were taken aback at the transformation in Mike when he spoke about the labs. It was the first time any of them had seen him passionate about anything.

"Perhaps we could go after lunch?" Valentine asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Mike agreed happily.

* * * * *

"It looks like there are even more people than there were this morning." Terry said as he looked at the lines of people waiting for food.

"Divide and conquer?" Sharan asked frankly.

"Main courses." Terry said quickly, then added, "I'm strong enough to carry them all."

"Perhaps, but eight plates of food might be a bit awkward among so many people. I will help you." Sharan said seriously.

"We'll get the sides." Phillipa said quickly.

"Salads." Melanie said with a smile at Valentine.

"I'm on drinks." Mike volunteered.

"Desserts." Troy said quickly.

"I suppose that leaves me to find us a table." Valentine said with a smile at his friends.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of looking around the dining room, Valentine spotted a table of new cadet crewmen who seemed to be almost finished eating.

He tried to be unobtrusive as he waited for them to leave. (at least as unobtrusive as a 6'5" Vulcan built like a body builder can be)

The moment the last student got up from the table, Valentine moved into the nearest seat to stake his claim.

As soon as he was assured that the table was his, he looked toward the lines of people getting their food to see if he could find his classmates.

Since his attention was focused on what was happening on the other side of the room, a voice from behind him startled him.

"Are these seats being reserved?"

"Yes." Valentine said as he turned.

He froze at the sight of the young Vulcan woman, a cadet Lieutenant.

"Valaan?" She asked, actually betraying surprise in her voice.

"T'Laraan." Valentine responded in a bewildered tone, not even trying to suppress his emotions.

Sharan and Terry approached the table with main courses, but didn't interrupt Valentine's discussion.

"Did you arrive today?" T'Laraan asked cautiously.

"No. I have been here for one month in the accelerated training class." Valentine said in a more controlled voice. "And you?"

"I too am in my second term, although in the standard course of study." T'Laraan said calmly as Mike placed a tray of drinks on the table.

"Hey Val, who's your friend?" Troy asked as he placed several desserts in the middle of the table.

Valentine glanced away from T'Laraan for a moment and found that the rest of his class group had joined them.

"T'Laraan, these are my classmates..." Valentine stopped suddenly, then amended, "...my friends. Everyone, this is T'Laraan, my sister."

"There's an open seat. Would you like to join us?" Melanie asked quickly.

"Thank you, no. I was endeavoring to secure a table for my classmates." T'Laraan said formally to Melanie, then turned to Valentine and said more quietly, "I did not anticipate your presence."

"I didn't expect to see you here either. How are mother and father?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"Unchanged." T'Laraan said simply, masterfully hiding any trace of emotion in her response.

"I see it! I'm on it." Troy said suddenly and bounded away from the table, drawing Valentine and T'Laraan's attention.

"That group over there is leaving their table, Troy is claiming it for you." Melanie explained to T'Laraan.

"That is most kind." T'Laraan said tonelessly, then turned to face Valentine again and said, "I will take my leave."

"Live long and prosper." Valentine said quietly.

"Peace and long life." T'Laraan said formally, then after a nod to the others at the table, she withdrew.

"You never mentioned that you had a sister at the academy." Sharan said suspiciously.

"I did not know." Valentine said formally.

Hearing his own tone of voice, Valentine consciously worked to relax before continuing, "I haven't spoken to anyone in my family in about four years."

"That sucks." Juan said simply.

Valentine was caught off guard by the statement, and couldn't restrain a smile.

"Yes, Juan. It does." Valentine said with a grin.

* * * * *

Just as Valentine was about to take his first bite of salad, he noticed a cadet ensign roam past their table, carrying a tray full of food.

"We have room for one more if you'd like a place to sit." Valentine offered quickly, before he got too far away.

The cadet ensign looked back at Valentine uncertainly, not knowing if the offer had been directed at him.

"Come on and join us. You can scoot in right here." Terry said as he shifted over slightly to make a place for him.

"Thank you." The cadet ensign said uncertainly as he placed his tray on the table.

"I hope you guys don't mind being seen with a cadet officer." The newcomer said hesitantly as he looked around the group.

"I'd think you'd be more worried about being seen with a bunch of cadet crewmen." Melanie said playfully.

"There's nothing wrong with crewmen. Ask anyone from Kimber IV." The cadet ensign said with a smile.

Melanie chuckled at the response and nodded her agreement.

"My class group got booted out... which isn't actually a bad thing, except that it means that I'm kind of on my own when it comes to things like this." The young man said anxiously.

"You may be on your own, but you're not alone. I'm Valentine and you are welcomed here." Valentine said warmly.

"Thanks. I'm Liam." The young cadet ensign said shyly.

"What happened for your class group to get kicked out? I mean, if you can talk about it." Terry asked curiously.

"Oh, it was just a stupid prank. They were being jerks and hacked the personnel files to falsify the records of some of our classmates. Believe me, the academy is better off without them." Liam said frankly.

"I thought I heard something about that happening last term." Sharan said cautiously.

"Yeah. It was early last term when they got caught. I got thrown in with another group but, I don't know what happened, we never really clicked." Liam said uncomfortably.

"Some of us went through that." Terry said with surprise.

At Liam's curious look, he continued, "There were four of us, me, Val, Mel and Sharan. Four other people were moved in with us. We lived together for about a week before they washed out. They were nice and friendly and all that, but they never became part of us."

"Yeah. When they finally left, we weren't happy about it or anything, but we weren't really that sad either." Melanie said frankly.

"It's good to know that I'm not the only one that's happened to." Liam chuckled.

"Well, since today is the start of a new term, maybe you could get in with another class group if you asked." Juan said speculatively.

"I sort of already did. I was placed with another group this morning... but I'm not one of them." Liam said regretfully.

"Is that by your choice or theirs?" Sharan asked curiously.

"It's mutual." Liam said honestly. "They're a group of friends who've been together since the beginning, kind of like you four, I guess. Since I'm in my last term, it's a little bit late for me to try to become part of their dynamic."

"So you're in accelerated training?" Sharan asked curiously.

"I wasn't before, but now I am. The way it worked out I could either take one month or four months to accomplish the same thing, so I switched to the accelerated track to finish early and getting switched to another class group was just an added bonus."

"That makes good sense. We're all in the accelerated course." Valentine said proudly.

"Yeah, and half of us were just added to this group yesterday and we're already a team... at least as far as I'm concerned." Phillipa finished timidly.

"We are." Melanie assured her.

"That's great. I didn't know that the crewmen had teams like that. I kind of thought that all of you were working on your own thing." Liam said with interest.

"That reminds me..." Terry said suddenly. "...that food in the middle of the table is up for grabs. Help yourself to anything you like."

At Liam's questioning look, Sharan explained, "We split up and each went to a different serving line to get food for everyone. Then when we arrived at the table, everyone took what they wanted."

"I guess that proves it, you guys *are* a team." Liam said with a chuckle, then took a small bowl of sliced kiwi fruit from the middle of the table.

"Those are very good." Valentine said, indicating the bowl of kiwi fruit that he also had.

Liam looked at Valentine curiously for a moment, then cautiously said, "You're not like most of the other Vulcans that I've met."

Before Val could respond, Terry quickly said, "Yeah. We really lucked out."

Valentine couldn't help but smile at the comment.

"Well, I don't know much about what cadet crewmen do. What do you have going on next?" Liam asked curiously.

"Mike and I will be going to the labs." Valentine said simply.

"That's Mike." Terry said, pointing down the table and Mike raised his hand in a slight wave in response.

"The rest of us will probably begin studying. We learned last term that we shouldn't waste even a minute of our time." Melanie said seriously.

"Juan and I were talking about taking Christmas day off to spend with my family. But after that, we'll be right back studying with the rest of you." Phillipa said quietly.

"That sounds nice. I'd love to take Sharan home to meet my family, but I'm afraid they wouldn't let me have him back when it's time to go." Melanie said with a chuckle.

"I'm just going for Christmas day but I'll be back as soon as I possibly can. In fact, I'll be lucky if I can make it through the whole day with my family." Troy said reluctantly.

"How bad is it going to be?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"They're going to treat me like I'm five years old. At the dinner I'll have to sit up straight and be quiet. After that I'll have to go outside and play with the kids." Troy said in a diminishing voice, then added. "I don't play."

"Well, as bad as it gets, I think it will still be better with your family than without them." Terry said frankly.

"Are you going to do anything for Christmas, Terry?" Melanie asked quietly.

"My family never really celebrated Earth holidays. I guess it would have been impossible to get a Christmas tree on Tellar... although it might have been fun to try to explain to the shopkeepers what we were looking for." Terry finished with a grin.

"Why don't we have a Christmas tree in our barracks?" Valentine asked curiously.

"I suppose we could. Would any of you object to that?" Melanie asked as she looked around the table.

After a moment, Melanie asked, "Then why don't you let Sharan and me worry about getting the tree."

"What about presents?" Troy asked cautiously.

"I'm not really interested in doing that. Anyone else?" Melanie asked curiously.

"How about..." Phillipa began to say, then thought better of it.

"Go on. You had an idea?" Melanie asked gently.

"Every year my parents make a really big deal out of getting one new ornament for the tree. The tree has twenty two ornaments, one for each year they've been married." Phillipa said carefully.

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

"Well, since this will probably be our only Christmas together, I was thinking, that maybe everyone could just get an ornament for our tree. That way all of us will be able to add something to the celebration but it won't take a lot of time or trouble or money." Phillipa said in a rush.

"I like that." Terry said with a gentle smile at Val.

"Yes. I think that is an excellent idea." Valentine said happily.

"Liam, before you can even *think* otherwise, you're part of this too." Melanie said firmly.

"I am?" Liam asked cautiously.

"Yes. We're in D 7 T. Of course, you'll be welcomed there any time but we'll be expecting you to come by and add an ornament to our tree." Melanie said dramatically.

"And for the rest of the term, you've got a place to sit at lunch or whatever meal is going on." Valentine said seriously.

"Don't even think about begging off, you've been adopted." Terry told him frankly.

"I have?" Liam asked with a chuckle.

"Don't bother fighting it. They won't let you get away." Mike said grimly.

"Yeah, Mike fought us a little bit, but we finally won him over." Terry said cheerfully.

"They're relentless." Mike said with a barely restrained smile.

"Then I guess I have no choice. Yes, I'll bring an ornament for the tree and yes, I'll plan on taking meals with you guys for the rest of the term." Liam relented.

"Good. Now that that's settled, we'd better get down to some serious eating. I think all of us have other things that we need to get to work on." Sharan said frankly.

Terry smiled as he said, "You're right Sharan, as usual."

* * * * *

As the days passed in the first week of their second term, Valentine began to notice that Mike seemed to have something weighing heavily on his mind. While they were together in the lab, Mike was consumed by their work and seemed to be at peace. But outside the lab setting, he seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Since Valentine was, for the most part, unfamiliar with Human customs and what constituted 'normal' behavior, he was going to approach Troy or Melanie and seek their advice. But before he could do so, he noticed that they, also, seemed to be uncharacteristically anxious.

"Val, may I speak with you?" Aieyu asked as everyone was preparing to leave their morning training session.

"Yes. Of course." Val said immediately.

"I can see a difference in you, just between yesterday and today. It's as though a shroud of worry has covered your features and it pains me to see it. Please tell me, is it anything I can help with?" Aieyu asked gently.

Valentine gave a small, appreciative smile at Aieyu's concern for him and said, "Actually, what's bothering me is that something seems to be bothering my friends and I don't know how to help them."

Aieyu thought for a moment, then asked, "Is Terry one of those you're worried about?"

"No. So far Terry seems to be fine." Val said thoughtfully.

"Then consider talking to him to gain his insights on the matter. I can sense your bond with him. It is strong and very beautiful. Be his strength, and in an instance such as this, let him be yours." Aieyu said gently.

"I will. Thank you." Valentine said, feeling very contented at that moment.

Aieyu pointed toward the door and whispered, "He's waiting."

Valentine smiled, then hurried to join Terry who was resting against the doorframe.

* * * * *

As they were leaving the gymnasium, Terry decided to give Val the time and space that he needed to work out whatever was bothering him.

When they reached the barracks and Terry saw Val sit heavily on his bunk, his resolve crumbled.

"What's on your mind, Big Guy?" Terry asked as he sat on the bunk beside Val and hugged him gently. "It looks like something serious."

"I'm worried about our friends." Val said simply as he returned the hug.

"What's got you worried?" Terry asked curiously.

"Mike seems to be anxious about something. When we're outside the lab, he's almost... depressed." Val said carefully.

"Well, since I don't go to labs with you, I'll just have to take your word for it. He seems the same as always to me. I mean, he's nicer than when we first met him, but he's never exactly been a happy kinda guy." Terry said frankly.

"I've noticed that Troy is also exhibiting signs of anxiety. Is this some sort of Human condition that I haven't heard about?" Val asked with concern.

"If it is, it's one that I haven't heard of either." Terry said casually, then noticed the worried look on Melanie's face as she walked into the barracks.

Melanie didn't acknowledge either of them, she might not have noticed them. She just automatically climbed up to Sharan's bunk and sat down cross-legged.

"Perhaps I'm imagining it." Valentine said slowly.

"No. I think I see what you mean." Terry said thoughtfully. He seemed to be about to say something else, then stopped and looked up in realization.

"Do you know what it is?" Valentine asked hopefully.

"I think it's the holiday blues." Terry said as he looked around.

"I don't understand." Valentine said slowly.

"Well, I don't know much about it. But from what I've heard, sometimes people get anxious or depressed before Christmas. For some it's because they don't have anyone to share the holiday with. For others, it's because the holiday brings back a lot of memories, and when that happens, not all the memories are happy ones. It probably happens for all kinds of reasons." Terry said thoughtfully.

"What can we do to help our friends? I don't want for them to be miserable like this." Valentine said with a pleading look at Terry.

"I really don't know. This whole Christmas thing is as new to me as it is to you." Terry said frankly.

"I have an idea." Valentine said as he stood from his bunk.

Terry stood as well, then walked with Val to where Melanie was sitting cross-legged on Sharan's bunk, reading a padd.

"Melanie, I've noticed that you seem anxious about something. Is it something I can help with?" Valentine asked carefully.

After a moment, Melanie looked up at him, then slowly said, "I don't think so."

"Perhaps if you told us about your problem, we might come up with a solution that you had not considered." Valentine said slowly.

Melanie smiled, then said, "Thanks, Val, but I don't know if there is a solution."

Valentine gave a vulcanesque raise of one eyebrow as a prompt for her to continue.

Melanie chuckled at the action, then said, "I want to invite Sharan to go home with me for Christmas. But having him meet my family is kind of a big step and we haven't been together that long. I feel like, if I ask him, that I may be moving too fast and I might scare him away."

Valentine slowly nodded as he considered her problem.

"How would you feel about me meeting your family?" Terry asked curiously.

"I wouldn't have any problem with that. We both know that we're just friends." Melanie said frankly, then added with a grin, "I know they'd love you."

"So the problem isn't with the action of meeting your family, but with Sharan's perception of being invited." Valentine speculated.

Melanie considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. It may be too soon for us to take that step."

"I think that the action will only have as much significance to Sharan as you tell him it does. I am not well versed in the nuances of Andorian socialization, but I would guess that their courting rituals are quite different from yours. I believe that if you tell him what it means to you, that he will accept you at your word and not read more into it." Valentine said carefully.

Melanie thought about it for a moment, then broke into a smile as she said, "Yeah! I wasn't even thinking about the cultural differences! That'll make it so much easier. I'm supposed to meet him in the rec room after my shower, I'll ask him then!"

Valentine smiled at Melanie's sudden happiness, and was surprised when she hopped down from Sharan's bunk and gave him a quick hug.

"Thanks, Val!" She said from the hug. "You always say that you're not like other Vulcans. Well, you're right. You're BETTER!"

Before Val could respond to that, Melanie raced out of the room.

"I wonder if Mike and Troy are going to react like that?" Terry asked with a chuckle.

"Troy, perhaps. Mike... doubtful." Valentine said as he tried to restrain a grin.

* * * * *

"It's back this way." Valentine said as he led Terry through the lab.

"I've never been in here before. This is kinda cool." Terry said as he looked around.

"Mike, do you have a minute to talk?" Valentine asked as he approached.

"Sure Val, I just wanted to double check everything so we can get this lab started right after lunch." Mike said as he fussed with a piece of equipment.

"What's that?" Terry asked quietly.

"A distribution node." Val answered, just as quietly, then said to Mike, "I've noticed that outside the lab, you've been worried about something. I feel that since we've started working in labs together that we've become friends. So I wanted to ask if there is anything I can do to help with whatever is bothering you."

Mike stopped what he was doing, then slowly turned to look at Val.

"I realize that you're a very private person and that you may not want to share this with me. I can accept that. Please just know that I'm concerned and that if there's anything I can do to help, you only need to ask." Valentine said sincerely.

Mike's serious expression melted slightly, then he said, "Before I left for the academy, I made a promise. Now I have to keep it, and I really don't want to."

"It must be something really horrible from how it's making you feel." Terry said honestly.

"I promised my family that I'd be home for Christmas." Mike said frankly.

"What's wrong with that?" Terry asked curiously.

"You'd have to meet my family to understand." Mike said wearily.

Val thought for a moment, then said, "I could do that."

"Do what?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Meet your family." Val said simply. "If returning to spend time with your family is causing you anxiety, perhaps it would be easier if I accompanied you."

Mike shook his head as he said, "My family's not the type of people that you'd want to meet. They're the type of people you'd walk across the street to avoid."

"I don't speak much of my time before the academy. But I lived for several years in a community of outcasts, bartering my labor for food and shelter. For the most part, the people who make up that community are considered imperfect, like me. So, although I can't speak about your family specifically, I can say that, in general, I feel most comfortable with people who are not 'normal' by the conventional usage of the word." Valentine said honestly.

"Are you saying that you want to go home with me?" Mike asked slowly.

"I'm saying that if it will make returning to your home and visiting your family easier for you, that I would be willing to accompany you." Valentine said carefully.

Mike looked down and thought for a moment as Valentine gave Terry a questioning look, as if to ask 'how am I doing?'

"Yeah." Mike said reluctantly. "If you're really sure you want to do it, I think that visiting my family would be a lot easier with your help."

"I will put in a request for a pass immediately." Valentine said with a slight smile.

"Okay. Then I'll make sure we have transportation there and especially back." Mike said seriously.

"Just let me know if there's anything I need to do." Valentine said quietly.

"Yeah. There's one thing." Mike said as he looked Valentine in the eyes.

Val quirked an eyebrow in response.

"Get out of here so I can get this set up for us to do our lab." Mike said with a grin.

"As you say." Valentine said formally, then gave a slight bow before withdrawing from the room.

Mike watched him leave, then after a moment was surprised to realize that he was smiling.

* * * * *

"Do you think you'll be okay missing a day of studying?" Terry asked as they walked down the hallway.

"Yes. With so many lab study courses, I don't need as much time doing book work. I can spare one day, and it's for a worthy cause." Valentine said honestly.

Terry slowly nodded, then suddenly said, "Troy!"

Valentine followed Terry's gaze and spotted Troy walking toward the library.

"Hey guys! What's going on?" Troy asked happily as he stopped and turned toward them.

"Actually, that was my question for you." Terry said as he walked quickly toward Troy.

"What do you mean?" Troy asked curiously.

"You've been in a blue funk for a few days. What's up?" Terry asked simply.

"I'm just anticipating the joys of Christmas." Troy said sarcastically.

"You said that your family treats you like a little kid, right?" Terry asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. It sucks." Troy said frankly.

"Do you think they'd still treat you that way if I went with you?" Terry asked curiously.

"Why would you go with me?" Troy asked cautiously.

Terry shrugged, then said, "Because I'm your friend."

