

***"Sempre Dolcissimo Cantabile"***  
**(Always Sweetly Singing)**

THE INFINITY SERIES

i

*Author: D. Sanders*

=====

Crispin Tinks, or just "Tinks" as the small starfreighter crew called their communications officer laid his headset down on his console and stretched turning to their Captain as his bones popped and he groaned. He smiled brightly, his jovial nature and prankster ways both endearing and annoying to his Captain and fellow shipmates. "So, how long are we gonna be planet bound?" He asked, a hint of mischief in his voice.

"Until this shipment is picked up." Captain Eran Callum replied eyeing Tinks with a warning look over his shoulder. "Do not get arrested."

"Come on Boss, I ain't that bad." Tinks laughed standing to continue his stretch.

"No you're worse." First Officer and co-pilot Enjoe Moira said as he exited the command bridge.

Tinks just flipped him off, Enjoe was gruff and blunt as always.

"He's right Tinks, don't get in trouble. I don't want to be here long. I hate this planet." Eran said not moving from his chair and pulling out a cigarette from his vest pocket.

"Weren't you born here? Don't you want to see your family?" Tinks asked, his mysterious captain kept most of his history a secret, all Tinks knew was he had been born on Pirotaine and that was the extent that anyone knew about their kind, but melancholy tight lipped Captain.

"I have no family."

"I'm sorry Eran."

"Don't be. It's been a long time since I've been back here, I'd rather not stay long. This place has bad memories for me." Eran said taking a long drag of his cigarette, his eyes ghostly haunted with sorrow.

"I know it's none of my business Eran, but..."

"You don't want to know my past Tinks. It's not pleasant."

"I do actually. You're my best Friend and I know Fuck all about you, other than I've known you going on ten years when you picked me up off the streets of Mirastor and I've not seen you change even a hair in all that time. You look human but you certainly don't age like one. I was a kid, I now look the same age as you do."

"And you'll be old and dead and dust and I'll still look like this. I can't die. Believe me, I've tried."

That was certainly more information than Tinks had ever gotten out of Eran even if it did sound ludicrous. "Right. Immortal Eran? I'm serious."

"So am I."

"Alright Eran. Enough of this bullshit, just who are you?"

Eran turned to face him and Tinks was almost knocked out his chair by the weight of misery in Eran's eyes. "Who am I? You really want my Story Tinks?"

Tinks reached out and laid his hand on top of Eran's forearm where it rested on his leg. "I love you like a brother, you practically raised me. Tell me, please."

Eran nodded, Tinks was right if anyone deserved the whole truth, it was Tinks. He has taken in that strange unruly twelve-year-old kid and became an older brother of sorts. Tinks was always there to alleviate the hell he lived in, he should know it all, from the beginning.

"How old do you think I am?"

That was a strange way to start Tinks mused and shrugged. "Ten years ago I would have said 'my age' now? I've no clue."

"One-hundred and eighty give or take a year or two."

Tinks jaw was resting somewhere in the vicinity of his chest. "B-b-but you're human. We don't live that long."

"I am human, I know that. Something happened here, I don't know what, but I should be dead. Literally. I had my whole chest blown off and it just grew back. That's when I learned I couldn't die. That was during the Tsionic Wars."

"Wait a minute. You mean THE TSIONIC WARS?"

"There was only one of those." Eran gave Tinks a sardonic look and Tinks frowned.

"Okay, sorry go on."

"I was your age, for real. I grew up in the Capitol and I'd had enough of filth, I'd always wanted to see the country so I went." Eran began lighting up another cigarette as the previous one burned away in the ashtray.

"I was twenty, hardly more than a rowdy street brawling kid, like you would have been had I not gotten you out of there. I went from town to town, gambling, working odd jobs, and not settling anywhere, just wandering around really. I did that for a couple of years, then..." Eran's breath hitched involuntarily, whatever he was going to say next was still highly emotional for him.

"Then I met... God I haven't told anyone this before." Eran's eyes were glassy and as he closed them a tear ran down his cheek.

"I think I can guess here." Tinks sighed, so the ever stony and celibate Eran did have a softer side buried under all the stoic certainty.

"You'd not even be close to imagining the perfection if you were to guess." Eran said wiping his tear and looking away at something only he could see. "It was the voice that drew me into that small tavern. So bright, so clear... I've never heard anyone before or since who sang like that. It was like a siren calling to me and I sat there for hours just listening and staring like a lovesick idiot."

"Was she pretty?"

Eran turned and cocked an eyebrow. "HE was beautiful."

"Well seeing as I don't ever see you look at either sex, ever, sue me for assuming. It's not like you advertise your sexual preferences."

"I have no preferences anymore. I died when I lost him."

"What happened?"

"What didn't? I stayed in that tiny town; I sat in that tavern every night drooling into my brew and shoes. I stayed waiting outside for him one night when I couldn't take it anymore, and he came out and smiled at me and I'll never forget it he just turned to me and said 'took you long enough handsome.'" Here Eran chuckled at the memory, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

"Busted?"

"Yes. He had remarkably keen perception. Thank Goodness."

"What happened?"

"The best year of my life. He was and is and will always be the love of my life. I cannot and could not replace him if I tried." Eran sighed stubbing out his cigarette.

"What was his name?"

Eran just smiled sadly and shook his head it hurt too much to say. "Now you know why I want to leave as soon as possible. I lost him during that war and I must live an eternity without him, this place is my hell. Now go on Tinks, go have some fun."

"What will you do? I don't think you should be alone." Tinks was concerned, Eran had opened up more than he had ever done in the past, it seemed cruel to leave him alone in his sorrow.

"I'll be fine Tinks. I prefer to be alone when I'm in a mood like this." With that statement, Eran stood and headed back to his cabin. Leaving Tinks to watch him walk away.

"Now I understand. I'll never give you a hard time about being miserable again. No wonder." Tinks sighed grabbing his coat and heading out to hit the local bar and get a stiff drink. He needed one after that story.

Eran returned to his cabin unsure why he had told Tinks so much. It was probably because Tinks reminded him a little of himself at times, the man he used to be. Before the war he had been carefree and fun loving before the weight of the world dropped on his shoulders and his spirit had been crushed.

He crossed the room to his desk and opened a small box that sat atop it, he took a small disk from within and put it in a now ancient player and tentatively pressed, "play".

*"Eran stop it."*

*"I'll stop if you make the damn recording."*

*"You hear me sing every day. Why on earth do you want this?"*

*"Because I want it. Sing for me gorgeous."*

*"You're already recording!"*

*"I know! Play already damn it!"*

*"Alright! Alright! Goodness gracious you can be demanding."*

*"But you love me."*

*"I do."*

Eran lay down as he listened to the old recording. He missed Beau terribly, every day seemed an eternity and with an actual eternity to go without him, Eran wept alone into his pillow another piece of his soul irrevocably destroyed.

He had given Tinks just a glimpse of the truth, the actual details that comprised the whole story he'd never share with anyone. They were precious memories of a life that had held such promise in his youth and as he listened to Beau sing, he wept as he reached back into his memory to reminisce on happier times.

Beau had been eighteen and totally naïve to his own charm. He was captivating with whimsical charisma, so handsome it should have been illegal to walk around looking that beautiful and without a doubt had a voice that reached into souls and could make you weep or cry for joy with the majesty he projected in a brilliant tenor. He'd had such remarkable power of voice contained in such a small package. The sheer size of the voice was at odds with the size of the man. Beau had blown people away when he opened his lips to sing. No one expected the petite young man to have such control and projection. What he lacked in physical stature, he made up for with the majesty of his vocal prowess.

Eran had wooed him like a man possessed. It didn't take too long before Eran had Beau neatly molded like clay in his hands and it was during one eventful and wonderfully timed Spring Rain Storm that Eran had made love to him for the first time.

They were walking through a field, holding hands, on their way back from the Spring Festival when the downpour hit and they dashed into one of the myriad of caves that dotted the craggy mountain face. A huge interlocking catacomb, like some large colony of ants had made a nest in the rock and then abandoned it to mother nature.

They had picked the first entrance they came to and huddled inside, laughing and drenched to the bone. Eran started a fire near the entrance and they hung their clothes up to dry while they waited for the rain to subside.

Youth, privacy, love and hormonal desires soon got the better of them and kisses turned to touches and touches turned into caresses and before either of them realized what was happening they were devouring each other with moans and sighs. They made love right there on the cave floor in a bed of moss that clung to their damp skin and hair where they thrashed in it in the throws of passion and first time awkwardness.

It was much later that evening, after the rain had stopped and they awoke from napping they noticed what a mess they were. The moss had left a residue on their skin like a fine dust, and they were covered in it, it was in their mouths, their hair, on their skin, and in other places unmentionable.

The ever-fastidious Beau had been mortified and it had taken days to wash off completely. Needless to say, he had never let Eran make love to him again in the outdoors. Beau had a personal hygiene fetish; the youth was never dirty, ever.