Troy's incredulous stare prompted Terry to continue, "Maybe if you brought a friend home with you, it might not be so miserable for you. Or, if it is, at least you'd have someone to share it with."

"But don't you want to spend that time with Val?" Troy asked cautiously, then looked up at Valentine.

"He's going home with Mike." Terry said simply.

"You are?" Troy asked Val in surprise.

"Yes. For much the same reason that Terry is offering to accompany you to your home." Valentine said seriously.

"So what we're doing is like 'adopt an alien for Christmas', huh?" Troy asked with a grin.

"Yes. Sharan will probably be going with Mel. Val is going with Mike, and if you'd like the company, I'll go with you." Terry said honestly.

Troy thought for a moment, then slowly asked, "You've never had Christmas before, right?"

"That's right. I've heard about it, but my family never celebrated it." Terry confirmed.

"I can't just invite someone over to my parents house, but let me shoot an email off to my mom and see what I can do. Maybe if I tell her that I've made a friend who's never been to Earth before and never had Christmas, it will be enough to get her to invite you." Troy said thoughtfully.

"Do you think that this will help you to be able to enjoy the holiday?" Terry asked cautiously.

"Yeah! It'll be great! I can show you where I grew up, and if they start up their crap, we can just leave and I'll show you around town and stuff." Troy said happily.

"If you'll go write your email, I'll go and request a pass." Terry said with a smile at Troy's new found excitement.

"It sounds like a plan! I'll tell you how it went at breakfast." Troy said with a grand smile, then dashed away, back toward the library.

"From what I've heard, it's the custom at this time of year to give presents to those who are most important to you." Valentine said as he looked at the library door.

"I'm with you, Big Guy. This is our way of giving them a Merry Christmas." Terry said as he hugged close to Valentine's side.

* * * * *

After putting in their requests for passes, Val and Terry took a quick shower before heading toward the mess hall.

"Hey guys!" Melanie said as she spotted them in the hallway. Sharan seemed perfectly content as he walked with his arm around her.

"Hi Mel, how's it going?" Terry asked cheerfully.

"Fantastic! Sharan said that he'd go home with me!" Melanie said happily.

"Hey! That's great. Did you get your passes and transportation all lined up?" Terry asked curiously.

"Yep. We just finished! Now all we have to do is wait for Christmas to get here." Melanie said with a smile, then added, "That's going to be the hardest part."

"When I requested my pass, the clerk mentioned that all the other members of D 7 T had already requested passes." Sharan said informatively.

"Yeah. Do you guys have some big plans?" Melanie asked happily.

"I won't know about my plans until breakfast." Terry said honestly.

"To my knowledge, my plans are not finalized either." Val said casually.

"So, you're not doing something together?" Melanie asked curiously.

"No." Val and Terry said in unison.

Melanie seemed to be disappointed but didn't question further, instead she asked, "Did you hear about what Liam's doing for Christmas?"

"No. I don't recall him mentioning it." Val said and looked at Melanie with interest.

"I think you two were off doing something else. Anyway, he said he's got this second cousin or something in Ireland, and she's setting up this whole

big family reunion thing for Christmas day. Liam said he's never even met most of his family from over there, it sounds like it's going to be so great." Melanie beamed.

"I'll have to ask him about it at breakfast." Valentine said warmly.

Terry snuggled a little bit closer to Val as they walked at a casual pace toward the cafeteria.

Chapter 7

Melanie, Sharan and Terry met up at the table that Valentine was holding for them. Quickly, they added their combined bounty to the center of the table.

"I still can't get over how crowded it is in here." Terry said as he looked around and noticed Troy approaching.

"Just wait until the first exam, I bet you'll be surprised at how quickly it thins out." Melanie said frankly.

"Speaking of exams, does anyone need any help studying?" Troy asked as he set out fruits and breakfast cereals.

"I'm having a little trouble with my advanced medical terminology class, but I doubt that there's anything you can do to help with that." Melanie said regretfully.

"Just give me a little time to read it over and I should be able to help you. I'm in a really good place with all my studying, so it's no problem." Troy said happily.

"Yeah. If you want to help, that'd be great." Melanie said with surprise.

Troy smiled, then took his seat. He got a curious look on his face, then seemed to remember something.

"Terry, I almost forgot, I printed this out for you." Troy said as he pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket.

With a smile, Terry accepted the piece of paper and unfolded it.

"It looks like I've been 'officially' invited." Terry said with a smile.

"Yup. As soon as I told her that you were raised off planet and never had Christmas before, she just about ordered me to bring you home with me." Troy said happily.

"You're going home with Troy?" Melanie asked cautiously.

Terry nodded with a smile.

Melanie's curious gaze moved from Terry to Val.

Terry turned to Valentine and gave him an expectant look.

Valentine smiled as he said, "Mike has invited me to visit his home on Christmas day."

"So, Terry's going with Troy and you're going with Mike?" Melanie asked in confirmation.

"And I'm going with you." Sharan said quietly to her.

Melanie looked from Val to Terry and back, sure that she was missing something.

Before she could ask anymore questions, a voice interrupted them, "Do you mind if I join you?"

"You're always invited, Liam. You don't have to ask." Terry said frankly.

"I still feel that it's the polite thing to do." Liam said honestly.

"I was telling Val and Terry about the trip you're going to take to Ireland. I'm *so* jealous of you!" Melanie said excitedly.

"Would you rather go to Ireland than spend the holiday with your family?" Sharan asked curiously.

"No. I wouldn't pass up Christmas with my family for anything. But still, I've always wanted to visit Ireland. It's supposed to be so beautiful there." Melanie said longingly.

"I'll be sure to take lots of pictures for you while I'm there." Liam said with a smile at her.

"And once we have both graduated from the academy, we will find a way that we can take leave together so I can take you there." Sharan said seriously.

"You would do that?" Melanie asked with surprise.

"Consider it a promise." Sharan said tenderly.

Melanie grinned at the response, then moved in to give Sharan a long slow kiss.

"Oh God! Are they at it again?" Mike groused teasingly as he approached the table with a tray full of glasses.

"I don't think they ever really stop. They just come up for air occasionally." Val said with a smile.

"Yeah, yeah. Look who's talking." Melanie said with a teasing grin at Val.

As Mike started handing out drinks, he said to Val, "Everything's arranged. It took some doing at the last minute, but I got us Starfleet transports all the

way to Pennsylvania. So it won't cost us anything. And someone will pick us up in Harrisburg."

"That won't be a hardship for them, will it?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"No. They drive into town all the time. They won't even think twice about it." Mike said

"Where are Juan and Phillipa?" Terry asked as he looked around.

"Right over there. It looks like their line is stalled." Liam said as he pointed at the serving line where side dishes were served.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the front of the line and the group could see a pair of people fighting.

"A hashed brown dispute?" Terry asked speculatively.

In less than a minute, the two cadets who had been fighting were being escorted out of the cafeteria.

"As crazy as our time here has been, at least we haven't had to deal with violence." Valentine said with a concerned look.

"Yeah. Over all, I think we lucked out with the group that we ended up with." Terry said frankly.

"I doubt that luck had much to do with it." Liam said honestly.

Everyone at the table looked at Liam with question.

"I don't have any proof, but I get the feeling from what I've seen and heard that very little around here is left to chance. I'm willing to bet that every one of you were put in your group for a reason." Liam said as he looked around the table.

"You think they planned on us becoming friends?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"No. Not that you'd become friends as much as you'd inspire each other to achieve and help each other to overcome obstacles." Liam said carefully.

"I think he's right." Mike said thoughtfully.

Everyone turned to look at him with question.

"My first term here was hell. I don't know if they planned that, but I'm going to choose to believe that they didn't." Mike said reflectively. "But since I survived it, they've put me in with your group where I can fit in. I wouldn't have thought that there would be anyplace that I'd feel like that. It must have been planned."

"I could be wrong about all this. But I just think from the way things seem to work out around here, that a lot of thought goes into a lot of decisions that we take for granted." Liam said seriously.

"I'm sorry we took so long. You guys should have started eating, you didn't have to wait for us." Phillipa said as she quickly offloaded the food from her tray.

"Seeing those punks fighting reminded me of our first class group." Juan said as he also added food to the selections in the middle of the table.

"Well, if we're going to eat. We'd better do it quick. Class will be starting soon." Terry said honestly.

As everyone started making their selections, Phillipa asked, "So, what did we miss?"

"It looks like all of us are going to be taking Christmas day off. Sharan's going home with me, Valentine is going with Mike, and Terry is going home with Troy." Melanie said cheerfully.

"And Juan is coming home with me." Phillipa said happily, then leaned over to give Juan a quick kiss on the cheek.

The group was all smiles as they began to eat in earnest so as not to be late for their upcoming class.

* * * * *

The alarm ringing jarred Valentine out of a peaceful sleep.

"Val, you need to get up. We have to catch an early shuttle." Mike said from beside Valentine's bunk.

"Oh, yes. That's today, isn't it?" Valentine asked blearily as he slowly sat up in his bed.

"Do you still want to go? You don't have to." Mike said cautiously.

"Yes. Of course I want to go. How much time do we have?" Valentine asked as he slowly stood.

"We need to be down at the shuttle pad in twenty minutes." Mike said with a tinge of anxiety in his voice.

"Just allow me a moment to dress and I'll be ready to go." Valentine said quietly.

Mike gave a quick nod, then went back to his own bunk to finish getting himself ready.

"I'm going to miss you, Big Guy." Terry said as he got out of his bunk.

"I'll miss you, too. Although I would like to be spending time with you today, I think that this is a good thing that we're doing." Valentine said gently.

"I think so, too." Terry said with a smile, then added, "But the next holiday is ours to enjoy together."

"Yes. I promise." Valentine said as he leaned down to give Terry a kiss.

"Guys!" Mike stage whispered impatiently from the doorway.

Valentine and Terry both began to giggle in their kiss.

"I'll see you tonight." Valentine whispered.

"Have a good time." Terry said as he stretched up to snag one final peck of a kiss.

* * * * *

"Is there anything I should know about your family before I meet them?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"I don't think there's any way to prepare you for them. Just, whatever they say, don't let it get to you." Mike said seriously.

"What are they likely to say?" Valentine asked curiously.

"I can't even guess. I just know that sooner or later someone will say something tacky or crude or just plain mean, thinking that they're being funny. Don't take it personally. They're always like that." Mike said firmly.

"Always?" Val verified.

Mike nodded and said, "All day, every day."

"If that's the case, then I can understand why you tend to be so cautious with people." Valentine said thoughtfully.

"I guess so. Being around you and the guys is really different for me. I'm just not used to being around people who behave so... civilized." Mike finished with difficulty.

"If that is the case, then you are in much the same situation that Sharan, Terry and I are in." Valentine said frankly.

Mike was about to remind Valentine that he wasn't an alien, but before he could say the words, he realized that his over-sized Vulcan friend was actually right.

Valentine listened carefully to an announcement, then said, "I believe they are announcing our shuttle."

Mike looked at the departure information that was being displayed just ahead of them, then said, "Yeah. That's us. It's down this way."

* * * * *

"Where are we going?" Terry asked as Troy led him out of the spaceport.

"To the airport." Troy said simply.

"I thought you said that you made arrangements so we wouldn't have to buy any plane tickets." Terry said cautiously.

"I did. My dad has his own plane. He's going to pick us up." Troy said frankly.

"He has his own plane? Is your family rich?" Terry asked cautiously.

Troy chuckled, then pointed ahead of them at the cab stand before saying, "More like reasonably well off. My parents have a nice house, nice cars, and dad has the plane. But my dad has to work and pay bills and all that stuff just like everyone else."

"I guess it's different where I'm from. No one in the domed cities had private transportation. And all the homes were built when the city was created, so they're all basically the same. It's possible to modify them, you know, attach another room module. But people usually only do that when they have kids, so the kids can have their own rooms." Terry said distantly.

"It sounds really different. I don't think my parents would do well there. They enjoy their 'things' too much." Troy said frankly, then motioned for Terry to walk forward so they could get the approaching cab.

"When we get on the plane, remind me to turn off my compensators." Terry said as he waited for Troy to get into the cab.

* * * * *

"Over there, that's my uncle Paul!" Melanie said happily.

Sharan looked to where she was pointing and saw a tall, stocky man waving at her like a fool.

"Come on, you're going to love him." Melanie said with excitement.

Sharan hurried and tried to stay close to her as she ran out of the spaceport.

"Uncle Paul, this is Sharan!" Melanie said, breathless with excitement.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, young man. You are young, aren't you? I don't want to make any assumptions when dealing with non-humans." Paul said pleasantly.

"I'm eighteen years old by your standard of measurement. And it's a pleasure to meet you as well." Sharan said formally.

"So polite!" Paul said with delight. "The truck's right over here. Let's get going before this one's parents send out a search party."

Sharan smiled at the man, he hadn't wanted to like him, but the man's genial personality was irresistible.

* * * * *

"Mama! I'm home!" Phillipa called as they walked in the front door.

"Oh Baby! I've missed you so much." The older woman said as she rushed into the living room to give her daughter a hug.

"I've missed you, too, Mama. This is Juan." Phillipa said as she returned the hug.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Juan. My Phillipa has told me many wonderful things about you. I'm Rosalee." She said warmly, still holding her daughter tightly.

"It's nice to meet you, ma'am." Juan said uncomfortably.

"Come into the kitchen with me. I need to keep an eye on the food." Rosalee said as she ushered Phillipa to walk away.

Juan followed along behind them silently.

* * * * *

"That's my grandfather." Mike said as he pointed at the large black car approaching.

Valentine watched as Mike's grandfather pulled the car to the curb.

The passenger window rolled down as the old man leaned over and said, "Git in. I'm not a chauffeur."

"It's nice to see you, too, Gramps." Mike said as he opened the back door, then gestured to Val that he was supposed to get into the car.

"Who's this with you?" Gramps asked sourly.

"This is Val, he's a friend of mine from the academy." Mike said as he closed Valentine's door, then opened the front passenger door.

"He got no family of his own?" Gramps asked as he waited for Mike to be seated.

Valentine was prepared to explain but Mike beat him to it.

"No. And since I've got more family than I know what to do with, I thought I'd share mine." Mike said bluntly.

Gramps didn't have any answer for that, instead, he pulled away from the curb to drive them to Mike's house.

* * * * *

Terry watched as a man approached them.

"Hi Dad!" Troy called out, then took off running.

Terry smiled as he watched Troy give his dad an enthusiastic hug.

"How are you doing, Troy-boy? I like the haircut! You look like you've done some growing since you've been gone." Troy's father said as he walked toward Terry with his arm around his son.

"I'm doing great! Dad, this is Terry Harper. He's one of my classmates." Troy said happily, then quickly added, "Terry, this is my dad, his name is David Evans."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir." Terry said cautiously.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Terry." Troy's father said courteously, then added, "When Troy told us about you, I guess we just assumed that you'd be an alien of some sort. His mother is going to be very surprised."

"Well, even though I'm biologically a Human, I was born in a Tellarite colony, so legally I'm a Tellarite. I guess in that way, I am an alien." Terry said cautiously.

"Come on. They should be done servicing the plane soon, so we can be on our way." Troy's father said as he gestured toward the small aircraft.

"Who all is going to be at the house?" Troy asked as he looked back to see if Terry was doing okay.

"Just about the whole family will be there, except maybe your Aunt Dee Dee. She's having one of her spells. You know how it is." Troy's father said casually as they walked.

"Aunt Dee Dee has an obsessive compulsive disorder and agoraphobia. Sometimes she can make herself go out and do stuff, but usually she just stays in her house." Troy said frankly.

"I've heard about OCD but I've never met anyone who had it." Terry said carefully.

"Yeah. There's not really anything we can do for her but just let her know that we understand that there's stuff she can't do." Troy said honestly.

"It looks like they're done. You guys get aboard while I do the preflight." Troy's father said as he gestured toward the door of the plane.

"Remember to turn off your compensators." Troy said as he climbed up the stairs.

"Thanks Troy, I'll be sure to turn them off as soon as I'm buckled in."

* * * * *

"This is it, what do you think?" Melanie asked as they emerged from the truck in front of an elaborately decorated house.

"It is very... festive." Sharan said haltingly at the sight of the astonishing amount of ornamentation on the house and around the lawn.

Melanie giggled, then said, "You should see it at night."

The snow on the ground and the chill in the air reminded Sharan of Andor.

He was lost in his thoughts for a moment until Melanie took hold of his arm and said, "Come on. I want to introduce you to the family."

* * * * *

"Juan, this is my Aunt Maria and my cousin, Rosella." Phillipa said as they entered the kitchen, then turned to the ladies and said, "This is my boyfriend, Juan."

"Oh, is he the guy who protected you at the academy?" Rosella asked as she looked over Juan carefully.

"Phillipa is strong, she didn't need me to protect her." Juan said as he looked at Rosella and waited for her to meet his eyes. "But I did stand with her, to let her know that she wasn't facing everything alone."

"Mammi! You need to keep this one. Mens like this are hard to find. I know. I been looking." Rosella said with delight.

Juan blushed as Phillipa put an arm around him.

"Girls, we need to do some cooking if we want to have dinner sometime today." Rosalee said from the stove.

"Do you need for me to help?" Phillipa asked quickly.

"No, Mammi, you take Juan and show him around, then take him into the TV room and introduce him to the boys and your pappa." Rosalee said with a knowing look at her daughter.

A look of apprehension ghosted over Phillipa's face before she hid it with a smile and guided Juan out of the room.

* * * * *

"Val? You a dago?" Gramps asked as he drove.

Although Val was reasonably sure that what he was being asked was an insult of some sort, he had never heard the term before and couldn't guess at what he was being asked.

"Gramps, you should wear your glasses if you're going to be driving." Mike said with exasperation, then added, "Val is from Vulcan."

"Vulcan? You're one of those guys from outer space?" Gramps asked slowly.

"Yes, sir." Valentine responded cautiously.

There was a long silence as Mike and Valentine waited for Gramps' reaction.

Finally, Gramps said, "Alright then. As long as you ain't no dago."

* * * * *

"How are you guys doing, back there?" Mr. Evans asked from the pilot's chair.

"We're fine. How long till we land?" Troy called out.

"Twenty minutes. So far the air traffic seems light, so there shouldn't be any delay." Mr. Evans called from the front.

"No matter how things go with your family, I think the whole trip was worth it just to be able to do this." Terry said as he looked out the window of the plane at the breathtaking scenery of the California coast.

"I guess I'm used to it. I used to go up with dad every weekend. We'd go and do all kinds of things; camping, skiing... Sometimes we'd just go flying for no reason, just to fly." Troy said distantly.

"It sounds like you miss it." Terry said as he turned his attention to Troy.

After a moment Troy shrugged, then quietly said, "We were really close, back then."

"What happened?" Terry asked gently.

"I don't know. Maybe he got busy with work, or maybe I just started growing up. However it happened, we just stopped..." Troy trailed off and ended with a shake of his head.

"When I was a kid, me and my dad used to go rock hunting." Terry said, then quickly added, "I know, it doesn't sound like much fun, but it really was. Sometimes we'd explore caves or dig around excavation sites looking for interesting stuff. For a lot of years, I thought I was going to become a geologist like my dad." Terry said distantly.

"I guess since you're going to the academy, you changed your mind." Troy said frankly.

Terry slowly nodded, then said, "When I started growing up, I figured out that I also enjoyed some things that my father didn't. I developed my own interests and spent less time doing things with him."

"You make it sound like it's just part of growing up." Troy said in resignation.

"I think it is. But it's not the end of doing things with your dad. The really great thing is that once you've developed your own interests, you can share them with him. You can still do the things that you used to like doing with him, but you'll also be able to introduce him to new things that you enjoy." Terry said with a smile.

"Yeah." Troy said consideringly, then looked at Terry with a grin.

"What?" Terry asked, confused by Troy's expression.

"Nothing. I'm just glad you're here with me." Troy said warmly.

"So am I, Troy."

* * * * *

"Everyone, this is Sharan." Melanie said happily.

Sharan looked around the room to find nearly two dozen people looking back at him.

"This is my mom, my dad, my Aunt Myrna, my Aunt Delia. On the couch we have my grandmother, her name is Pearl and beside her is her sister, my great aunt Opal. Over here by the tree are my cousins Pete, Aaron, Julie,

Rachel, Wendy Sue, Justin, Austin and Aiden. Then on this side of the room we have Uncle Frank, my cousins Mike, Jay Jay and Ford, my brothers Ryan, Paul and Patrick, and my sister-in-law, Judy. And of course, you've already met uncle Paul." Melanie said, seemingly in one breath.

"You know that Troy is the one with the photographic memory. There is no way I will remember everyone's name." Sharan said quietly as he looked around the room.

"Just stick close to me and you won't have to worry about it." Melanie said with a grin.

"So Sharan, I take it you're... from out of town?" Melanie's mom asked weakly.

"Yes, ma'am. You could say that." Sharan said, very glad that he had had time to adapt to spending time with Humans.

A chuckle went around the room at Sharan's response.

"Did you already hand out all the presents?" Melanie asked as she looked at the bounty of unwrapped gifts by the tree.

"We couldn't keep the kids waiting all morning. But your dad sat your presents aside. If you'll take a seat, he'll bring them in to you." Melanie's mother said, then gave her husband a significant look.

"Sharan, can I get you anything? We won't be having dinner for a while yet." One of the women, Aunt Delia, asked from beside the couch.

"We didn't get to eat before we left the academy, so I think we're both pretty hungry." Melanie said frankly as she drew Sharan down to sit with her on the floor.

"You should have spoken up! Just stay right there and I'll get you something." She said as she and Myrna dashed out of the room.

Sharan sat cross-legged on the floor and looked around at all the strangers looking back at him.

The silence in the room was uncomfortable, and he was very much wanting to go outside and enjoy a few minutes of the crisp cold air.

"He's blue!" an elderly voice said from the couch.

"Yes Grandma. This is Sharan, he's an Andorian." Melanie said loudly.

"He's blue!" She said again, seeming not to be able to work past that one point.

"Yes, dear. He's blue." Opal said as she patted her sister's hand.

"Here you go, honey. Make sure to read the tags before you open them." Melanie's father said as he handed her a stack of gifts.

Melanie accepted them and did as her father said. She looked at the first tag and said, "This one is from Uncle Paul and Aunt Myrna."

Sharan watched as she opened the gift to reveal a hideously gaudy Christmas themed sweater.

"Thank you!" Melanie said happily, then added, "I don't have one like this."

'I should hope not.' Sharan said internally.

"The next one is..." Melanie began to say, then turned and quickly said, "Hey! It's for you, Sharan!"

After a moment of hesitation, Sharan accepted the gift from Melanie cautiously.

His inner dialogue was chanting to him, telling him things like 'be nice', 'say nice things', 'these are the beings that spawned Melanie, so they must have some redeeming qualities'.

Once he had the wrap off the gift, he turned the oddly shaped wooden box around, looking for how to open it. He finally found the clasp and opened the box to reveal paper, pens and a small clip-on light inside. It took him a moment to realize that the box itself was the majority of the gift. It was a lap desk. Considering the amount of classwork he had and the amount of time he spent studying, it was actually a very useful gift.

"How do I know who gave this to me?" He asked Melanie in a daze.

She picked up the discarded wrapping and finally found the tag before saying, "It doesn't say. It just has your name on it."

"It's from the whole family, Sharan." Melanie's father said from his place, sitting on the arm of the couch.

Sharan looked around, then said, "Thank you, all of you. I will make good use of this."

"That will be the best thanks you can give us." Melanie's father said warmly.

"You two, clear some space. Food's coming." Myrna said as she rushed into the room. "Aaron honey, pull your legs in so you don't trip your Aunt Delia."

Melanie and Sharan put their gifts aside just in time to be presented with two trays filled nearly to overflowing with just about every kind of breakfast food imaginable.

"I'm supposed to eat all this?" Sharan asked as he looked at the mounded over plate of food.

"You need to eat, you're too skinny." Myrna said with a warm smile at Sharan.

"And blue!" Pearl added insistently.

* * * * *

"Juan, this is Junior and Chewy and Oscar, and my baby brother, Juan." Phillipa finished shyly.

Juan nodded in introduction to the boys and smiled at his much smaller namesake.

"And this is my papa, Eduardo." Phillipa said nervously.

"I heard you took care of my little girl when she was scared." Eduardo said in a low voice as he looked at Juan carefully.

"She handled things just fine on her own. But I always tried to be there for her in case she needed me." Juan said as he met the much larger man's gaze.

After a long silent moment, Eduardo broke into a smile, then said to his daughter, "You keep this one, mija. He treat you right."

Phillipa was all smiles as she ran to her father and gave him a joyful hug.

Juan felt relief course through him. The parents seemed to approve of him; now, there was a chance that he could actually 'enjoy' the rest of the holiday.

* * * * *

"This is it." Mike said as he got out of the car.

Val looked around, then hesitantly asked, "People live here?"

"If you can call it living." Mike said, then led the way across a cluttered lawn and up to the front of a single-wide trailer.

As they walked up to the door, Valentine looked around curiously.

"I understand, now." He said to Mike slowly, "At first glance, I thought these to be shipping containers."

"They pretty much are. Cut out a few windows and throw in some carpet and you have a trailer." Mike said frankly.

"Mikey, honey. Who do you have out there?" A woman asked from inside.

"Mom, I brought a friend home with me for Christmas." Mike said, then gestured with his head for Valentine to follow him inside.

The smell was the first thing that caught Valentine's attention as he crossed the threshold. Most Vulcans are aware of the scent of humans and are somewhat offended by it until they get used to it. But the stench inside the trailer was of a whole new level.

Valentine backed away from the trailer and took in a slow breath of cool fresh air to try and dilute the acrid stench of years of stale cigarette smoke mingled with the overwhelming odor of unwashed bodies.

"Are you okay, Val?" Mike asked with concern.

"I will be. I just wasn't prepared." Valentine said carefully.

"For what?" Mike asked cautiously.

"The smell." Valentine said honestly.

Mike puzzled over that for a moment, then suddenly said, "Oh! The cigarette smoke. Yeah. Just about everyone here but me and the dog smokes. Are you going to be alright?"

Valentine considered telling him the whole truth, but concluded that saying more would only cause offense and not improve anything for anyone, so he simply answered, "Yes. Although I may need to step outside at some later point for a breath of fresh air."

"You and me both. I don't know how I stood it for all those years." Mike said frankly, then asked, "Are you ready?"

Val took a slow, deep breath to brace himself, then nodded that he was.

* * * * *

"Are you okay, Terry?" Troy asked with concern.

"I forgot to turn my compensators back on." Terry admitted shyly from his position sprawled on the floor of the plane.

"Did you hurt yourself?" Troy's father, David, asked as he got out of his pilot's chair. "Do you need any help?"

"No. I'm fine." Terry said as he slowly stood.

"Terry's home planet has a lot different gravity from Earth. He has some devices that he wears to deal with it, but he can't turn them on while we're flying because they'll mess with the plane." Troy explained to his father.

"But you're going to be okay?" David asked carefully.

"Yes. I'm fine now." Terry said with a smile.

"Good. Then let's get going. I don't know about you guys, but I'm getting hungry." David said honestly.

"We had a good meal before we left the academy, but that's been a while ago. I'm just about ready for lunch." Troy said frankly.

"You're always ready when it comes to food." David said with a chuckle, then motioned to the door and asked, "Do you want to do the honors?"

Troy rolled his eyes, then walked to the door of the plane and opened it, then lowered the stairs into place.

* * * * *

"Can I get you anything else?" Myrna asked Sharan hopefully.

"No. Please don't." Sharan said as he handed her his plate.

"That was great. They feed us good at the academy, but it's no where near as good as your home cooking." Melanie said with a wide smile at her aunts.

"Tell us about the academy. What's it like?" Melanie's brother, Ryan, asked curiously.

"Well... I guess in some ways it's like going to school, but it's a whole lot harder." Melanie said carefully.

"Do you have a lot of classes?" Ryan asked curiously.

"I'm taking eight subjects, but I don't actually have *any* classes."

"I don't understand." Ryan said seriously.

Melanie looked at Sharan hopefully, begging with her eyes for him to explain.

"Rather than requiring us to attend classes, they give us all the requirements and study materials at the beginning of the term. After that,

it's up to us to motivate ourselves and learn what is required of us. No one is teaching us, no one is telling us what to do or when to do it. Whether we pass or fail is completely up to us." Sharan said frankly.

"We have a facilitator who will help us if we get stuck on something or give us suggestions about which areas of study we should focus on, but the big thing is that we're learning how to teach ourselves. We're learning how to find the answers on our own even when we're tired and don't feel like studying anymore. It's really a valuable lesson and I don't think we could learn it any other way." Melanie said seriously.

"So what about you two? How did you get together?" Melanie's mother asked curiously.

"It's kind of hard to explain how that happened. I mean, there are eight of us in our barracks. We've been through a lot together and we've become friends. There are four of us who have been together since the beginning, so we're closer to each other than to the rest."

"Although, I think Troy has insinuated himself into our group rather effectively." Sharan added.

Melanie nodded, then continued, "So, Sharan and I are two of the four originals. The other two, Val and Terry, became a couple at the same time that we did. I liked Sharan from the first day we met, but I think the way things worked out around us also helped us to become a couple."

"You didn't open all your presents. Don't you want to see what else you got?" Melanie's father asked with a smile.

"Oh yeah! How could I forget about presents?" Melanie asked excitedly.

Sharan smiled at her happiness, that alone being enough to make the entire trip worth it.

"This one is from Aunt Delia and Uncle Frank." Melanie announced, then tore open the gift wrapping.

"Look at this!" She said happily, "It's a portable music player. Now Mike won't be the only one who can listen to music at night."

Sharan broke into a grin at her unbridled joy at receiving gifts.

"This one is from Mom and Dad." Melanie said with surprise as she opened an envelope.

"What did you get?" Sharan asked when he noticed her dumbfounded state.

"It's a Christmas card filled with all kinds of gift cards! Here's one for music for my music player and one for clothes... this is great!"

"A very practical gift." Sharan said in an impressed voice, then noticed the satisfied looks on Melanie's parents' faces.

"Let's see what else." Melanie said eagerly, then said, "This one's for you, Sharan."

He was surprised to be receiving another gift, but accepted it willingly.

It only took a moment for him to get the wrapping paper off, then he looked at the folded piece of cloth.

As he unfolded it, he finally began to realize what it was.

"What did you get?" Melanie asked curiously.

"It's a new duffle bag!" He said happily, then picked up the wrapping and looked around, "Thank you, Ryan and Paul. This is something that I can use."

"I'm glad you like it." Ryan said with a smile, "When Mel told us she was bringing someone home from the academy, we knew she'd want us to treat you right. So we put our heads together to come up with something practical for you."

"You did great, guys." Melanie said as she walked to her brothers and hugged them.

"Gentlemen, I believe I heard something about a certain sporting event that you were wanting to watch on TV today. I think that should be starting any minute." Melanie's mother said as she looked around the room, then continued, "Ladies, I believe we have some hungry men who will need to be fed soon. Who would like to help me make a special dinner for them?"

All the women, even Grandma Pearl, got up and filed out of the room.

"I want to go in the kitchen for a few minutes talk to my mom and my aunts. Will you be alright in here with the guys while I'm gone?" Melanie asked cautiously.

Sharan looked down at the lap desk and duffle bag before saying, "Yes. I believe I will be fine."

* * * * *

"So how is this school you're going to? Are they treating you alright? From Phillipa's letters it sounds like they been picking on you." Eduardo asked Juan and Phillipa as one.

Phillipa looked at Juan hopefully, silently asking him to answer the question.

"When we first got there, we both got picked on a little bit. But I think it was just the punks trying to figure out the pecking order in our barracks. When Phillipa and I wouldn't back down and act afraid of them, they pretty much left us alone. But them always being loud and acting like pinche pendajos made it hard for us to study." Juan said frankly then, when he realized what he had said, he muttered, "Excuse me, sir."

Eduardo chuckled at his shy apology and obviously wasn't offended by his words. "I'm just happy to see that Phillipa had someone to keep her on the right path."

"We help each other." Juan said seriously.

"And now we're in with a really good group. It was worth putting up with those punks to end up where we are now." Phillipa interjected.

"So they don't treat you funny because you're Latina?" Eduardo asked as he looked his daughter in the eyes.

Phillipa chuckled as she said, "No daddy. In our group, we have an Andorian, a Vulcan and a Human who was raised as a Tellarite. I don't think they've even noticed that we're not lily white."

"Since the day we joined our new group, they've included us in everything they do and treated us with respect." Juan added seriously.

"It sounds like you've fallen in with good people. That's the way things should be." Eduardo said warmly.

"Yes." Phillipa said introspectively. "I think we're exactly where we need to be."

* * * * *

Valentine steadied himself as best he could to endure the horrendous smell that was assaulting him. Although he wasn't typically a person who was bothered by these types of things, just being in such a malodorous environment made him feel as though it was permeating his clothing and penetrating his skin. He envisioned himself taking a very long shower when he got back to the academy... perhaps more than one.

"Val, I'd like you to meet my mom and dad, that's my brother Jimmy, our neighbor, Victor, and you already met Gramps." Mike said quickly, then turned to face his family and said, "This is Valentine, he's one of my classmates from the academy."

"Are you fucking my brother?" Jimmy asked into the silence that followed.

Val stared at the grossly overweight young man, shocked at the blunt and vulgar question.

"Stop being an asshole, Jimmy." Mike's mother barked. "Valentine is a guest in our house, so you need to welcome him and treat him with respect. You can ask him about who he's fucking after dinner."

Valentine winced slightly when he saw Jimmy light up a cigarette. He then noticed that everyone else in the room was also smoking.

"Come on in and have a seat! There's beer in the fridge, you can help yourself!" Mike's father said as he raised a bottle of beer in a toasting gesture, then added, "It's Christmas, after all."

"Do you want one, Val? It might help." Mike asked quietly.

Val was about to refuse, but after another look around the grimy house filled with grubby people, he finally answered, "Yes, please."

As Mike was getting the beer from the refrigerator, Val quietly said, "I know that you weren't expecting me, Mr. and Mrs. Horton. Thank you for welcoming me into your home."

"Oh, no." Mike's mother said quickly, then shyly added, "Our name is Burluson. Horton was Mike's father's name... he was my second husband."

"Please excuse my mistaken assumption." Valentine said quietly, then accepted a beer from Mike.

"My dad was a mechanic. He was killed when a winch broke and dumped a car engine on him." Mike said as he took his seat.

"Yeah. Steve was a good man... damned good mechanic, too." Mike's father said seriously, then finished off his beer in one long gulp.

Mike automatically handed his unopened beer to his father, then walked to the kitchen to get another one for himself.

* * * * *

Terry was in awe as he walked into the huge house. In all his life, he had never seen a private dwelling that was so luxurious.

"Guess who I've got!" Troy's father, David, said as he led them through an entry hall into a cavernous living room.

Terry couldn't help but gawk at the enormity of the room.

The building was two stories tall, but this room didn't have a second floor above.

At the side of the room, by a curved staircase, was an enormous Christmas tree, looking to be every bit of twenty feet tall.

On the other side of the room was a collection of very formal looking couches and chairs, most of them filled with a collection of equally formal looking people.

"How's my little angel doing?" Troy's mother said happily as she ran forward and stopped just short of hugging Troy.

Terry watched curiously as she took Troy by the shoulders, mimicking the action of hugging and kissing him without actually doing either.

"I'm fine, Mom." Troy said shyly, then added, "This is Terry. He's one of my friends from the academy."

Troy's mother looked at Terry curiously, apparently trying to find something 'alien' in his appearance.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am." Terry said quietly, suddenly feeling very uncertain of his ability to behave properly in front of people who were obviously rich.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Terry. And please call me Janna." She said graciously.

"We can do the rest of the introductions after presents. We've just been waiting for Troy to get here." David said with a warm look at his son.

"Dad! You didn't have to wait for me!" Troy said with annoyance.

Terry couldn't help but smile at Troy's petulant tone. It made him sound like a small child.

"Come over here and sit down, Terry." Janna said as she gestured to an open chair. "As soon as Troy is done handing out presents, we'll be having dinner."

Troy flashed an exasperated look at his mother before walking to the tree.

Terry watched as Troy handed out the gifts. Everyone was very courteous and outwardly pleasant, but he couldn't detect even the slightest hint of

happiness from any of them. It was curious to him that Troy didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary with any of it.

Troy approaching him caused Terry to break out of his musings.

"I'll leave mine over here with you, if you don't mind." Troy said as he placed a wrapped gift on the floor beside Terry's chair.

"Of course, Troy." Terry said quietly, then looked around and noticed that no one was opening their gifts.

"Hey, Terry! There's one here for you!" Troy said happily as he dashed away from the tree, carrying a small gift.

"Really?" Terry said with surprise, then looked toward Troy's parents and said, "Thank you. I wasn't expecting to receive a gift. Just being here, seeing a real Christmas is enough of a gift for me."

"Terry told me that he was raised in a Tellarite colony, so I suppose they have their own holidays there." Troy's father explained to everyone.

"They don't have holidays so much as celebrations. When they have a special occasion like this, the whole community just gathers together and drinks and sings and tells stories. They don't have anything like trees or decorations or gifts." Terry said in a clear voice, trying to use the skills he had learned in his public speaking workshop.

"That's very interesting." Janna said in a bored tone of voice that said that it really wasn't.

"I think that's all the gifts!" Troy said as he handed out the last present.

"Then I'd like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas." David said to the group, then began to open a wrapped gift that was sitting on his lap.

As soon as he started to open his gift, everyone in attendance started to open their own gifts.

There were murmurs of 'That's lovely' and 'How nice' from the people around him.

Terry opened his own gift to find that it was a small, crystal Christmas tree with tiny ornaments embedded in it made of gold and tiny jewels.

He had to admit that the delicate and obviously expensive little decoration was incredibly beautiful. It also had to be the most useless thing he could imagine. All his life, he and his family had never owned anything that didn't have a purpose. They had things of beauty in their modest dwelling, but each of those things had a function and a reason for being in their home.

"Do you like it?" Troy asked from Terry's side.

"It's beautiful." Terry said honestly, then noticed a woman in a plain blue uniform walk into the room and say something to Troy's mother.

"If we're all done, dinner will be waiting on us in the dining room." Janna said as she stood.

"What did you get?" Terry whispered to Troy at his side.

"A new tablet computer." Troy said as he raised the boxed gift for Terry to see.

"That's nice. You'll really be able to use that." Terry said as he stood and placed his gift on the low table beside his chair.

Troy shrugged, then said, "I can do everything I need to do with a padd. But I guess it will be nice for when I'm on leave."

Terry nodded as they followed the rest of the guests out of the massive living room.

* * * * *

"So Sharan, what's going on between you and my sister?" Ryan asked curiously. His tone wasn't the least bit accusatory or threatening. He seemed to be genuinely interested.

"We enjoy each other's company. She inspires and encourages me to do my best and I believe that she is likewise affected by me." Sharan said thoughtfully.

"Do you love her?" Patrick asked from his brother's side.

"Yes." Sharan said immediately, then added more quietly, "More and more each day."

"Good." Melanie's father said with a smile. "As long as you two can keep feeling that, everything will be fine."

"You're not bothered that I'm not Human?" Sharan asked cautiously.