Eran, the rotten youth he had been back then, took great delight in tormenting Beau over it.

How he'd give anything to have Beau smack him with a pillow again when he became frustrated with him.

Gone. All gone.

They had lived together in Beau's small one room dwelling almost a year, when they had been awakened by a loud roaring boom. They had rushed out to see Tsions everywhere, crawling over everything, shooting anything that fought back.

He and Beau stood in horror as everything around them burned and screams of agony filled the air. The women and the children were being herded into containers and Beau ran for his sister, Eran right behind him when he felt the burning in his chest.

He saw the terror in Beau's eyes as he fell.

Beau screaming his name sobbing and pleading in gut wrenching painful cries of sheer torment and loss, then silence.

All sound had ceased; he saw blood all over Beau's hands and face, his blood. He saw his chest torn open; he saw rage in his Beau's eyes and then darkness.

He awoke alone in a sea of dead bodies and the burning stench of charred human flesh.

He himself, not a scratch marred his frame. He would have thought himself mad had the state of his clothing not shown he had indeed been ripped apart by a TSION blaster rifle.

He stumbled across the remains of his town calling for Beau and looking at every body to find him, seeing friends and loved ones dead, but no Beau. The town was deserted, those he could not identify as corpses were gone as if they had never existed.

His journey of revenge and hatred had begun that day. Survivors of the TSION attack banded together and it had taken fifty years but finally the Tsions lost and the slave camps emptied of its human and other races.

He had never found Beau. Had he lived he would now be long dead from old age.

Eran lived on and faded from military glory. Now he was just Captain Eran Callum, trader and smuggler. He had Tinks for communication encryption, Enjoe for navigation and his second in command, Mandala for accounts and in charge of the crew's health and wellness, and Farin for engineering and maintenance. His crew was small, dedicated, talented and all of them he had picked up in his travels as youth's on the wrong side of the law.

And none of them asked questions. Except for Tinks and even then if told 'no' Tinks knew when not to press.

The recording ended and Eran got up to put the disk away to keep it safe. It was all that had survived the destruction of his life and it was his most precious possession. It was all he had left of Beau and his heart.

Eran took a hot shower to purge his sorrow then laid down to sleep until his patrons came to pick up their cargo and they could get off this forsaken rock.

-----

Tinks wandered the spaceport district, his mood dour and thoughtful. His best friend was living a nightmare and he was powerless to help. He sighed as he headed into the first tavern he came to and went straight to the bar and ordered a shot and had the bartender leave the bottle.

"You look depressed. Careful not to drown it too badly in booze, it never helps." A light voice beside him said, nursing his own bottle of brew. Tinks looked up to see a youthful and handsome profile under a thick, wild mane of curly and wavy sandy blond hair.

"It helps enough and they aren't my problems handsome, they belong to someone else I wish I could help." Tinks replied and the blond turned to look at him a sad smile on his face.

"You sound like a good friend if you care about him so much."

"Yeah, I owe him my life really. I just wish I could help."

"Some things are beyond our control and all we can do is watch the world change around us, powerless to alter it's course." The blond said again finishing his beer and tossing a chip on the counter before standing to leave the bar.

"Where you going handsome? Stay a while?" Tinks asked intrigued by the youth's words and his even more comforting countenance. He was angelic to behold, but the blond only smiled at him.

"I have work to do. Besides, as much as you remind me of someone I used to know, I can't I'm sorry."

"You married?"

"I was once."

"You don't look old enough."

"You'd be surprised." The blond began to walk away and Tinks took his hand the blond tenderly disengaged his hand and pressed a disk into it. "I cannot give you anything but a song."

Tinks looked down at the music disk in his hand confused and when he looked back up, the blond was gone. But not for long, the crowd cheered as the young man took his place on stage guitar in hand and began to sing.

Tinks sat transfixed like the rest of the crowd listening to pure magic, his sorrows being drowned out by liquor and song. He was halfway through his bottle when a hand gripped his shoulder. Tinks looked up into the steel blue eyes of Enjoe. "Hey Jo-Jo whaddya know?"

"You're drunk."

"Yes I am."

"We're leaving."

"Spoil sport. You never let me have fun."

Enjoe grunted and just tugged Tinks out of his seat and dragged him out of the bar. "Oh I just love it when you're all commanding." Tinks laughed drunk and totally oblivious to Enjoe's expression.