Melanie's father chuckled, then said, "No. Not at all. Our family already had to face our demons on that subject, and I think we're all well past it."

At Sharan's inquisitive look around the group, Ryan finally said, "My ex-boyfriend was... half-Romulan."

Sharan's eyes went wide at the announcement.

Ryan's look became distant as he said, "He was raised as a Human and never even knew his father. But his whole life, he only ever knew discrimination because of his species."

"What happened to him?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"We didn't work out." Ryan said quietly. "While we were fighting to get people to accept him and to accept us as a couple, we were great. But when the fight was over we realized that the fight is all we ever really had in common. Underneath it all, we were just two very different people. I'll always cherish him as a dear friend."

Patrick put an arm around his brother and gave him a comforting squeeze.

"So, Sharan, you can see that after that, accepting an Andorian wasn't really much of a challenge." Melanie's father said with a look of sympathy directed at his son.

"I appreciate how you've welcomed me into your home. I don't have words to express how much your acceptance means to me." Sharan said sincerely.

"Just worry about you and Mel. Do what's right for the two of you, and however that turns out, we'll be in the background, cheering you on." Melanie's father said with a warm smile.

* * * * *

When the football game started, all other conversation stopped.

"I want to go talk with mama. Do you want to stay here or go with me?" Phillipa asked quietly.

"I'll stay, if you don't mind. This looks like it could be a good game." Juan said, dividing his attention between Phillipa and the television.

"I don't mind at all. Enjoy the game." Phillipa said happily, then gave Juan a quick kiss on the cheek before leaving the room.

* * * * *

"Hey, Dumbass. Get me the remote! It's time for the game!" Jimmy bellowed.

"Get off your fat ass and get it yourself." Mike said to his brother.

"Mikey, your brother's been working hard and needs to relax on his day off." Mike's mother said in a scolding tone.

"You've been working? When did that happen?" Mike asked with surprise.

"I got a job as a cart clerk at the grocery store." Jimmy said with an impatient look at his younger brother.

"But aren't you too old to be doing that? I mean, you're twenty six." Mike said incredulously.

"Yeah. Well, I just do it two nights a week, when the other guy's off." Jimmy said uncomfortably.

"But when they see how hard he works, they're sure to give him a full time job." Mike's father said with certainty.

Val looked at the morbidly obese young man and had doubts that Mike's father's prediction would come to fruition. Jimmy appeared to be breathing heavily from the effort of sitting upright.

"Are we going to watch the fucking game or not!?" Gramps bellowed.

Mike's mother got up from her chair, walked to the coffee table and picked up the remote. She handed it to her husband as she said, "I'm going to check on dinner. I hope everyone's hungry."

Valentine looked around the trailer and seriously doubted that he would be.

* * * * *

"Everything looks wonderful." One of the women at the formal dining table said in an impressed voice.

"Since I started having the holiday meals catered, it has made the holidays such a delight. Now I'm free to devote my attention to my guests." Janna said happily.

'Lucky us.' Terry thought to himself sarcastically as he looked at all the other people settling in around the table.

They all had plates full of food set out before them, each exactly the same as every other.

Terry didn't really know what he expected when he was invited to Christmas dinner, but this wasn't it.

"To friends and family." David said from the head of the table as he raised his glass.

Everyone around the table responded in kind, then took an obligatory drink.

The wine had a harsh flavor and it was all that Terry could do not to wince at it.

He looked around and noticed that the few teenagers and children at the table were making faces at the bitter flavor.

Some signal must have been given that Terry missed. All at the same time, everyone seemed to start eating.

The food was decent, not remarkable in any way but not in the least offensive.

"These vegetables taste just like at the academy." Troy said quietly.

"They must use the same cannery." Terry responded.

"Did you have something to share with the whole table?" Janna asked sternly.

"I was just saying that this food tastes like what we have at the academy." Troy said, seemingly oblivious to his mother's tone.

"So they feed you well." She said as a statement, but Troy seemed to take it as a question.

"Yeah. It's great. And they always have a lot of things to choose from." Troy said happily.

"How nice." Janna said to Troy with a smile that was as false as just about everything else in the place.

* * * * *

The doorbell ringing stopped any further conversation.

"Who could that be?" Melanie's father asked as he stood.

"I think everyone's already here." Patrick said frankly.

"But you know how it is, somehow there's always room for one more." Melanie's Uncle Paul chuckled as Melanie's father walked out of the room.

Sharan glanced around the room and found that Ryan had a pained look in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" Sharan asked cautiously.

"No." Ryan said as his expression changed to a wistful smile. "I was just remembering."

As Sharan was trying to come up with something to say, Melanie's father walked into the room with his arm draped around a young man.

"Look who's here!"

There was no doubt in Sharan's mind who this person was. Even though his features were much softer than those of a full Romulan, there would be no way of mistaking him for a Human.

"Khari!" Ryan said with delight as he ran forward and pulled his ex-boyfriend into a hug. "I'm so glad you're here! I thought you said that you couldn't come."

"I know. I was really trying to be strong and self sufficient. But I was miserable being alone on Christmas. You've become my family and that's what this day is all about." Khari said as he looked around the room, then his startled gaze stopped on Sharan.

"Khari, you know everyone else. This is Melanie's classmate from the academy. His name is Sharan." Melanie's father said formally.

Sharan's first instinct was to distrust the Romulan and strike out at him. But fortunately, he was able to control that urge and focus on the good things that had been said about the person he was meeting.

There was definite anxiety in Khari's eyes which was the final element to enable Sharan to greet the Romulan as something other than an enemy.

"I have been accepted here and been treated very kindly. I hear that that's in large part thanks to you. If they accept you, then I do as well." Sharan said as he looked Khari in the eyes, then decided to follow up his speech with the Human custom of shaking hands.

As Khari shook Sharan's hand he said, "Thank you. And allow me to respond in kind. If they accept you, so do I."

Sharan gave a slight nod of agreement.

"Khari, I got you this, just in case." Ryan said as he quickly handed Khari a wrapped present.

"Oh, Ryan! I didn't get you anything." Khari said sadly.

"Don't worry about it. I got this for you before you said you couldn't come. Really, I just saw it and thought you'd like it." Ryan said as he waited anxiously for Khari to open the present.

"It's perfect! But how did you know that my camera was broken?" Khari asked as he pulled Ryan into a hug.

"I didn't. I just remembered that it was getting old and when I saw this one on sale, I thought you'd like it." Ryan said gently.

"I've missed you." Khari said quietly.

"I've missed you, too." Ryan responded.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone watched Ryan and Khari just holding each other, then Patrick suddenly said, "Crap! We're missing the game!"

"Football?" Khari asked hopefully as he turned, keeping one arm loosely around Ryan.

"Let's sit down and watch it." Ryan said as he urged Khari toward the couch.

"Do you like football, Sharan?" Mel's father asked casually.

"I've never watched it before." Sharan said honestly.

"Two teams, each has a goal. One ball, each team is trying to get it to their goal the most times before the time limit expires." He said frankly.

"That's it?" Sharan asked with surprise.

"Oh, no. It would probably take the whole game for me to explain all the rules, but those are the facts you need to know to enjoy the game."

Sharan nodded that he understood, then turned his attention toward the TV screen.

* * * * *

"Dinner's ready." Rosalee said as she walked into the TV room.

Everyone looked at her anxiously, obviously torn between following the game or their stomachs.

"If you go now, you'll be back in plenty of time to see the start of the 3rd quarter." Rosalee said warmly.

"Come on. Mama knows best." Eduardo said as he stood.

Reluctantly, the others stood to follow.

"Are you having a good time?" Phillipa asked as she walked to Juan's side and put an arm around him.

"Yes. I'm having a very good time." Juan said gently before leaning in to give her a quick kiss.

Chapter 8

"Where's Goober?" Mike asked his father as he looked around curiously.

"I'm sorry, Mikey. I know you loved that old hound dog, but we had to have him put down." Mike's father said regretfully, then added, "He got the lung cancer."

Mike sadly nodded, then noticed Valentine's look of discomfort and asked, "Are you okay, Val?"

"I need some air." Valentine said quietly to Mike.

"I'll go with you." Mike said as he stood.

"Where are you two going? The game's on!" Mike's father asked indignantly.

"We'll be right back, dad. I'm just going to show Val around the trailer park." Mike said frankly.

"If you see my parents, you don't know where I am, okay?" Victor asked hopefully.

"I didn't see you." Mike said as he walked toward the door.

Val couldn't get to the door fast enough.

He had thought that the stench of stale cigarette smoke and unwashed bodies was the most unpleasant thing that he would ever smell, but add in the foul odor of whatever Mike's mother was cooking into the mix and it went beyond nauseating.

* * * * *

A prison.

With all its huge rooms and beautiful 'things', the place, at its core, was a prison.

And Janna was the warden, lording over her helpless inmates with an iron fist.

At some signal that Terry must have missed, the dinner was simply over.

He was eating his meal with everyone else, then all of a sudden, between one bite and the next, it seemed that everyone else was done, or at least had stopped eating.

"We'll have dessert later, after dinner's had a chance to settle. We can retire to the living room, now, and the children can go outside and play," Janna said as she stood.

Troy looked at Terry with an expression that said he didn't know what to do.

"Outside." Terry said simply.

"But..." Troy began to say.

"Troy, you and your friend can stay in and visit with the adults if you like." Janna said from the dining room doorway.

After an uncertain look at Terry, Troy reluctantly said to his mother, "I already told Terry that we'd be going outside and he's looking forward to meeting the kids."

His mother gave a single nod before withdrawing from the room.

"I thought when you said that you'd come with me, that we were going to work on my parents to get them to treat me more like an adult." Troy said as he slowly started walking toward the door.

"I thought that, too. But have you looked at the adults around here? They have no souls!" Terry said frankly.

Troy stopped and looked at him curiously.

"Your mom runs everything, every little detail. Everyone else goes along with whatever she says, without even thinking about it." Terry said in an urging tone, trying to get Troy to see what was going on.

"That's just how people behave in society. You know, proper etiquette." Troy said dismissively.

"Then I pray to any deity who might be listening, that I never become successful enough to have to live this way." Terry said as he looked Troy in the eyes.

"It's not that bad. It's no different from when I have to act professional in class. You just turn it on when you have to and off when you don't need it." Troy said honestly.

"I think it is different. This is your home. The people you invite into it are supposed to be your friends. This... I would never treat a friend like this." Terry said desperately, imploring Troy to understand.

Troy thought about it for a moment, then slowly nodded. "I never realized it before, but the way we are with the guys from the barracks, that's what family's supposed to be like, isn't it?"

"Yes. That and more." Terry said with relief that Troy was understanding his point.

Troy smiled warmly at Terry, then said, "Come outside and I'll show you around."

"Lead the way."

* * * * *

The football game itself wasn't all that interesting to Sharan, but watching it with the others made the experience somehow more enjoyable. Their excitement about the happenings on the screen seemed to be contagious.

"How is it going?" Melanie's aunt Myrna asked as she walked into the room.

"It's a good game, so far." Melanie's dad said without looking away from the TV screen.

"Khari! When did you get here? Come here and give me a hug!" Aunt Myrna said as she ran to him.

With a smile, Khari stood and hugged the woman firmly.

"It's a Christmas miracle! Just wait until everyone finds out that you're here." Myrna said as she continued to hold him.

"I don't think anyone else in the universe would call me a miracle." Khari chuckled.

"Everyone in this house would, and you know that." Myrna said firmly, then said to everyone, "Dinner's going to be ready in just a few minutes. You might want to think about heading into the dining room."

Sharan looked at her disbelievingly as he stood. He had consumed what he was sure was a full day's worth of food less than two hours before.

Before he could say anything to that effect, she rushed out of the room.

"Don't worry, son. Just eat as much as you're comfortable with. This meal is more about enjoying each other's company than it is about eating." Melanie's father said as he put a hand on Sharan's shoulder.

The innocent word so casually spoken, hit Sharan like a ton of bricks. To be called 'son' by this man, this virtual stranger, intellectually seemed wrong

to Sharan, but on some fundamental level, it also seemed more right than he wanted to admit.

"Speak for yourself, Dad. I'm starving." Paul said as he walked past them out of the room.

* * * * *

"So Juan, tell us about your family." Rosalee said as everyone settled around the table

"I have three brothers and two sisters, I'm the oldest. I grew up in Lubbock, Texas, but when I was about 13 we moved to Austin so my dad could open his own restaurant. The whole family works there." Juan said quietly.

"I'm surprised you didn't want to spend Christmas with them." Rosalee said frankly.

"Dad didn't want me to apply to Starfleet, but he didn't fight me too much about it because he thought I'd never get accepted. When I was, he said that I would be betraying the family if I left. My dad told me that if I went to the academy, that I wasn't his son anymore. He said that I was on my own and that I could never come back." Juan said with pain at saying the words.

"I'm sure it was just said in the heat of the moment. I know he didn't mean it." Rosalee said gently.

"Oh yes he did. But I'm going to give it some time and I'll try talking to him later on. I haven't given up on him, but it's too soon for me to talk to him now." Juan said wearily.

"In life, all of us say and do things we regret. I can understand that you probably feel hurt and angry at what your father said. But try to understand that what he has done will hurt him for the rest of his life. No matter if he changes his mind and takes back what he said, he still will have said it and it will haunt him." Eduardo said sagely. "I do not know the man, but I pity him."

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Val?" Mike asked with concern.

After another long moment of breathing in the fresh air, he finally said, "I feel as though I've been steeped in a vat of stench."

Mike chuckled, then said, "I've never thought of it that way, but yeah, it's like we're being smoke cured."

"Although your family seems belligerent and somewhat dysfunctional, I don't think they're bad people." Valentine said cautiously. He was trying to dwell on the positive aspects of Mike's family, but that turned out to be more challenging than he would have liked.

"No worse than anyone else's, I suppose, they're just louder about it." Mike said as he leaned on the rickety porch railing and stared off into the distance.

"You're ashamed of them." Valentine said distantly, simply stating the fact.

Mike let out a long sigh, then said, "Yeah."

"Do you think you're better than them?" Valentine asked curiously.

Mike chuckled at the question, then said, "I don't know. Maybe, sometimes. But other times I feel like, no matter what I do, this is what I am, this is all I'll ever be... Low down trailer trash."

Valentine looked on with sympathy, being able to relate to Mike's feelings on some level.

"I want to be better than this. They live this way, in a ratty trailer in a junky trailer park, smoking their cigarettes and getting drunk all day and... they're fine with it. They don't dream of anything else."

"And you do?" Valentine asked gently.

"Yeah. If I can complete my training, I'll be able to get a job doing what I love to do." Mike said distantly, then chuckled as he added, "And maybe even make a few friends along the way."

"You don't have to worry about that, Mike. All of us, all of D 7 T, sees you as our friend." Valentine said frankly.

After a moment, Mike nodded and quietly said, "I'm still not sure how that happened, but I'm pretty sure I have you to thank for it."

"I didn't do anything, Mike. It was you being willing to let down your guard enough to talk to us." Valentine said sincerely.

Mike smiled as he said, "I still think that if you weren't there, things would have turned out a lot different for me."

Valentine considered that for a moment, then said, "Why don't you do as you said earlier and show me around? I'm interested to see this 'trailer park'."

"Yeah. Sure." Mike said easily, then led the way off the front porch.

As Terry and Troy walked out of the house, Terry was taken aback at the intoxicating beauty of his surroundings.

The sunlight was bright, causing the expansive yard to come alive with vibrant color. The lawn was perfectly manicured and the hedges had been sculpted with the utmost precision.

"It's nice today." Troy said as he tilted his head back to enjoy the feel of the sun.

"Troy! Troy!" A younger boy said excitedly as he ran up to the pair.

"What's going on, Cal?" Troy asked casually.

"Did your parents really let you join Starfleet?" Cal asked breathlessly.

"I haven't actually joined yet. But I'm attending the Starfleet academy. This is Terry, he's one of my classmates." Troy said warmly.

"How do they treat you there? I mean, do they pick on you because you're a rich brat?" Cal asked without any hint of teasing in his voice.

Troy chuckled at the question and honestly said, "The only time they've treated me like a rich brat is when I've acted like one."

"So they really treat you like everyone else? Your mom doesn't, like, go in there and try to check up on you or push people around?" Cal asked hopefully.

"No Cal, she can't get to me inside the Academy. That's one of the big reasons I went there. She can't arrange any 'endowments' or schmooze any alumni to try to control me there." Troy said seriously.

"I'm not as smart as you. Do you think that when I'm old enough that there'll be any way I can go to the academy too?" Cal asked hopefully.

"I tell you what." Troy said in prelude. "You do your best at school and email me about what's going on with you. By the time you're ready to start the Academy, I should be out on assignment. I'll try to have some contacts lined up to help you out. With any luck, I'll be able to arrange a sponsor for you."

"A sponsor?" Cal asked with confusion. "The 'rents got more money than God. Why would I need a sponsor?"

"It's not a monetary sponsor, it's an officer who can tell the Academy that you're a good kid who'll try really hard. If you've got someone like that in

your corner, it can get you moved up in the line and one step closer to being accepted." Terry said seriously.

"Hey! That would be great! I'm so scared that I'll end up like my brother did, all zombied out at a college, under mom and dad's thumb." Cal said frankly.

"I know. Seeing what happened to Blaine is what made me start looking at other alternatives." Troy said honestly. "Just let me know when you're ready and I'll help you out however I can."

"Thanks!" Cal said quickly, then gave Troy a quick hug before running to join the other kids.

"What happened to Blaine?" Terry asked Troy quietly.

"He left for college. His mom and dad arranged everything. His major, his classes, his roommate... everything. They kept the pressure on him every moment, always watching, always guiding."

"Did he have a nervous breakdown or something?" Terry asked cautiously.

"No. He's in the house right now if you want to meet him. He's *exactly* what his parents want him to be. I don't know if he has a single thought or feeling that his parents haven't approved. Everything that made him a real person is gone now." Troy said ominously.

"His soul died?" Terry ventured.

Troy nodded.

"No wonder you wanted to join Starfleet."

"I think I'm smart enough and strong willed enough that I could have gone to college without losing myself, but for what? To get a degree and become some corporate wonk, working in a beige cube? Maybe spend my days scheming and clawing my way up the ladder so that someday I can have a corner office? I think I'd rather live life and retire with a lifetime full of good friends and good memories instead of a bank full of money."

"It sounds like a way to go." Terry said with a casual smile.

Troy grinned at the comment, then asked, "How about you? What were you trying to get away from?"

"Nothing. I just wanted something else. Something that I couldn't find at the colony." Terry said simply.

"Something like..." Troy prompted.

"I don't know yet. I'll let you know when I've found it." Terry said thoughtfully.

"Are you sure you're looking in the right place?" Troy asked curiously.

Terry thought for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Yeah, pretty sure."

* * * * *

As Sharan walked into the dining room, Aunt Delia was there to direct him to a seat.

There was a commotion off to the side and he noticed that Khari was the center of attention. It seemed that all the women in the family were taking their turns hugging and kissing him.

As Sharan took his seat, he smiled at the embarrassed look on Khari's face at receiving so much attention.

It took a few minutes for things to settle down, but finally everyone took their places around the table.

"At Christmas it's our tradition for the family to gather and regroup. We share our lives with each other and draw strength from each other before we have to go our separate ways and go back to our regular lives." Melanie's father said from the head of the table. "Khari's back and Sharan is joining us for the first time. So please join me in celebrating because this is what families are supposed to do... grow."

Sharan felt a smile come onto his face. The sincere words touched him and made him feel that these people, for all their quirks and oddities, were becoming his family.

"So remember why we're here, it's not for presents or food, it's for family. The people around this table... and at that little table over there." He added with a chuckle as he looked at the 'kid's table'. "This is the big picture, this is why we do all the things we do through the year, so we'll always have this."