"Just... Never mind." Enjoe sighed as they reached the ship and he deposited a very drunk Tinks in his room and left him to sleep it off. Tinks flopped into bed, clothes and all and Enjoe left with a sigh. Mandala was just leaning against the wall, arms crossed across her chest.

"Ya know Joe. You might want to tell him you love him."

"Mind your own business Mandy." Enjoe barked, his hard eyes and handsome face a blank mask over his pain as always.

"Whatever, suffer then. He's not gonna ever know the way you treat him sometimes."

"Don't you have something to do?" Enjoe said going into his own cabin and shutting the door.

"Already done it tight ass." Mandala said going back into her cabin; Farin was snoring away where he had dozed off with a book on the bed. She nudged him awake for dinner and sat complaining to him about Eran and Enjoe's terminal moodiness. Enjoe's easy to cure if he only would do something about he crush he had on Tinks and no one knew Eran's secrets, he never told anyone anything other than what to do. Nothing personal was ever divulged.

Farin let her chatter without offering opinion on the matter.

-----

Eran awoke feeling miserable. He had dreamt of Beau and of the day they had stood in the town center hand in hand, dressed in white robes as the town shaman had tied their hands together with a strip of red silk ribbon. Binding them together as partners in life, husband to husband. The silk symbolizing their spiritual connection that would never be broken, the vows of love they had said before their friends and family still as vivid as if they had been spoken but a day before.

They'd been bound as one a very short time, but the love had spanned a lifetime. Eran still wore the ring Beau had given him around his neck on a chain and had never taken it off in over One hundred and fifty years.

Eran finger combed his thick dark brown hair, he'd gone to sleep with it wet and it was knotted and snarled from a fitful sleep. "Even after all these years, I can't let you go." Eran sighed as he dressed and went to find himself something to eat.

He heard Tinks snoring in a drunken stupor in his cabin, Mandy was chattering with Farin in their rooms, Enjoe was being quiet as usual, and the gallery was blissfully vacant as he made some strong coffee and chain smoked as he drank and munched on whatever was handy and didn't require preparation.

Their clients came, the cargo was unloaded and Eran was already going over plans for their next mission perimeters with Enjoe in the main living area at the game table when Tinks wandered in wearing nothing but his pants, his long hair, that was usually braided was undone and falling in waves down his back. He wore a pair of headphones, listening to something as he disappeared into the galley in search of something to fill the bottomless pit he called a stomach.

Enjoe's eyes just followed and Eran shook his head. "You do realize staring gets you nowhere."

"Not you too. I get enough from Mandy thanks."

"She's right you know."

"Fuck off Eran."

Eran just lit a cigarette and shrugged. "Your loss. What do you know of the Shanta cluster?"

Enjoe, glad to be back on topic scratched his chin. "Other than it's nothing but one red light district after another? Not much. Why?"

"I got a message, forty crates of Shanta Lace for New Beruna."

"That could get us arrested in fifty jurisdictions. New Beruna has an embargo against all shipments from Shanta, hell most planets have an embargo against Shanta."

"Its just booze."

"And only the most potent aphrodisiac ever made."

"Demand is high."

"And if you drink too much it could kill you."

"But what a way to go eh?"

"I worry about you sometimes Eran." Enjoe said as Tinks walked back into the room a hunk of bread hanging out of his mouth and coffee mug in hand. He flopped down next to Enjoe at the table.

"So where are we off to next?"

"We're still debating." Enjoe grumbled Tinks shrugged, used to Enjoe's monosyllabic responses to him. He had no clue why Enjoe hated him so much, it hurt, but he'd never let it show. Enjoe talked to everyone but him, he'd grown accustomed to his cold shoulder.

"It's either the Shanta job or weapons for the Zaran Mafia."

"Jesus don't we ever get nice jobs where I don't have to encrypt communication out the wazoo so the federation don't arrest us? Why can't we transport the occasional benign cargo?" Tinks grumbled.

"Where's the adventure in that?" Eran said tapping Tinks' headset. "What did you pick up?"

"I tried picking up a hot blond in a bar, all I got was this disk for my efforts. He's damn good though, wanna hear?"

Tinks passed the headphones over and as Eran settled the headset over his ears. Tinks hit play and he watched Eran turn a ghostly pale, his eyes haunted and his whole body began to shake. He ripped the headphones off in a fury.

"That's not fucking funny Tinks! Where did you get that?"

"I told you. Some blond dude gave it to me."

"IMPOSSIBLE! No one could know that song!"

"Um, mind telling me what you're angry about? I'm telling you the truth."

Eran ran to his room and came back with his player and disk and hit play, the same song played on a very old home recording – in the very same voice.