After a moment, Patrick asked, "Can we eat now?"

"Go ahead, son. I'm done." Melanie's father said with a smile.

Sharan watched as everyone around the tables started moving at once. Platters and bowls were being passed to him from both directions and everyone seemed to be talking at the same time.

"Take it easy on him, this is his first Christmas." Melanie chuckled as she intercepted some of the food that all seemed to be directed at Sharan.

"Which of this food would you recommend?" He asked her quietly.

"Knowing your tastes, I think you'd enjoy the turkey and stuffing and maybe the baked sweet potatoes." Melanie said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "Not the candied ones."

"That?" Sharan asked as he pointed at the turkey.

"Yes. I think you'd like some breast."

"Excuse me?" Sharan asked as he looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening.

"Breast meat." Melanie said with a chuckle as she maneuvered some of the already carved meat to his plate.

"That sounds... rather..." Sharan trailed off as he looked at her.

"Just try it." Melanie said with a roll of her eyes.

Sharan took a small bite, then considered the flavor carefully.

"Is it good?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think I like it... except for the name." Sharan said hesitantly.

"Just call it white meat." Melanie said with a smile, then spotted the bowl of baked sweet potatoes.

"You'll want to split this open and add butter. Watch out, it's still pretty hot." Melanie said as she dropped the foil wrapped sweet potato onto his plate.

After unwrapping the foil, Sharan cautiously asked, "This is a root vegetable?"

"Yes. It's just like the potatoes we have at the academy... but different." Melanie said in a considering voice.

"Good, after the breast, I was concerned at what this might be." Sharan said frankly.

A bark of laughter from further down the table caused Sharan to look up and he noticed that Khari was watching him.

"I'm sorry. But that was funny." Khari said shyly.

Sharan grinned at Khari to let him know that he wasn't upset, then buttered his sweet potato.

"Is that all you're having?" Myrna asked with concern.

"You fed us a ton of food for breakfast. We won't be able to eat very much." Melanie explained carefully.

Myrna seemed to consider that for a moment, then said, "Just as long as you eat your fill. We have plenty of everything."

"I will. Thank you." Sharan said quietly to her.

Myrna put an arm around his shoulders and hugged him to her slightly before moving off to fuss over someone else at the table.

"I think my family likes you." Melanie said warmly.

"I think I like them too." Sharan said as he looked into her eyes.

For a moment, all the noise and chaos of the bustling dining room faded away as Sharan and Melanie felt peace.

* * * * *

"Juan, there's the tree I was telling you about." Phillipa said from her place at the table.

He turned slightly and saw the simple Christmas tree illuminated with twinkle lights. And just as Phillipa had said, the tree had twenty-two ornaments.

"You told Juan about our tree?" Eduardo asked with a smile at his daughter.

"I told everyone in our barracks. We wanted to do something special for Christmas, but we didn't want to do anything really big or expensive. So I told everyone about our tree." Phillipa said shyly.

"And because of Phillipa, we have a tree of our own in the barracks. It has nine ornaments, one for each of us." Juan said happily.

"It's beautiful." Phillipa added with a distant smile.

"To do something like that, they must be good friends." Rosalee said thoughtfully.

"All of them are great. I'm just worried about what's going to happen after we graduate." Phillipa said honestly.

"Do you know where your friend Lydia is now?" Rosalee asked curiously.

Phillipa thought for a moment, then said, "She's married and they're living in Oregon. It sounds like she's really happy. They're already trying to have a baby."

"How long has it been since you've seen her?" Rosalee asked with a smile.

"Two, no, two and a half years." Phillipa said carefully.

"I think that's what's going to happen with you and your friends after graduation. You'll go and live your own lives, but you'll still be part of each other's lives, too. And being in Starfleet, I'm sure you'll run into each other all the time. I don't think it's anything to worry about." Rosalee said warmly.

"Yeah." Phillipa said quietly, then smiled at Juan.

"No matter what anyone else does, we will be staying together." Juan said seriously.

Phillipa smiled at Juan and nodded her agreement.

* * * * *

As Mike and Valentine walked at a slow casual pace through the trailer park, they were mostly silent. Occasionally Mike would tell Val about the people who lived in one or another of the trailers, but for the most part, they were just walking.

"You know, before I left for the academy, I'd never been away from here. I think I kind of missed it." Mike said distantly.

"I think that's natural. This is what's familiar to you." Valentine said thoughtfully.

"Hey Mikey! Who's your new girlfriend?" A mocking voice called out from the front door of one of the trailers.

"That's Juss. He's an asshole." Mike said as casually as if he were talking about the weather.

"So I assumed." Valentine said calmly.

A moment later they heard footsteps hurrying to catch up to them.

"What's up? Whoah! You're a Vulcan!" Juss said with amazement.

"The funny thing is, he is the sharpest tool in the shed." Mike said as he glanced up at Valentine.

Valentine quirked an eyebrow in response to his comment.

"Hey man! What're you doin' here with a Vulcan?" Juss asked excitedly.

"You know that I'm going to the Starfleet Academy. Val's in my class and he's never had Christmas before, so I invited him to visit today." Mike said frankly.

"Wow. I didn't think Vulcan's were so big! You look a lot smaller on the TV." Juss said in wonder.

"Everyone looks smaller on the TV." Mike said simply, but was obviously being ignored.

"So, how do you like Earth?" Juss asked as he stared up at Valentine in wonder.

"So far, I like it very much." Valentine said cautiously.

"My folks ain't gonna believe I actually got to talk to a Vulcan." Juss chuckled.

"Miiiiiiiiiikey!!" a voice called on the wind.

"I think dinner's ready." Mike said as he glanced toward where his trailer was located. "We've got to go, Juss."

"Yeah! Yeah!" Juss said quickly, then stopped and said in a deep booming voice, "LIVE LONG AND PROSPER!"

"Peace and long life." Valentine said as he gave a quick Vulcan salute.

"Oh man! You really did it!" Juss said with delight.

"We'd better get back to the house, now." Mike said as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

* * * * *

"Did I miss dinner?" A woman asked as she rushed up to Troy.

"Yes." Troy said simply.

"Thank God!" The woman said dramatically. "Call me crazy, but I really do want to see everyone. I just can't bear the thought of enduring another one of your mother's prison cuisine dinners."

Troy chuckled, then said, "It's over. You're safe."

"And you're probably right. I think the caterers probably served the same mass produced Christmas dinner that will be served in prison." Terry added frankly.

She turned her attention to Terry and said, "I haven't seen you around here before. No one's gotten married, no one's adopted a kid. How did you get invited to the holiday wake?"

"Terry, this is my Aunt Dee Dee." Troy said with a smile, then turned to his aunt and said, "Aunt Dee Dee, this is Terry Harper, he's one of my classmates at the academy."

"The academy? Your parents let you go?" Dee Dee asked with surprise.

"I sort of applied and got accepted before I ever talked to them about it." Troy said quietly.

"Hey! Whatever works!" Dee Dee chuckled. "I had to get a psychiatrist to declare me nuts before they'd stop trying to run my life."

"You know they're going to lecture you for missing the dinner." Troy said in a tone of warning.

"No they won't. They'll just be happy that I showed up at all. Remember, I've got OCD." Dee Dee finished proudly before turning to leave.

"Lucky." Troy called after her.

She chuckled and waved at him over her shoulder as she walked toward the house.

"I like her." Terry said honestly.

"Now that I'm older, I do too." Troy said thoughtfully. "I used to be kind of scared of her, but I can't remember why."

"Well, I think she's great." Terry said with a cheerful smile.

"Come on, it'll still be a little while before dessert, let's walk down the hill, I want to look at the pond." Troy said as he started walking.

"That sounds nice. Does it have any fish or anything?" Terry asked curiously.

"I really don't know. Mom was having it put in when I left for the academy."

* * * * *

"Would I be offending anyone if I went outside for a few minutes?" Sharan asked Melanie cautiously.

"No. Is something wrong?" Melanie asked with concern.

"Not at all. I just think a few minutes of quiet and cool air would be refreshing, right now." Sharan said honestly.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"No. Please stay and enjoy spending time with your family. I just wanted to be sure that I wasn't going to be disrespecting my host if I chose to be absent for a time before the gathering was concluded." Sharan said honestly.

Melanie chuckled and said, "No, we don't have anything like that. It's fine if you want to go outside."

Sharan nodded, then quietly left the crowded room filled with chattering people.

* * * * *

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Sharan turned to see that Khari was standing by the front door, apparently waiting for his answer.

"I don't mind at all." Sharan said as he leaned on the porch railing and looked out at the quiet street.

"Are you from Andor?" Khari asked quietly.

Sharan turned to look at him with an 'are you serious?' expression.

Khari chuckled, then said, "I don't want to make any assumptions. And since I don't really know anything about you, I thought I'd ask. I hope that's okay."

"It's fine." Sharan assured him, then added, "And yes, I'm from Andoria."

"I was born on Earth. I guess I've always wondered what it's like, to have grown up on a whole different world." Khari said quietly.

"I can't really say. It was different than it is here. Different air, different gravity, different sky." Sharan said as he looked up into the blue sky scattered with puffy white clouds.

Khari was looking off into the distance and seemed to be at war within himself.

"If you want to ask me something, please feel free. I'm not going to lash out at you. I promise." Sharan said carefully.

"Thanks." Khari whispered, then hesitantly forced himself to look into Sharan's eyes before asking, "Since you've been somewhere other than Earth, maybe you know, does everyone hate... Romulans... as much as they do on Earth?"

"I can't really answer that question. I haven't been very many places." Sharan said frankly. "But what I do know is that Andorians are taught from an early age that Romulans are the enemy."

Khari regretfully nodded.

"And then I met you, and I realized that such sweeping generalizations can blind us if we don't have the courage to challenge what we were told." Sharan said quietly.

"I just wanted to know if there's someplace in the universe where I can go and not be looked at as a villain or a monster." Khari said distantly.

"Well, I can think of one place." Sharan said honestly.

Khari looked at him with hope.

"Inside that house."

Khari's hopeful look wilted at the words.

Sharan saw the disappointment, but persisted, "Those people love you. Not your species, just you."

"But Ryan and I broke up. I can't be part of their family anymore. It's selfish of me to be here at all." Khari said regretfully.

"Do you want to hear about my family?" Sharan asked curiously.

"Yes." Khari said with immediate interest.

"My parents died a few years ago, so I'll tell you about my current family." Sharan said carefully. "You know Melanie. We're a couple, so that makes us family in some sense of the word."

Khari nodded that he accepted that reasoning.

"My closest friend after Melanie is named Valentine. He's a Vulcan, if you can believe it." Sharan chuckled.

"I thought Andorians and Vulcans didn't usually get along." Khari said curiously.

"I personally think the stories are exaggerated because it's easier to deal with simplistic ideas. I think that if you were to dig deeper, you'd find that those who actually had differences probably had legitimate reasons for their grievances and those reasons most likely had nothing to do with what species the participants were." Sharan said thoughtfully.

Khari nodded that he understood.

"Valentine's boyfriend is named Terry. He's a human who was raised as a Tellarite." Sharan said simply, then waited for Khari's reaction.

"How did that happen? Is his situation something like mine?" Khari asked quickly.

"Since I don't know anything about your situation, I can't say. But what I do know is that Terry's parents are Human and they accepted jobs working in a Tellarite mining colony. Terry was born in the colony and lived his whole life there. His first time away from his home was when he left for the academy."

"Oh." Khari said thoughtfully. "But I guess being a Human among Tellarites made him feel kind of like an outcast, didn't it?"

"He hasn't spoken much to me about that. But he was really timid and quiet when he first arrived, I'd guess that he probably did grow up feeling different from everyone around him." Sharan said speculatively.

"So he's friends with you and your Vulcan friend. Does that mean that he can't fit in with Humans?" Khari asked cautiously.

Sharan chuckled as he shook his head, then answered, "No. Terry fits in with the Humans just fine. He lived with us for a month before he finally told us that he hadn't been born and raised on Earth."

"I wonder if he feels more a kinship with the Tellarites he was raised with or the Humans who are his own species." Khari asked distantly.

"I don't know. But I haven't noticed him having any problems with our other bunkmates. The other four of them are Human. Terry actually went home with one of them for Christmas." Sharan said frankly.

"I bet that's an odd concept for people from other planets." Khari said with a grin.

"Not really. We all have our own mythologies, folklore and holidays. Some are more fanciful than others, but they all end up being basically the same." Sharan said thoughtfully.

"Aren't you cold? It's freezing out here." Khari asked as he snuggled tighter into his coat.

"I'm from Andoria. It's quite cold there. From my bedroom window I could look out onto a vast frozen desert that stretched off into what seemed like infinity. Feeling this cold, it reminds me of home." Sharan said with a far away smile.

"Well, I grew up in Southern California and my nose is cold. I'll see you inside." Khari said seriously, then added more gently, "Thanks for talking with me."

"It appears that we've been adopted by the same family. That makes us family, of sorts." Sharan said as he looked Khari in the eyes.

"Yeah. Family." Khari agreed, then added, "Jeeze it's cold!"

Sharan chuckled as he watched Khari rush inside.

* * * * *

"Juan, make sure you save room for dessert!" Rosalee said with a grin.

"I hope Aieyu has some offensive moves that involve rolling over your opponent." Juan chuckled.

"Who is that?" Rosella asked curiously.

"Our hand-to-hand combat instructor. He's really great." Phillipa said with a smile.

"That's nice. But more importantly, is he cute?" Rosella asked with a predatory grin.

"Yes. But he's a little bit out of your league, Ella." Phillipa chuckled.

"Oooh, tell me! Tell me, Mammie." Rosella said, her interest now piqued.

"He's Deltan. He had to take an oath of celibacy so he'd be safe to be around us." Juan said frankly.

"Soooo, he's so sexy it hurts!" Rosella said with a twinkle of delight in her eyes.

"He's so sexy it kills. LITERALLY." Phillipa said slowly.

"Oh." Rosella said shortly, then muttered, "Death is soooo not sexy."

"But Aieyu is a really good teacher and a nice guy. He'd be worth getting to know even if you couldn't ever... you know." Juan finished shyly.

"You don't go to the butcher shop to LOOK at the meat. I'm not expecting to find Mr. Perfect. But I sure ain't looking for Mr. It's-So-Freakin-Good-It's-Gonna-Kill-You either." Rosella said frankly.

"Enough!" Rosalee said as she tried to restrain her chuckles. "Before it gets too late, it's time for our Christmas tradition."

"We need to go in by the tree." Phillipa said quickly.

Juan looked at her curiously.

"They're going to put up this year's new ornament." Phillipa said happily.

Juan smiled as he walked with Phillipa into the next room.

* * * * *

As Valentine stepped into the trailer, he was once again assaulted by the acrid stench.

"Oh good! Set up your trays and then git on into the kitchen and load up your plates." Mike's mother said as she scurried around in the small kitchen area.

"Trays?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We always eat in front of the TV. Just go with it." Mike said as he picked up two folded TV trays, then handed one to Val.

After a moment to see what Mike was doing, Valentine unfolded his TV tray and snapped the top into place.

"Come and get it!" Mike's mother said happily.

Before Valentine could even turn toward the sound, Jimmy shifted his massive bulk at an impressive speed from the living room to the kitchen, nearly knocking Val and Mike over in his rush.

"Remember to leave some for everyone else, Jimmy." His mother warned.

"The early bird gets the worm." Jimmy said unrepentantly as he mounded food onto his plate.

"Worm?" Valentine asked Mike apprehensively.

"It's just a saying, Val. No worms, I promise." Mike said with a grin.

Once Jimmy had shifted aside, Valentine moved forward to look over the available selections.

Although he had experience with Human food from his time at the academy, several of the foods were unfamiliar to him.

"Just grab a little bit of each thing you don't recognize and then come back for the ones that you like." Mike suggested.

"Thank you. I will." Valentine said gratefully.

"Where's the dinner rolls?" Gramps asked from beside Val at the table in his ever irritable tone.

"They're over by the sink. I don't have enough counter space to put everything out in one place." Mike's mother said patiently.

"Good, I want some of this ham on buttered rolls." Gramps said gruffly as he piled slices of ham onto his plate.

"I know, Gramps. That's the main reason I get the rolls, and before you ask, the butter is over there too." Mike's mother said with a smile.

"Is that all you're having?" Gramps asked as he looked at Val's plate.

"I'm not sure what everything is, so I'm just trying a taste of each thing so I can come back and get more of what I like." Valentine said carefully.

"That's good, 'cause I bet a big guy like you needs lots of food." Gramps said before moving away to get rolls at the sink.

On impulse, Valentine put a piece of ham onto his plate, then followed Gramps, so he could also get some buttered rolls.

* * * * *

The pond was idyllic.

Every leaf on every tree surrounding the pond seemed to be in its perfect place.

Each and every blade of grass seemed to be trimmed to exactly the same height.

Even the color of the water seemed to be perfectly coordinated to create the illusion of optimal beauty.

Although it was pleasing to the eye, the entire scene served to put Terry ill at ease.

"Troy, please don't be mad at me for saying so, but I really hate this place." Terry said quietly.

After a moment, Troy nodded but didn't respond otherwise.

As their walk around the pond finally started them back toward the house, Terry hesitantly asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm just thinking about how all of this used to seem normal to me. As far as I knew, this was just the way that people lived." Troy said distantly.

"I don't know about people on Earth, but I can tell you that people on Tellar don't live this way." Terry said frankly.

"Good for them." Troy said with a weak smile at his friend, then added, "Why don't we go in and have our dessert so we can get out of here?"

"That's all that's left? Eat and leave?" Terry asked cautiously.

"No. We'll have to visit with the family, but that doesn't take too long. It's all just obligatory chatter that we put on for show. You ask 'how are you?', as if you don't already know, then when they ask you the same thing, you say 'fine', knowing that they don't care in the least." Troy said frankly.

"Why is it like that?" Terry asked curiously.

"When my grandpa died, he left tons of money to the family, but he left the family business to my dad. I guess that kind of made dad the unofficial 'head of the family'." Troy said distantly. "Dad manages the business and everything and keeps making more money. I guess mom manages the family... and dad."

"Troy, you need to get away from this place and these people while you still have a soul." Terry said frankly.

With a smile, Troy responded, "That's the plan."

* * * * *

As Sharan walked into the house, he spotted Khari standing in the doorway of the family room, looking at the men watching the football game.

"What do you see?" Sharan asked as he stopped at Khari's side.

"Something I'll probably never have." Khari said quietly.

"Why do you think that?" Sharan asked curiously.

"I don't know, I guess it's because Ryan is such a great guy. The perfect guy, really. And if I couldn't get things to work with him, what are the chances that I'll find someone else?" Khari said honestly.

"What went wrong?" Sharan asked, in spite of himself.

"I did." Khari said frankly. "It seemed to work for a while, but... I'm just not good enough. Ryan deserves someone who can go out and do things with him. When I go out, all I get is stares and pointing. Sometimes the cops even get called."

"So Ryan broke up with you because of that?" Sharan asked curiously.

"No. I called it off. It just wasn't fair to him for me to always be holding him back and keeping him from doing things." Khari said regretfully.

Sharan thought about that for a moment, then said, "I know this is none of my business, but... well, I'm doing it anyway. Would you mind if I asked Ryan to talk with us for a few minutes?"

"What are you going to do?" Khari asked with sudden panic.

"I'm just going to ask him a few questions, and if I'm right, you'll be interested in his answers." Sharan said frankly, then added, "You've already broken up with him, I doubt that my meddling will make matters worse."

Khari thought for a moment, then finally nodded.

Sharan stepped past Khari into the family room and called Ryan's name to get his attention .

When Ryan looked up, Sharan motioned for him to join them in the hall.

* * * * *

Juan looked at the ornament and smiled.

It was a simple thing. It was glittery and beautiful, but not any more than the other twenty-two ornaments on the tree.

But to see the family placing such meaning into such a simple thing made Juan feel warm inside.

His own family had traditions that weren't so different, but somehow it seemed to him that his own family were just going through the motions. Phillipa's family actually seemed to feel the significance of what they were doing and honestly enjoyed their celebration.

"Juan." Eduardo said, then amended, "Little Juan. I think you're old enough now that you can be the one to put this special ornament on the tree."

The young boy reverently took the ornament by its hook, then looked at his father with question.

"Right there." Eduardo said as he pointed at a spot low on the tree.

Little Juan stepped forward and carefully hooked the ornament in place.

The whole family cheered when it was done and Little Juan received several hugs for his fine ornament hanging job.

"I hope that someday we'll have a tree like this of our own." Phillipa said from Juan's side.

Juan was a little bit surprised by her words. Although they had been dating for nearly a month, neither of them had broached the topic of doing

anything 'long term'. But as he looked around the comfortable little home and the loving family that surrounded him, he felt at peace with the idea.

"I hope so, too. And I want for us to have a family just like this." Juan said before leaning in to give her a kiss.

"The mistletoe is over there, by the door." Rosella said loudly.

Phillipa pulled out of the kiss enough to say, "We're past mistletoe, Ella."

"So are you two ready to get married and settle down, or what?" Rosella asked insistently.

Before Phillipa could respond, Juan said, "We're going to complete our training, then get posted to a starship or starbase somewhere. Once we've gotten that part of our lives settled, we'll decide what's next."

"So you two are going to be able to stay together?" Rosalee asked cautiously.

"Yes. We can request to be assigned as a couple. It usually takes longer to get assignments when you do it that way, but I don't think we'll mind waiting." Phillipa said with an adoring smile at her boyfriend.

"As long as we're together, waiting won't be a problem." Juan said happily.

* * * * *

Valentine choked a little and discretely tried to hide the fact that he was spitting food into a paper towel.

"Not good, huh?" Mike asked with concern.

"I like the green beans at the academy, but these have another flavor, I really don't know what it could be." Valentine said cautiously.

"Bacon grease." Mike said simply. "Mom adds it to just about everything she cooks."

Valentine gulped once, trying to keep his stomach contents at bay, then said, "Yes. That would be what I'm tasting."

"I'm sorry, Val. I didn't think about the vegetarian thing." Mike said regretfully.

"I'm not strictly a vegetarian and I don't mind experiencing new flavors. However, I detect a stale, somewhat rancid bacon grease flavor in the green beans that is most unappealing." Valentine said frankly.

"Did you find *anything* that you like?" Mike asked hopefully.

"Strangely enough, I like the ham on buttered rolls. Although the idea is rather revolting, the mix of flavors turned out to be somewhat pleasant." Val said consideringly.

"So Mikey, why did you really bring this guy with you? Do you feel like you need a bodyguard to visit your own family?" Jimmy asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Yeah. At least with Val's help I'd have a chance of surviving if your fat ass fell over on me." Mike retorted without hesitation.

"I thought when you left for Starfleet that they'd make a man out of you." Jimmy sneered.

"I've only been gone for a month. What did you expect?" Mike asked bluntly.

"I thought you'd stop being such a little pussy." Jimmy responded frankly.

"Jimmy, I'm 5'3" and I weigh 105 pounds. I don't know what it is that you want from me." Mike said honestly.

"Stop being such a fag." Jimmy said flatly.

"Jimmy!" Mike's mother gasped.

Before anyone else could respond, Gramps said, "So what if he's gay? Back in my day, you did stuff like that to help out a buddy in need. We never thought about being a couple or getting married or nothin like that, but if you had a friend who was doing without, you helped him. No harm done."

"That's just sick!" Jimmy spat.

"What about the time I caught you with that chink friend of yours?" Gramps asked frankly.

"We were just changing clothes so we could go out and play football." Jimmy responded quickly.

"And while you were changing, his dick somehow managed to slip half-way down your throat? I know you thought I didn't see, but I knew what you two were doin. The reason I didn't say anything about it is because there was no reason to. You weren't doing anything wrong. But now that you're bad mouthing your brother, condemning him for doing the same stuff that you used to do, it's time for me to speak up." Gramps said seriously.

"Dad, Jimmy was young and confused back then. He just needed to get it out of his system." Mike's father said firmly.

"Lloyd, stop making excuses for the boy. I ain't sayin that he's a limp wristed fairy, but he's got no room to be calling names." Gramps said firmly, then added, "Or maybe I should be telling some stories from when *you* were a boy."

"No. You're right, dad." Lloyd said nervously, "Jimmy, your brother is gay and you bullying him ain't gonna change that. God knows that you've hounded him enough over the years that if it was gonna do any good, something would've happened by now."

Some action on the television seemed to have drawn everyone's attention at that point.

After a moment, Valentine turned to Mike and quietly said, "But you're not gay."

"No. But I'm small. To them, real men are big and tough and little men are gay. I tried to tell them for years that I'm straight, but they wouldn't believe me. Now I just let them believe whatever they want. It's actually kind of funny." Mike finished with a smile.

"So, by their reasoning, because I am big, I am straight and because you are small, you are gay?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Mike chuckled. "Except that, because you're so much bigger than me, you could have sex with me and still be considered straight... well, as long as you're on top."

"The logic of this seems complicated." Valentine said slowly.

"Oh yeah. It gets worse. There's a whole list of rules." Mike said playfully, "I mean, if you're straight, you can never ever suck another guys dick, EXCEPT... if you're in jail, or if you're trying to get out of a traffic ticket, or if you're hitchhiking, or if you want backstage passes or if you lost your last match at wrestling practice... actually, I'm not sure about that last one."

"I think being gay is much simpler." Valentine said frankly.

Mike nodded, then said, "It's not so bad. I mean, yeah, they're a little bit nasty about it sometimes. But if it wasn't about that, it'd be something else. I'm really okay with the whole being gay thing... well, except for the part about having sex with guys. I think that'd be gross."

"As long as you're at peace with it, I see no reason to dissuade them from their beliefs." Valentine said frankly.

There was a commotion on the TV and all the others in the room started to hoot and holler.

"What happened?" Valentine asked as he turned his attention to the football game.

"They must have got a home run or something." Mike said with a disinterested shrug.

"It's a touchdown, you little fruit!" Jimmy barked.

"Whatever." Mike said with a grin at Val.

* * * * *

As Troy and Terry walked into the living room, Troy's mother said, "You're just in time for dessert! Come in and visit for a while."

"Oh God! She's having the turd cake again." Troy said with a wrinkled nose at the plates of cake lined up on the side board.

"The what?" Terry asked with a chuckle.

"It's a dark chocolate torte or something like that. It's really bitter, no one likes it." Troy said as he walked past the desserts.

"Then why does she serve it?" Terry asked curiously as he followed.

"I don't know; maybe because it's expensive. Or maybe because it's so dense it doesn't have crumbs." Troy said thoughtfully.

"If no one eats it, then crumbs don't matter." Terry said frankly as he stopped to see where Troy was leading him.

"Good point." Troy said as he approached a young man, then said in a formal tone, "Terry, this is my cousin Blaine."

The young man standing before Terry was impeccably groomed and somewhat attractive, but he had a coldness behind his eyes that was disturbing.

"I met your brother outside. It's nice to meet you." Terry said, trying to maintain a pleasant tone.

"I'm sure Calistair didn't have anything nice to say about me. You'll have to forgive him, he needs to grow up." Blaine said seriously.

"Actually, I thought he was very nice. I guess that probably means that I need to do some growing up too." Terry said with a grin. He didn't care what Blaine thought of him and realizing that was very liberating.

Blaine didn't seem to know how to respond to that, so he looked away to find someone else to talk to.

"Aunt Dee Dee, how are you doing?" Troy said suddenly and raced away.

Terry smiled and followed.

* * * * *

"I'm glad that I got to see you again before I left. I hope that you had a good Christmas." Dee Dee said as she hugged Troy warmly.

"Yeah. A lot better than I expected to." Troy said as he returned the hug, then added, "Sharing all of this with Terry has opened my eyes to a lot of things that I never noticed before."

"That's good. I'm so glad to see that one of the young ones is going to escape this pit of vipers." Dee Dee said warmly.

"Well, from the sound of things, Cal is about ready to go over the wall, too." Troy said frankly.

"I'll keep an eye on him from a distance and see that he gets any help that he needs." Dee Dee said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"What do you have there?" Troy asked as he noticed the ornament in Dee Dee's hand.

"It's my gift. Another egg." Dee Dee said as she held up the intricately decorated object.

"Do you collect those things?" Troy asked curiously.

Dee Dee chuckled, then said, "I'm thought of as something of a hoarder, and I guess I have earned that reputation. I have so many trinkets and treasures that you can barely walk through my house. But it seems that your parents have found the one thing on all the planet that I have absolutely no interest whatsoever in collecting. This thing will be wrapped up in tissue paper and put in a box in the basement, along with the other six that they've bought me. If your mother ever deigns to honor me with a visit, I'll dig them out and put them on display for her benefit. Otherwise, I'd drop the ugly little thing into the first trash bin that I encountered on my way home."

"Do you happen to need a glass Christmas tree?" Terry asked simply, as he pointed at his gift on the nearby side table.

"No, sorry, Hun, I already have two of them. Actually, I think they're in the same box with the eggs." Dee Dee said with a chuckle.

"So, did you have a good visit with everyone?" Troy asked curiously.

"Good? I suppose that's a relative term. Let's just say that I saw what I wanted to see. Everyone is still alive and in reasonable health. They're all a little older, a little more bitter... I suppose it's selfish of me, but it makes me feel better to see that." Dee Dee said frankly.

"Because you know that while they're looking down on you and being judgmental, you're enjoying a much happier and more fulfilled life than they can imagine?" Terry asked speculatively.

"Yes. I think that's it." Dee Dee said thoughtfully, then smiled as she added, "I'm glad that Troy has made such a good friend at the academy. It's important that he get to know some 'real' people."

"You don't have to worry about that at all. He has lots of friends at the academy. All of us are very different, and definitely very real."

"I'd better be going before Troy's mother decides that I'm lucid enough to be drawn into one of her conversations." Dee Dee said dramatically, then finished with a visible shudder at the thought.

"It was good to see you, Aunt Dee Dee. I'll be sure to stop by and see you next time I'm on leave." Troy said as he moved in to give her a quick hug.

"Yes. And make sure you have plenty of time because I'm going to want us to have a long visit so I can hear about all your friends." Dee Dee said warmly.

"I'll definitely do that." Troy said gently, then watched as Dee Dee walked away.

"So, what next?" Terry asked curiously.

"Our next thing is to corner Dad and get him to fly us back to San Francisco." Troy said frankly. "I mean, unless you'd rather hang around here and socialize with the family."

"Let's hurry up and find him."

* * * * *

Once Sharan had Ryan and Khari alone in the hall, Sharan said, "I think that what's happened to you two wouldn't happen to an Andorian couple."

Both Ryan and Khari looked at Sharan with surprise at the vague statement.

"Just let me ask you a few questions, then I'll explain." Sharan said in prelude. "Ryan, if you wanted to go out to a club and Khari didn't want to go with you, what would you do?"

Ryan shrugged uncomfortably, then quietly said, "I'd try to talk him into going, because I know that it's good for him to get out of the house now and then. But if he absolutely refused to go, then I'd stay home with him."

Sharan nodded as if he expected that answer, then asked, "Khari, if Ryan wanted to go out and you didn't feel like it, what would you do?"

Khari glanced at Ryan, then reluctantly answered, "I'd probably end up going, because Ryan wanted me to, but then I'd end up being miserable all night because I'd feel like people were staring at me."

"If you two were Andorians, this wouldn't be a problem. Ryan would ask if you wanted to go, you'd say 'no' and then he would go to the club by himself and neither of you would have any hard feelings about it." Sharan said frankly.

"But I'm afraid that if I don't coax him to go out, he'll never leave the house." Ryan said with a concerned look at Khari.

"He's an adult, he's capable of making that choice. Let him know that he's invited, then allow him the dignity of making the choice for himself." Sharan said firmly.

Ryan looked at Khari with question.

"Khari feels like he's not good enough for you because you're always trying to change the way he feels. If you'll accept him the way he is and trust that he knows his own mind, then maybe you two can find some middle ground." Sharan said to Ryan seriously.

After a moment, Sharan turned to Khari and said, "You need to tell Ryan when he's pushing you to do something that you really don't want to do. If you'll stand up for yourself and declare your feelings, then I truly believe that you'll start to feel 'good enough'."

Ryan and Khari both seemed to be about to say something to each other, but both remained silent.

"One last thing." Sharan said firmly, drawing their attention. "You must not tell others that I said these things to you. I wouldn't want to be responsible for Andorians getting the reputation of being relationship counselors."

"Your secret is safe with us." Ryan said with a grin.

"Thank you." Sharan said, then turned to walk into the family room. Before he passed through the doorway, he said over his shoulder, "Merry Christmas."

Juan and Phillipa were snuggled together on the couch in the TV room.

The football game was going on, but neither of them were paying it any attention.

No words were being spoken. No great thoughts were being thought. They were simply drifting in the peaceful feeling of having full bellies and being surrounded by people who loved them.

Juan found that the feeling transcended words and held the essence of Christmas.

Chapter 9

"So. Are you fucking my brother?" Jimmy asked Valentine with a look of menace in his piggy little eyes.

"No. But since you seem interested to know about my sexuality, perhaps I should ask what you have in mind." Valentine said frankly.

Jimmy's eyes went wide at the question, then he stammered, "I, um..."

Mike fought to restrain his chuckles at the sight of his brother at a loss for words.

Everyone was quiet, waiting for Jimmy's eventual reaction.

Some excited commentary on the television drew their attention, breaking the awkward silence.

Valentine was surprised to discover that he actually got drawn into the end of the football game. Although he really didn't understand everything that was going on, he could tell from the reactions of the others if what happened on the TV screen was something good or bad.

* * * * *

When the game was over, Mike announced that he and Valentine needed to leave for the spaceport soon to catch their transport back to the academy.

"I'll take you." Mike's father, Lloyd, said immediately.

Valentine noticed the surprised look on people's faces, but didn't give it much thought, not when the prospect of getting away from the vile stench was so close at hand.

"I guess we're ready to go whenever you are." Mike said cautiously.

Lloyd got the car keys from his father, then said, "Let's roll."

Mike's mother ran up to him and pulled him into a firm hug.

"Things are a lot different from when I was your age." Gramps said seriously to Valentine. "You give Mike something he could never get while he was here."

"I don't know that I give him anything. It's Mike that gives to me. I depend on his help every day in the labs at the academy." Valentine said frankly.

"That, right there, is what you give him. A man needs respect." Gramps said, then patted Valentine on the shoulder as he walked past him into the kitchen.

"Ready?" Lloyd asked as he stood by the doorway.

They had to wait a moment longer for Mike's mother to stop hugging him, but finally they were done.

* * * * *

"Dad! Terry and I need to get back to the academy." Troy said as he approached his father.

"Already? We haven't even had two minutes to sit down and talk." David said with disappointment.

"Yeah. But if I stayed here another four hours, we still wouldn't have a chance to talk." Troy said frankly.

David looked around the room, then reluctantly said, "You're probably right."

"So why don't you fly us back to San Francisco and spend some time talking when we get there?" Terry asked simply. "I'll be able to find my way back to the academy from the airport with no problem, so you wouldn't even have to worry about me tagging along."

"I'm sure your mother expects..." David began to say, then saw Troy's hopeful look fall.

"You know what? Let's do it! You guys grab your things and meet me in the garage." David said decisively.

Troy broke into a huge smile and hugged his father tightly.

"There'll be time enough for that once we're out of here. Go on." David coaxed, then glanced around before ducking out of the room.

Troy hurried over and picked up Terry's ornament and his tablet computer, still in its unopened box.

"I want to throw this in my room, then we'll be ready to go." Troy said as he led Terry to the stairs.

* * * * *

"Where did Khari go?" Melanie's father asked as he looked around.

"He and Ryan seemed to need to talk." Sharan said simply.

"Good! I love that boy but sometimes he really is thick headed."

"Which one?" Patrick asked from his father's side.

"Well, I was talking about Khari, but I guess it would be kind of a contest to see which one of them is more thick headed. They're like two peas in a pod."

"I hope they can figure it out. Ryan's never been as happy with anyone else and Khari seemed to really be opening up. They're just so good for each other." Patrick said distantly.

"No matter what happens, remember that we can't interfere. Since we love them, the best thing we can do is stay out of their way and support their decisions." Melanie's father said sagely.

"No. I'm not going to stand in the background anymore. If Ryan and Khari can't work it out this time, then I'm going to ask Khari out on a date." Paul said frankly.

"But you're not gay." Melanie's father said cautiously.

"I go both ways." Paul said as he looked his father in the eyes. "I usually go more for women, but that's mostly about convenience. I think that being with Khari would be a great relationship for both of us."

"If you started dating Khari, it could destroy your relationship with your brother."

"And if I don't, I might never see Khari again. I'll risk Ryan's wrath if it means keeping Khari in my life." Paul said honestly.

"I really hope it doesn't come to that, Paul." Melanie's father said quietly.

"Me either." Paul reluctantly admitted, "I just want Khari to be happy, and if Ryan can do that for him, then I'll be fine with cheering them on from the sidelines."

"Do you love him?"

Paul nodded, then looked at his father and quietly said, "Maybe even as much as Ryan does."

"Does he know?"

"I think he knows that I care about him. That's all he needs to know right now. I wouldn't want for things to become awkward between us." Paul said honestly.

"How is everything going in here?" Melanie asked cheerfully as she walked into the family room.

"When I used to watch Earth television to prepare for my time at the academy, I believed that the overly dramatic stories were an exaggeration for entertainments sake." Sharan said frankly, then added, "It appears that I was mistaken."

Several chuckles sounded from the men around the room.

"What time do we need to leave? I wouldn't want us to miss our transport." Melanie asked quietly.

"Actually, I booked our return passage on commercial transport. I anticipated that you would want to spend as much time as possible with your family, so we don't have to be at the airport until midnight, local time." Sharan said gently.

"I love you, Sharan!" Melanie squealed as she hugged him tightly.

"I love you, too, Mel." Sharan said sincerely as he pulled the excited girl close to him.

Melanie suddenly stopped all movement and looked at Sharan with surprise.

Sharan gave one single, decisive nod to confirm that he had meant what he said.

"I've got to go tell mom!" Melanie exploded with excitement, then raced out of the room.

There was a long moment of silence, then Paul said, "Thank you for making your own contribution to our drama."

Sharan looked at him suddenly, then broke into a smile as he said, "I believe you Earth people have a saying about 'When in Rome...'"

* * * * *

"So tell me, do you have any 'single' classmates that I should know about?" Rosella asked with a predatory grin.

Phillipa shook her head, but Juan seemed to really be considering it.

"Tell me,

I was just thinking that Liam and Rosella might make a really good couple, you know, like complimentary personalities."

Phillipa looked at Juan strangely, but before she could say anything, Rosella quickly asked, "So who is Liam, and more importantly, is he HOT?"

"He's a cadet officer who's about to graduate. And even though I don't go around judging guys looks, I think it's safe to say that he's pretty good looking." Juan said seriously.

"Smoking hot." Phillipa interjected.

Juan looked at her with surprise.

"Hey! I can notice, can't I?" Phillipa said playfully.

"But is he SINGLE?" Rosella asked slowly.

"Yeah, as far as I know." Juan said speculatively.

"He's visiting his family in Ireland right now, but I think he'll be back at the academy tomorrow." Phillipa said thoughtfully.

"If you're interested, we can talk to him and see if he'd like to meet an energetic and interesting young lady." Juan said with a smile.