"You cleaned that up! When did you steal my disk?"

"I'm telling you the truth Eran! I never tampered with that, I didn't even know you had something that ancient."

Eran looked faint. "It can't be. That song, I have the only copy."

"Care to elaborate?" Tinks said as the old recording continued.

"Tinks, that song was written for me."

"I swear on my life Eran. I never touched your disk. I'm good, I'm not that good, that disk has got to be about as old as you are, I don't have that sort of equipment to restore something that old and faded."

"Take me to that bar." Eran said still shaking and pale. Tinks got dressed and the Trio set out for the Tavern.

As they walked Enjoe leaned over to Tinks. "How old is he? Did he tell you?" Asked softly his curiosity getting the better of him.

Tinks smirked. "So now you decide to talk to me? Not my secret to share I'm afraid." Tinks answered ending the conversation. Enjoe looked too stunned to reply, the hurt in Tinks voice was evident. He had never intended to hurt Tinks; he just never knew what to say.

He'd have to ponder it later; they were back at the tavern and Eran looked too afraid to go inside.

Eran closed his eyes, saying a silent prayer as he stepped into the dark room filled with people, liquor, gambling and smoke.

-----

The Lotorainian Woman on the stage dancing topless was not what Eran had hoped to see and he scanned the multitude of men and women of all races that were packed in like sardines in search of anything even remotely blond.

Nothing.

He felt deflated and empty; he had stopped daring to hope years ago for this very same reason. He felt cold and numb as he shut down emotionally and fell into an empty barstool. The bartender walked over and Eran ordered a shot and downed it in one gulp as it burned its way down his throat.

"Another." Eran said slamming down his glass to have it filled again.

"What's eatin' ya Captain?"

"Mind your business and pour." Eran grumbled as Tinks and Enjoe found him.

"Hey barkeep! The singer here this afternoon, where is he?" Tinks asked as he got within earshot.

"Kid that's an open floor, I don't pay performers, they work off tips. There's a different performer there every five minutes."

"Come on man, it's important. Is he here often?"

"Which one? They're all here often."

"Blond, easy on the eyes, even better on the ears."

The bartender seemed to think a moment. "I'm sorry I can't help you unless you want to get drunk."

"I hate this rock. Too many ghosts." Eran said finishing a fourth shot before shoving his way toward the door. He was almost out the door when he stopped dead in his tracks. His back was to the stage and a voice made his feet stop cold.

*What did you see in me to make you pause that night?  
Was it a spell I cast unaware?  
Was it a love at first sight?*

*What did I see in you to make me want to sing all night?  
Did you cast a spell on me unaware?  
Was it a love at first sight?*

*The days go by, the nights go by  
And you are always there.  
The Days go by, the Nights go by  
And I am always here.*

*Love like flowers bloomed that spring and two were one at night.  
By summer's end I wore your ring  
It was love at first sight.*

*Through autumn's chill I held you close and kept you warm at night.  
Long winter nights you loved me well.  
It was love at first sight.*

*The days go by, the nights go by  
And you are always there.  
The Days go by, the Nights go by  
And I am always here.*

*The days go by, the nights go by  
And you are always there.  
The Days go by, the Nights go by  
And I am always here.*

*I am always here...*

*I am always here...*

Eran has turned halfway through his song, and he stood there awash in a voice he had never dreamed he'd hear again. He stood there drinking in the beauty of the man on the stage, not a single hair had changed and his handsome head. He fell in love at first sight all over again. He was crying rivers of silent tears as he weaved his way closer to the stage, under a spell of unbelievable joy.

Tinks had unconsciously taken Enjoe's hand as he bounced with anticipation. "What the hell is wrong with Eran? Who is that?"

"Eran's Husband I think."

"What?! Eran's not married!"

"Yes he is. What the hell do you think that ring around his neck is?"

"That kid is younger than you, we'd have like noticed Eran getting married over the past decade!"

"Joe you are so blind. Have you not noticed Eran never gets older while WE DO?"

Enjoe just turned to look at Tinks. "Come to think of it, you're right."

"The light bulb finally comes on. Welcome to reality Enjoe. Eran's a hell of a lot older than he looks and the blond bombshell there I suspect is just as old."

"You and I will talk later."

"Joe... really I've already said too much, it's for Eran to tell not me. Just watch, this is gonna curl toes better than Shanta Lace I'd wager." Tinks said turning his attention back to Eran who made it to the stage just as the last notes faded.