"Don't forget to mention 'gorgeous'." Rosella said firmly.

"Of course, we'll be sure to mention that first." Juan chuckled.

"Seriously, Ella. We'll see if he's interested, and if he is, we'll give him your email address. After that, it's up to you." Phillipa said frankly.

"Mammie, that's all I need. I mean, what man could resist *this*." She asked as she struck a pose.

Juan looked her over, then shook his head as he said, "Poor Liam, he doesn't stand a chance."

* * * * *

Valentine noticed the tension in the car as they pulled out of the trailer park.

"I just wanted to say thank you for coming home for Christmas." Lloyd said quietly.

"I promised that I would." Mike responded simply.

"I know it may not have felt like it sometimes, but we wouldn't have been able to enjoy the holiday without you." Lloyd said frankly.

"I'm sure Jimmy would have been just as happy if I weren't there." Mike said honestly.

"Your brother has a lot to deal with. You need to cut him some slack." Lloyd said quietly.

"Cut him some slack? All he gets is slack! Dad, you need to open your eyes and stop defending him." Mike said firmly.

There was a long moment of silence, then Lloyd finally asked, "Do you know what the greatest day of your brother's life was?"

"Sure. It's when he caught that interception that won the game in his senior year of high school." Mike responded with confusion at the non sequitur.

"That's probably the best day he'll ever have. Take a good look at your brother, Mike. He can barely read or write. That boy looks like he's been beat half to death with an 'ugly stick' and he's dumb as a stump. And I'm not just talkin' about book learnin', that boy don't have a lick of good sense. I feel like I need to talk him up and tell him that I'm proud of him for the little things he does because, let's face it, outside our house, no one's likely to say a single kind word to him."

"Does that mean that you're proud of me, too?" Mike asked hesitantly.

"I'm proud of both of you. I'm proud of your brother for what he's done and for the fact that he keeps trying." Lloyd said quietly, then added, "Of course I'm proud of you for getting accepted to Starfleet and all that, but it's different. Jimmy's probably already done the best thing he will ever do. You're just getting started."

"Huh?" Mike asked in confusion.

"You've got the brains and the drive to better yourself. I'll wager that before very long, you'll be doin' somethin' that'll make me so proud that I'll be fit to bust. And when that happens, I'll speak right up about it. I'll stand up there and tell you how proud I am 'cause I just won't be able to hold it in no more. And you'll know that I mean it because I don't go around praising you for the little things."

Mike stared at his father in wonder.

"And, unless I miss my guess, I figure that you're gonna make me proud like that more than once."

"I'll do my best." Mike muttered as he fought to restrain his tears.

"You always do. I'm just sorry as I can be if I ever made you feel like that wasn't good enough." Lloyd said honestly.

"You didn't make me feel anything. I let myself feel that way. But now that I understand, it won't be a problem anymore." Mike said as he regained control of his emotions.

"You always were the strong one." Lloyd said absently as he turned his attention fully to his driving.

* * * * *

"THIS is your room?" Terry asked as he looked inside.

"Yeah." Troy said as he walked into an alcove where an impressive computer system was located.

"Troy, this room is bigger than my whole HOUSE back at the colony." Terry said frankly.

"I know it's nicer than some people's rooms, but it's really not that special." Troy said dismissively.

"Where's the bed?" Terry asked curiously.

"Over that way, around the corner." Troy said with a casual gesture across the room.

Terry couldn't restrain his curiosity and ventured further into the enormous room.

"Oh! Come on! You have a balcony with a hot tub! A big screen home theater and a computer system like I've never seen in my life! This is a lot more than 'better than some people's'." Terry said in a voice of challenge.

"Okay, I admit it. I used to be into all the materialistic 'things'. Are you happy now?" Troy asked defensively.

"Not particularly." Terry said quietly, "I'm your friend and I want to understand who you really are."

"I'm a rich spoiled brat who woke up one day and realized that everything that I trusted and believed in for my whole life was a lie. I finally saw all this... crap, for what it really is. A pretty little gilded cage meant to keep me pacified until the brainwashing is complete." Troy said seriously.

Terry thought about Troy's words as he looked around, then said, "Let's get out of here."

"I'll take you down the back stairs so we don't have to face the 'festivities'." Troy said as he hurried toward the door.

"Good plan." Terry said as he followed closely behind.

* * * * *

Silence fell over the family room as Ryan and Khari walked in.

"Well?" Patrick asked impatiently.

"Well, what?" Ryan asked with confusion.

"Are you two back together or not?" Patrick asked frankly.

Khari looked at Sharan uncertainly.

"I'm curious, too." Sharan said honestly. "I just told them that you two were talking."

Ryan looked at Khari with question and received a nod in response.

"We've decided to give it another try." Ryan said simply.

A cheer went up around the room and all the men moved forward at once to hug the couple and offer their congratulations.

After a moment of watching the group happily hugging and back slapping, Sharan was surprised when he was pulled into a hug from his side.

"Thanks for what you said, Sharan. We talked about things and... I think it's going to be better." Khari said frankly.

"I hope so, Khari." Sharan said honestly.

* * * * *

"Let me take him upstairs." Eduardo said when he noticed that Little Juan had fallen asleep on Juan's lap.

"I don't mind if he stays. My little brother, Marco, used to fall asleep on my lap all the time. Mama used to say that it was the only way to get him to sleep." Juan said distantly.

"You must miss your family terribly." Eduardo said with sympathy as he settled in on the couch beside Juan.

"Sometimes, yeah." Juan quietly admitted, "But I know I'm doing the right thing. I can't spend my whole life making my father's dream come true. I have to follow my own dream."

"What is your dream?" Eduardo asked curiously.

"I guess it's to be the opposite of my father." Juan said frankly, then explained, "The only thing that matters to him is his restaurant. His family are just a way to get free labor. I'm going to the academy so I can get a good, stable job so I can be a good provider when I have a family of my own."

"That is a very fine goal." Eduardo said seriously.

"Phillipa's told me that when she was growing up, she knew that you worked hard to provide for your family. But she said you were always there when she needed you and she never felt like she ever had to do without anything. That's what I want for my kids... our kids." Juan finished quietly.

Eduardo chuckled slightly as he wiped a stray tear from his eye, then said, "I was so afraid for Phillipa when she left us. There are so many dangers and so many temptations out there... I suppose with all that worry, it never occurred to me that something good might happen."

"She's really happy at the academy, and she's safe." Juan said seriously.

"I won't worry... well, no more than any parent when their child is out of their sight." Eduardo finished with a chuckle.

Little Juan shifted on Juan's lap and snuggled a little tighter into his chest.

Juan leaned in and gave the boy a gentle kiss on the top of his head to help quiet him.

Eduardo watched the unconscious action and smiled.

* * * * *

Valentine and Mike's trip back to the academy had been mostly silent.

It wasn't uncomfortable, but Valentine could tell that Mike just needed some time to assimilate the revelations brought on by his discussion with his father.

As Valentine stepped under the hot shower's spray, he began to feel the tension drain away.

After a few minutes of standing and soaking in the warmth, he began to lather himself heavily. He felt as though no amount of washing would ever make him feel clean.

"Could you use some company?"

Valentine turned to see Terry, wrapped in a towel and walking slowly into the room.

"Your company, absolutely." Valentine said with a smile.

"Troy is going to spend some time with his father before he comes back." Terry said as he walked to the hooks to hang up his towel.

"Mike said he wanted to check on things in the lab, but I think he really just needs some time to be alone." Valentine said, then smiled at the sight of Terry's completely naked body.

"Whoa, big guy. You know we can't be doing anything here." Terry said as he noticed the evidence of Valentine's interest.

"I've missed you terribly, today. I know we aren't ready for everything, but I would like very much to hold you right now." Valentine said honestly.

"I need a kiss." Terry said frankly as he slowly walked toward Valentine.

"That is good, because I happen to have one for you." Valentine said with a smile.

When Terry finally reached him, Valentine pulled him into a hug and proceeded to give him a slow, lingering kiss.

Valentine's hands drifted down Terry's well muscled back and came to rest on his firm butt.

"You keep doing that and I might forget the rules." Terry muttered against Valentine's lips.

"There is nothing I would like more." Valentine said in return, then added, "But it would be wrong."

"It's not wrong." Terry said as he moved in for another, even more passionate, kiss.

"No. Not wrong. But the wrong place and the wrong time." Valentine said regretfully.

"When will we ever be in the right place and right time?" Terry asked desperately as he looked up into Valentine's eyes, proving that he honestly wanted an answer.

"I believe that we promised each other that we would spend the next holiday together. As I understand local customs, that will be the celebration of advancing to the next calendar year." Valentine said breathlessly.

"New Year's Eve. Yeah, I've heard of it." Terry said with anticipation.

"Between now and then, we can make arrangements for the proper time and place." Valentine said in a low, sultry voice.

"Let's go put in for passes as soon as we're dried off." Terry said with anticipation.

"Perhaps we could eat first? I wasn't able to eat very much today." Valentine said honestly.

"Yeah. I'm hungry, too." Terry said frankly.

"Turn around and I'll wash your back." Valentine said quietly.

"You just want to look at my butt." Terry said playfully as he turned around.

"That's not ALL I want to do." Valentine said with a grin as he started to soap Terry's back.

* * * * *

A knocking on the door caused everyone to look up in surprise.

"Who would be visiting us on Christmas?" Melanie's father asked with a puzzled look as he left the room to answer the door.

"Everyone who might visit is already here, except..." Melanie trailed off in thought, then her eyes lit up with delight as she thought of who it could be.

"Where's my niece?" A woman's voice boomed, announcing her arrival as she rushed into the room.

"Aunt Janice!" Melanie said with a broad smile as she ran to hug the woman.

"That's our Aunt Janice, she's the one who's in Starfleet." Patrick said to Sharan quietly, then added, "They've always been extremely close."

"Yes. Melanie has spoken of her." Sharan responded as he watched the two women hugging joyfully.

"I thought you said you couldn't come today." Melanie said as she pulled back slightly to look at Janice curiously.

"I didn't think I could. We just got back to Earth and came directly here." Janice said, then looked behind her and said, "Shish, come in here so you can meet my family!"

Everyone in the room watched as a tall thin man hesitantly walked into the room with Melanie's father at his side. There was a moment of silence when you actually could have heard a pin drop.

Sharan found that he was as much in shock as anyone else at the sight of the Andorian man standing in the doorway.

"Everyone, I'd like for you to meet my boyfriend... fiancée, Shish." Janice said proudly.

"You're getting married!" Melanie yelled, then hugged her Aunt with renewed joy.

Shish looked around the room uncomfortably at all the strangers, then his expression seemed to soften when he spotted Sharan.

"You've always been two of a kind, but this goes beyond coincidence." Melanie's father said with a grin.

Janice looked at him curiously at the statement, then followed his gaze to Sharan.

"Oh, it's no coincidence. Melanie's been telling me about Sharan for over a month now. Shish and I have known each other for years, he serves on the Enterprise with me. He's asked me out a few times, but until I heard Melanie describing the way her relationship was developing with Sharan, I guess I never really gave his invitations serious thought. Once we started dating... well, you can guess the rest." Janice finished as she hurried to Shish and gave him a firm hug.

"I'm glad you finally found someone." Melanie's father said sincerely.

"He was worth waiting for." Janice said with an adoring smile at her fiancée.

"I took Janice to meet my family on Andoria. Our ship only just arrived at Earth and we came directly here." Shish said in a soft, tenor voice.

"Yeah. I was so afraid we wouldn't make it before everyone left." Janice said quickly.

"Well, most of the ladies are in the kitchen fussing over things. I think they would be very interested to hear your news, especially your sister. Who knows, they might even be able to find some Christmas dinner to feed you while you're in there." Melanie's father said with a loving look at Janice.

"Come on, Shish. You aren't even going to believe it." Janice said exuberantly as she led him out of the room.

"It seems that as much as your aunt has inspired you, that you have also been able to inspire her. It has a certain symmetry." Sharan said thoughtfully.

Melanie smiled at his words, then gave him a quick kiss before rushing away.

"Sharan." Melanie's father said, to gain his attention. At Sharan's inquisitive look, he continued, "Just in case you ever have a doubt, you ARE part of our family. All you have to do is look at Janice and Shish to see the influence you've already had."

Sharan looked into the man's eyes and said, "For the first time since my parents' deaths, I feel like I belong to a family again. I don't have words enough to express my gratitude."

"There's no need, son. Because we're every bit as grateful to have you as part of our family." Melanie's father said, then put an arm around Sharan's shoulders to give him a one armed hug.

* * * * *

"Juan, are you Catholic?" Eduardo asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Yes. Yes, sir." Juan responded hesitantly, then felt it necessary to add, "I haven't attended church for many years. Not since my father moved us to Austin. But I was raised Catholic."

"That's fine, Juan. We aren't a strict religious family, by any means, but I feel that a religious foundation is important to provide a guide, a moral compass, later in life." Eduardo said frankly.

Juan considered for a moment, then quietly said, "I never thought about it before, but I suppose that a lot of what I believe about right and wrong and acceptance and forgiveness come from what I learned in church when I was young."

Eduardo smiled, then said, "Just make sure that my grandkids get that same moral foundation."

Juan's eyes went wide at the statement.

"I don't mean right now. There's plenty of time for that." Eduardo said with a smile at Juan's surprised reaction.

* * * * *

The showering might have taken a bit longer than was necessary, but Terry and Valentine didn't do *much* that would be considered inappropriate.

As they were walking toward the cafeteria, Valentine thought to ask, "How was your Christmas dinner?"

"I guess if I were going to describe the entire meal in one word, it would be 'Sanitary'." Terry said frankly, then asked, "How was yours?"

"Fragrant." Valentine said as he led the way into the cafeteria.

They casually walked through the hot food line and made their selections.

As Valentine was selecting dinner rolls from the variety of breads that were available, Terry noticed that Valentine had ham on his plate.

"You're going to eat meat?" Terry asked with surprise.

"Yes. But don't worry. I'm still a vegetarian... except for ham." Valentine said casually, then carried his tray to the salad line.

Terry stared at Valentine for a moment, then started to chuckle as he followed.

* * * * *

Once they were seated, Terry couldn't help but stare as Valentine prepared his mini sandwich of ham on a buttered roll.

"I'm guessing something must have happened at Mike's family's house for you to suddenly change your diet." Terry prompted.

After eating a bite of his sandwich, Valentine said, "Many things happened at Mike's family's house, and most of them I probably won't discuss, out of respect for Mike. But as far as my change in diet, it is simply because Mike's grandfather introduced me to a new flavor combination that I find pleasing."

"Oh? Well, then, I'm glad that you found something new that you can eat." Terry said happily.

"Terry, isn't that the young man from the restaurant?" Valentine asked as he indicated a young man walking toward them with a food tray.

"Hey, Giovanni! Do you want to sit with us?" Terry asked quickly.

The young cadet ensign looked at Terry curiously, obviously not knowing who he was.

"We met in the restaurant the day before you started at the academy." Terry explained.

"Oh, yeah!" Giovanni said with a smile and placed his tray on their table.

"It looks like you've got a full meal there, I'm guessing you didn't go home and have Christmas dinner." Terry said casually.

"No, I went home a few days ago to celebrate the Winter Solstice with my family." Giovanni said frankly.

Valentine looked at the young man curiously. Although he couldn't be sure, it appeared to him that Giovanni had not been getting enough sleep and had lost some weight.

"So how have things been for you? Is it everything that you expected?" Terry asked curiously.

"No. Not what I expected." Giovanni said with a weary chuckle. "Everything you and your friends warned me about was true. I'm just glad that I listened. Every time I feel like being lazy and taking the day off or the easy way out, I just remember what you said and keep going. And most times I'll look back and see someone else who *did* take the easy way, and they usually end up having to pay a heavy price for it."

"Well, since we're not in the officer's training, we don't know exactly what you're going through, but that sounds about right." Terry said honestly.

"I feel like the stress is constant, always pressing down on me. But I think that maybe I'm starting to get used to that." Giovanni said introspectively.

"Well, as soon as you do, then it's time to take it up a notch. In fact, if your exams are anything like ours, the pressure is going to be ramped up pretty soon." Terry said seriously.

"Yeah. I've been talking with one of the regular term students, and he said pretty much the same thing. Of course, that's when I could get him to talk about something besides the 'Hero of Kimber'." Giovanni said with a roll of his eyes.

"What about him?" Terry asked curiously.

"You haven't heard?" Giovanni asked with surprise.

"No. We've been focusing on our studies and haven't really talked to anyone outside our group except Liam, and he hasn't said anything." Terry said frankly.

"Well, from what Aiden said, when they did their first simulator exercise, they were put in there with people from different class groups and stuff, he'd never even spoken to most of them before and didn't know who some of them were. Anyway, when the exercise started, they had this kid with them. It turns out that the kid was the hero of Kimber... I mean, he was there in the simulator with them as part of their team!" Giovanni said in amazement.

"I'm guessing they passed their test." Valentine said, mostly as a prompt for Giovanni to continue the story.

"Yeah. And from what Aiden said, they probably would have failed, like, big time, if he hadn't been there." Giovanni said with a wide eyed expression.

"I guess it just goes to show you that you never know what to expect from one day to the next around here." Valentine said with a smile.

"So, how are things going for you, besides being stressed?" Terry asked curiously.

"Okay, I guess. Except for my roommate. He seems to always be mad about something. He probably hasn't said a dozen words to me since we moved in together and he's always slamming things around. It's kind of hard to relax around someone like that." Giovanni said frankly.

"Yeah. Well, some people don't know how to handle stress. There's not much that you can do but try to let it not get to you." Terry said sympathetically.

"I know. For the first few days I was all tied up, trying to figure out what I'd done to piss him off. But I finally realized that he's just a very angry and unhappy person and that it has nothing to do with me." Giovanni said in a voice of acceptance.

"Let us know if there's anything we can do." Valentine said sincerely.

Giovanni smiled, then said, "Yeah. Just being able to sit here and talk with you like regular people is a big help. Everyone in my class group is all so serious all the time, we don't talk about anything except for our studies and preparing for the next exam."

Terry chuckled, then said, "Well, we do a lot of that, too. But we also help each other out. I think it helps all of us when we know that we can depend on each other."

Giovanni slowly nodded, then absently said, "It would be nice if we could do that."

"It's your first term. Sooner or later, it'll happen. You just have to hang in there." Valentine assured.

Giovanni looked down at his plate and realized that he had finished his meal. "I guess I'd better get back to studying. I've got a chapter on navigation that needs my attention right now."

"Yeah. We've just had a day off, but it's about time for us to get back into study mode." Terry said frankly.

"Thanks for talking with me guys." Giovanni said as he stood, then stopped and added, "And thanks for all the stuff you told me at the restaurant. It really helped me get through the first few days."

"I'm glad. And remember that you can always come to us if you need some advice, or if you just want to talk." Valentine said sincerely.

"Yeah. I appreciate it. And the same goes for me if I can ever do anything to help you." Giovanni said with a smile.

"We'll remember that." Terry said warmly, then watched as Giovanni left their table.

"He appears to have grown up a lot since we first met." Valentine said speculatively.

"Yeah. I'm glad the stuff we told him at the restaurant helped." Terry said happily.

"We still have a little time before bed. I think it would be a good idea to do some studying before we sleep, to put us in the right frame of mind for tomorrow's class." Valentine said thoughtfully.

"Your bunk or mine?" Terry asked with a grin.

"Yours." Valentine said with an answering smile.

* * * * *

Most of the family had left. Melanie's parents were sitting on one end of a couch and Janice and Shish were sitting on the other. On the other couch, Ryan and Khari were sitting snuggled together on one end as Sharan and Melanie mirrored their position at the other end. They were all silent, listening to instrumental Christmas music while they watched the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree.

"What time do you need to be going?" Melanie's father asked casually, breaking the long silence.

"We have to be at the airport by midnight." Sharan answered as he glanced at the clock.

"We can give you a ride to the airport if you like." Ryan said casually as he held Khari close to his side.

"Isn't that quite a bit out of your way?" Melanie asked with concern.

"Not really. We need to stop by Khari's place to pick up a few things. So we'll be in the neighborhood." Ryan said with a smile.

"I'm so glad you're back together." Melanie's mother said from her husband's arms.

"Me too." Ryan said quietly, then leaned in slightly to give Khari a kiss.

"If you're sure you don't mind driving us, we'd appreciate the ride." Sharan said honestly.

"No. We don't mind." Khari said in a contented whisper.

"It looks like three of our four kids have found true love. Now the only one we have to worry about is Paul." Melanie's mother said as she looked around the room.

"Give the boy some time. He has to get over an unrequited love. That doesn't go away overnight." Melanie's father said gently.

"Was Paul seeing someone? Why didn't anyone tell me?" Janice asked as she looked around the gathering.

"No. He wasn't seeing anyone. That's what I mean by 'unrequited'. Just give him some time and I'm sure everything will work out." Melanie's father said seriously.

Silence fell over the room again as everyone seemed to accept the answer.

"We should leave for the airport soon, so we won't have to rush." Ryan said quietly as he looked at the clock.

"Before we go, I'd like to thank all of you. I couldn't have imagined a better experience. Thank you for accepting me in your holiday celebration." Sharan said formally.

"We're just so happy that you came. I hope that you'll be able to come and visit again very soon." Melanie's mother said tenderly.

"Yes. That is my hope as well." Sharan said sincerely.

"Do you need some help carrying your gifts?" Khari asked as he stood from the couch.

"Yeah. Thanks." Melanie said happily as she hurried to the tree to gather her things.

Ryan put a hand on Sharan's shoulder and said, "Thanks for all your help, today."

"It is not in my nature to get involved in such things, but too many people who have been kind to me were being adversely affected by your situation.

I saw a possible solution and related it to you as inoffensively as I was able." Sharan said carefully.

"If our places were reversed, I doubt that I would have been able to handle the situation as well as you did." Ryan said frankly.

"Don't forget your presents." Melanie said with a grin at Sharan.

Sharan knelt down and reverently picked up his lapdesk, then opened it and put the duffel bag inside.

"I don't know when we'll be able to come back, but I'll email you as soon as we get another break." Melanie said as she ran to give her mother a hug.

"We'll be waiting to hear from you." Melanie's mother said gently, sounding like she was about to cry.

"Yes. And we'll also be expecting regular updates on how you're doing." Melanie's father said as Melanie started hugging him.

Sharan was surprised when Melanie's mother went to him and hugged him gently.

"I hope you know that we're all really happy that you and Melanie found each other." Melanie's mother whispered as she hugged him.

Sharan was awkwardly holding the lapdesk out of the way as he returned her hug with one arm and said, "I'm surprised to say that I do know that. Before meeting your family, I would not have believed it to be possible."

Melanie's mother kissed him on the cheek, then withdrew.

"Listen, son, Melanie's not the only one we want to hear from." Melanie's father said as he moved to take his turn hugging Sharan. "Write to us and let us know how you're doing."

"I will... try." Sharan said reluctantly, then added, "I'm not good with that sort of thing."

Melanie's father chuckled, then said, "Just do what you can."

Sharan nodded, then watched as Melanie's parents went through the same hugging ritual with Ryan and Khari.

He noticed that Janice and Melanie were whispering together and that Shish was looking at him, as though he wanted to say something.

As Sharan approached, Shish said, "Even though I know you weren't aware of what was going on with Janice, I still feel that I should thank you. I've

loved her for years as a dear friend, but if not for you, we might never have been able to be anything more to each other."

"I feel certain that before all is said and done, I will have cause to thank you as well. As close as Melanie and Janice seem to be, I feel certain that they will be sharing their experiences and anything that either of us does will end up impacting us both." Sharan said honestly.

Shish smiled, then said, "You remind me of how I was when I first started my career in Starfleet. There have been times when I have felt... isolated. If there's any way my years of experience can be of benefit to you, I hope that you will feel free to call on me. After all, it appears that we have quite a lot in common."

Sharan glanced over at the two women talking animatedly in hushed whispers, then looked back to Shish and said, "Yes, it appears that we do. Thank you."

"We'd better get going." Ryan said from the doorway.

Melanie gave Janice a firm hug and quick kiss before hurrying to Sharan's side.

With one last look around the family room, to imprint the scene on his memory, Sharan put his arm around Melanie and turned to leave.

* * * * *

As Troy walked into the barracks, Terry immediately asked, "How are you doing?"

"I had a good talk with my dad." Troy said with a peaceful smile as he walked to his bunk.

"I'm glad. He seemed like a really nice guy." Terry said honestly, from his place cuddled close to Valentine.

"He is. I just get the feeling that he's really unhappy." Terry said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. But there's not much you can do about that but be there for him if he needs you. Until he decides to make a change, nothing you can do is likely to help." Terry said frankly.

"I guess so." Troy said quietly, then added, "But I was thinking that if, maybe, I can show him what it's like to be happy, I can kind of be an example for him, so he'll know how it *can* be."

"Yeah. And even if he doesn't make a change, maybe it'll be enough for him to know that you've found happiness." Terry said honestly.

Troy nodded, then turned when the door opened.

"How are you doing, Mike?" Valentine asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Mike smiled and said, "Everything's fine."

Valentine smiled and nodded, obviously accepting the answer to be true.

* * * * *

Juan and Phillipa walked into the barracks, and were surprised to find that their classmates weren't already asleep.

"How was your Christmas?" Terry asked curiously.

"Perfect." Phillipa said as she cuddled close to Juan, then asked, "How was yours?"

Terry smiled, then said, "Well, I wouldn't call it 'perfect', but I'm glad I got to meet Troy's family. I've gained a whole new level of respect for Troy since I've met them."

"I can hear you." Troy said playfully from his bunk, where he was reading his padd.

"Yeah. Like I'm saying something that you don't already know." Terry said with a roll of his eyes.

"Thanks, Terry." Troy said quietly, then turned his attention back to his padd.

Terry smiled, then noticed that Juan and Phillipa were standing, holding each other and staring at the small Christmas tree.

He sat silently and watched them, appreciating the tranquility in that moment.

* * * * *

"Shhh. We don't want to wake them." Melanie whispered as she and Sharan crept into the barracks.

Valentine watched them walk into the room, arm in arm and smiled at the scene.

"Did you have a good Christmas?" Valentine asked as he sat up in his bunk.

"Go back to sleep, Val. I'm sorry we woke you." Melanie whispered.

"I wasn't asleep yet. How was your visit?" Valentine asked curiously.

"It was great." Melanie said quietly.

Valentine nodded, then looked at Sharan curiously.

"Mel has some... *interesting* relatives. But they were all very nice and I had a good time." Sharan finished carefully.

"You'll have to tell me all about it at breakfast." Valentine said warmly.

"Yes. Good night, Val." Sharan said in an uncharacteristically affectionate tone.

"Good night." Valentine said before lying back down on his bunk.

* * * * *

"Terry?" Valentine said in a voice that probably meant that it wasn't his first attempt to gain Terry's attention.

After a moment more of reading, Terry looked up from his padd and smiled at Val as he said, "Yeah? What's up, Val?"

"Do you still want to celebrate the calendar change holiday?" Valentine asked hesitantly.

Terry looked at the clock and was surprised at how late it was.

He stood suddenly as he said, "I'm sorry! I was studying and lost track of time! We still need to get our passes and arrange for transportation..."

Terry's litany of despair was cut off by Valentine's firm kiss.

The tension in Terry's body melted away as Valentine held him tightly.

Finally, Valentine pulled away enough to look Terry in the eyes.

"Is it too late?" Terry asked in a small voice.

"I have the passes in my pocket. And if we leave right now, a taxi should be waiting for us in front of the academy." Valentine said gently.

"I love you, Val." Terry declared, then lunged forward for a joyful kiss.

"You guys, go on and get out of here." Troy said from his bunk.

Valentine looked around the barracks, but was relieved to find that Troy was the only one who seemed to be aware of what he and Terry were doing. For a moment he had completely forgotten that they weren't alone.

"Come on, Big Guy." Terry said urgently as he took firm hold of Valentine's arm and pulled him toward the door.

"Have a good evening, and enjoy the celebration." Valentine said shyly to his young friend.

Troy grinned, then said, "Yeah. Happy New Year to you, too."

* * * * *

Things were a bit rushed, but Terry and Valentine eventually found their way to their hotel room.

Once they were secure in each other's arms, nothing else mattered.

"What's bothering you, Terry?" Valentine asked gently.

"Nothing. Everything's perfect." Terry said as he held Valentine a little tighter and rested his head against Valentine's massive chest.

"Something about this is causing you apprehension. I can't do anything to address your fear if I don't know what it is." Valentine said frankly.

After a long moment of silence, Terry finally said, "When we make love... I've never done that."

"I haven't either, Terry." Valentine whispered, then added, "But I've done considerable research on the subject. I know the things to do and have brought the supplies that we will most likely need."

"Wait. Is that what's in that shopping bag?" Terry asked suddenly.

"Yes. What did you think it was?" Valentine asked with a smile.

"I don't know. I didn't really think about it. I guess I had other things on my mind." Terry finished with a sultry look into Valentine's eyes.

"Before we proceed. There is a matter we have not discussed." Valentine said uncomfortably.

"What's got *you* worried, Big Guy?" Terry asked curiously.

"When a man and a woman make love, this isn't a concern. But between two men... I just don't want to assume..." Valentine trailed off with difficulty.

"I just kind of thought that you'd be the one making love to me." Terry said frankly.

Valentine absently nodded that he had heard.

Terry's look became distant for a moment, then he broke into a smile. Finally he said, "But how would you feel if I were the one to make love to you?"

"I think I would like that." Valentine said quietly.

Terry relaxed into their embrace, then slowly said, "I suppose we could try it both ways, so we'll both know what we each like best."

"That would be nice, too." Valentine said contentedly.

"Were you worried that I'd expect you to be 'the man' and take charge of everything?" Terry asked curiously.

"No. I don't think so." Valentine said slowly, then continued, "I know that you love me. I was concerned that you might be willing to forego your own pleasure to please me. I want for us to be equal."

"No matter what we do, it'll be because it's what we both want." Terry said as he pulled back slightly to look Val in the eyes. "Since neither of us have done this before, we're going to need to try things until we can find out what we both enjoy."

"That is acceptable." Valentine said with his best attempt at a 'Vulcan' expression.

Terry giggled, then said, "I'm hoping we can come up with something a little bit better than 'acceptable' before we're done."

Valentine released Terry from their hug, then allowed his hands to drift down Terry's sides, coming to rest on his waist.

"If we're done talking, I'm ready to show you how much I love you." Valentine whispered.

"Me, too." Terry said as he looked up into Valentine's dark eyes.

Slowly, Valentine took hold of Terry's long sleeved t shirt and pulled it up and off over his head.

As soon as Terry's hands were free, he took hold of the sash of Valentine's robe and untied it.

"You're so beautiful." Valentine whispered in awe.

Terry guided Valentine's tunic off his massive shoulders and allowed it to fall away.

"I think I'm starting to see why people celebrate the new year. I feel like we're beginning something new and wonderful." Terry said as he ran his hands over Valentine's firm chest.

Valentine moved in to give Terry a kiss filled with all the desire he was feeling.

Chapter 10

As Terry glanced at the bedside clock, he absently said, "We need to get back to the academy."

"I know." Valentine said as he drifted on a peaceful cloud of tranquility.

"I feel you in me." Terry said distantly.

"Was I too aggressive in my love making?" Valentine asked with concern.

"No... I mean, you were an animal. But I liked it." Terry grinned, then continued, "But what I was saying is that I feel you, like you're in my heart, like you're a part of me."

Valentine turned to look at Terry curiously and seemed to be searching for something in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" Terry asked with concern.

"I didn't think this was possible." Valentine gasped.

"What? What's wrong?" Terry asked as he reached up to soothe the worried look from Valentine's face.

"As I've told you before, I have very little telepathic ability." Valentine said cautiously.

"Yeah. Oh, you mean that what I'm feeling really *is* you inside of me?" Terry asked with a smile.

"Yes." Valentine whispered, then continued, "But it's something more than that."

"Oh? What is it? It's not a problem, is it?" Terry asked curiously.

"I'm not sure. I didn't think this could happen, so I didn't prepare you for this eventuality." Valentine said nervously.

"Just tell me what it is." Terry said gently.

"We've become bonded." Valentine said hesitantly.

Terry smiled, then said, "I don't know exactly what that is, but it sounds nice."

"It can be." Valentine said slowly, then added, "But, from what I've heard, dissolving the bond can be painful. I'm sorry, Terry. I never wanted to cause you pain."

"Why do you want to dissolve it?" Terry asked quietly.

"I don't really. But... we should. Otherwise, it becomes permanent and we will be bonded for life." Valentine said frankly.

"What's wrong with that?" Terry asked cautiously.

"I couldn't do that to you." Valentine said as tears welled in his eyes, then whispered, "Terry, you're such a beautiful person. You should be free to find someone worthy of your love. You shouldn't be bound to a genetically inferior throwback like me."

"You really mean that." Terry said with surprise.

"I love you, and I want what's best for you." Valentine said honestly.

Terry thought for a moment, then quietly responded, "What's best for me is to be with the person who loves me enough to let me go."

Valentine looked at Terry with confusion.

"I can feel, deep inside me, just how much you really do love me. I know how bad you want for the bond to become permanent. But you're still trying to convince me to let you go because you think it's for my own good." Terry said warmly, then added, "It just makes me love you that much more."

"So, does that mean that you want for us to maintain our bond?" Valentine asked cautiously.

"Yes, Val. I want you. Forever."

"There is one other thing you should know before you commit to this." Valentine said quietly. "Near the time of my twenty-first birthday, we will be instinctively drawn through our bond to be together. The blood fire, the *Plak Tow*, will compel us to come together to mate. And if we do not... we will die."

"Um, considering what we did last night, I don't think you'll have to threaten to kill me. An invitation is all it will take." Terry said with a grin.

"I'm serious, Terry. You need to understand the gravity of the situation before you commit to this." Valentine said imploringly.

"Okay. I've got it, Big Guy." Terry said quietly. "And I'm not worried about it at all. I love you and I will always love you. We'll just be sure to be together before your twenty-first birthday... when is that, anyway?"

"Nearly two years away." Valentine said quietly.

"Well, then we'll just make sure to both be posted to the same ship or starbase before it happens." Terry said frankly.

"Thank you, Terry." Valentine said as he pulled Terry into a firm hug.

"I love you, Val. So it's no problem." Terry said affectionately.

"You seem to have a way of making my most impossible dreams come true." Valentine whispered.

"I'm glad." Terry said gently, then added, "Because having you is better than anything I ever dreamed of."

Valentine and Terry's bond seemed to pour strength and serenity into both of them. For the first time, neither of them felt alone.

* * * * *

After what seemed like a month of relentless, solid worry, work and study, the final exam day finally came.

The test was every bit as challenging as any of the others had been, and the group of friends waited just outside the classroom as each finished, as had become their habit.

"How do you think you did?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"I had three on-the-spot oral essays and *five* practical demonstrations." Valentine said in a daze.

"And?" Melanie prompted.

"And." Valentine said as he broke into a smile, "I think I did well on all of them."

"As did I." Sharan announced as he approached from the opposite direction.

"Did any of you have anyone special on your panel of judges?" Melanie asked curiously.

"I had Admiral Hanson again." Valentine said with a chuckle.

"Don't tell me..." Melanie snickered.

"What?" Juan asked in confusion.

"When Valentine has to speak in front of people, he imagines them naked." Melanie said with a wide grin.

"I no longer do that." Valentine quickly assured. "However, the mental image of Admiral Hanson seems to be indelibly etched into my mind. I may need a trained Vulcan telepath to rid me of it."

"How did everyone else do?" Sharan asked curiously.

"So far, we're all good." Terry said frankly.

"We're just waiting on Mike and Troy." Phillipa said as she hugged close to Juan's side.

"Cadet Crewman Valaan, Cadet Crewman Sharan, please report to room 112." a female voice said over the public address system.

Sharan and Valentine looked at each other with question, both thinking the same thing, but neither wanting to voice it.

"Room 112 is Commander De Gama's office." Phillipa said in a whisper.

"Let's go, Valentine. It's either very good news, or very bad." Sharan said reasonably.

"Considering that there are two of us, it could be both." Valentine said quietly.

"Good luck." Melanie said as she pulled Sharan into a tight hug.

"I love you, big guy." Terry whispered as he hugged Valentine with something beyond average Human strength.

"It will be fine." Valentine said as he returned the hug, then whispered in Terry's ear, "I love you, too... Forever."

"We don't want to keep the Commander waiting." Sharan said as he reluctantly released Melanie.

Valentine nodded as he let go of Terry and stepped to Sharan's side.

They walked down the hallway, side by side, both apprehensive and wondering what it could possibly mean.

* * * * *

Sharan and Valentine walked into room 112 and were immediately ushered into Commander De Gama's office by his secretary.

"Would you like to do this separately?" Commander De Gama asked as the two cadets stood at attention before him.

"No sir. I don't mind if Sharan is here." Valentine said quietly.

Commander De Gama looked at Sharan with question.

"I would prefer if Val stayed, he is my friend." Sharan said frankly.

"As you like." Commander De Gama said simply, then directed his full attention to Sharan and said, "From the choices of course studies you've made, it seems that you're doing an 'all or nothing' gamble."

"Yes sir." Sharan said as he kept his head held high, trying to hide his anxiety.

"I would never advise a cadet to make that choice, but in your case it seems to have paid off. The captain of the Potemkin happens to have need of a communications technician with your unique skills. He reviewed your transcript and requested that you be assigned to him as soon as you're eligible." Commander De Gama said as a smile broke through his professional expression. "I assume that you would be interested in that assignment."

"Yes sir. Thank you sir." Sharan said, fighting to contain his excitement.

Commander De Gama's smile seemed to change as he looked at Valentine. The smile spoke of uncertainty.

"Cadet Valaan, I'm sure that you are aware that although you are technically eligible for Starfleet service, you don't qualify for any specific posting in Engineering." Commander De Gama said seriously.

"Yes sir." Valentine said bravely, not able to guess what point Commander De Gama was working toward.

"Fortunately, test scores aren't the only criteria that you are judged on." Commander De Gama said carefully and seemed to be trying to phrase his statement very precisely.

"This request did not come to me through the normal channels." Commander De Gama said slowly, as if he were reluctant to continue. "My daughter was on shore leave during the holidays, and she mentioned that her department is under-staffed."

"She wasn't actually asking for me to send a cadet as much as she was expressing her concern that a new addition to their department might cause problems. Apparently they've developed an exceptional team, but they're short a few key people. She was saying that she's worried that the new people might come in and disrupt the dynamic that they've established." Commander De Gama said slowly.

"I've had exit interviews with each of the cadets who went through training with you. They have told me, without exception, what a good, decent, conscientious, hard working person you are. Their admiration for you was a factor in my recommending your placement."

"Cadet Crewman Valaan, you technically meet the absolute minimum requirements for the job. And from the way my daughter speaks of her commanding officer and co-workers, they will be happy to go out of their way to help you learn anything that you failed to pick up during your time at the academy." Commander De Gama said carefully.

Valentine looked at Commander De Gama with disbelief and fought to hear the Commander's words over the pounding of his own pulse.

"Congratulations Cadet Crewman Valaan. You have been assigned to Deflector Control on the USS Yorktown."

THE END