The singer had his eyes closed and as he opened them he blanched as if he had seen a ghost.

"Beau, my beautiful Beau." Eran's voice was choked as he lifted his arms.

Beau dropped his guitar and it clattered to the floor as he fell into those arms off the stage with a cry of orgasmic and unfettered joy. "ERAN! ERAN!"

Frantic kisses fell everywhere and gut-wrenching sobs were cried and followed by desperate arms reaching, grasping and holding tightly to the phantom before them in fear and longing.

"How?" Eran finally managed to ask as he cupped Beau's face in his hands.

"I spent a long time figuring that out and I'll tell you much later." Beau said leaning over to breathe into Eran's ear. "Other things first, my love."

Eran's grin looked almost feral as they made a mad dash toward the door.

"What the hell? When does Eran grin like that?"

"When he's about to get laid obviously. Really Joe, you're such a smart guy, but so dense." Tinks teased laughing and wiping a tear from his eye. "God that was beautiful."

"Closet romantic Tinks?"

"I'm well out of the closet thanks." Tinks replied turning and leaving Enjoe at the bar. He sort of felt bad for Enjoe the man was obviously harboring emotions in there somewhere, too bad they were buried under such a harsh demeanor. Given half the chance Tinks would more than oblige the First officer's fancies. He'd had a crush on the handsome co-pilot since he hit puberty. Enjoe was just a few years older, but those few years had seemed a lot larger a gap ten years ago. Now? Now it was too late, Enjoe hated his guts, never talked to him unless it was about Eran or giving orders, or to just plain insult him for reasons known only to Enjoe.

Tinks was off to go sulk for a while alone. He was thrilled for Eran, his own love life sucked. He was in love with someone who despised him; it hurt too much to think about, he needed to get some fresh air.

-----

Eran played idly with a silken strand of wavy spun gold where a sated youth used his sweaty chest as a pillow. "I can't believe any of this. You're a phantom of my imagination from being back on this rock."

Beau just reached down and squeezed Eran's equally sated sex making him hiss with the gentle assault on his still overly sensitive flesh from their lovemaking. "That feel real enough for you?"

Eran chuckled as Beau shifted to lay propped up on his elbow where they were stretched out in Eran's rumped bed. "Still so handsome." Beau said breathlessly brushing hair from Eran's face, looking deeply into Eran's violet blue hued eyes. In all his years, he'd never met anyone with that unique shade. Eran to this day had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen despite the fact he was more than a little biased on the subject. "I knew you were alive." Beau breathed still overwhelmed by Eran's return.

"How? You saw me blown to bits. I didn't come to until after the bastards were gone." Eran asked lacing his fingers through Beau's and kissing each knuckle.

"At first I just suspected that first month after I was taken. My gut feelings especially when I couldn't suicide and I tried probably a dozen times or more." Beau sighed and Eran's hand clutched tighter. "I was more than emotionally dead, life without you in a prison internment camp was not how I wanted to live and I was stuck with it with no escape."

"I looked for you. For years I looked." Eran pulled his husband close and clutched him to his chest. He knew the horrors he must have endured in the Tsion camps. He dared not linger on such heart shattering thoughts, not in this moment of loving reunion with his beloved Beau.

"I know you did. Sometimes we got word of the war on the inside. I heard about 'the crazy, fearless, Eran Callum who could not die no matter how many times the Tsions blew him up.' It didn't take long for me to put two and two together seeing as I couldn't die either."

"What the fuck happened to us?"

"I spent fifty years in that camp with nothing but time to THINK about that. The only suspicion I had was... do you remember that cave? The one we made love in the first time?"

Eran nodded "I was just thinking of that earlier, we made a mess in that... THE MOSS! The DUST!"

Beau smiled. "That's what I love about you, you're so smart." Beau kissed the end of Eran's nose and continued.

"After you liberated the camps, I tried finding you. You just up and disappeared and no one knew or could tell me where you had gone. So I came home. I began to study the moss. It wasn't the moss though, I learned that the moss was just the living host; it was the dust, only it wasn't dust. You and I my love have been 'colonized' for lack of a better description. They're like mites, little microscopic workers living off us and our cell tissues and keeping alive by keeping US alive."

"Can we get rid of them?"

"No. You and I are stuck like this I am afraid. They have taken over our infrastructure, we are one big colony of little, tiny, ugly bugs."

"Shit."

"Funny I said that too when I figured it out about eighty years ago. It took me another twenty years but I scrubbed those caves clean, I have all the mites from the entire cave network that didn't infest us and were still in the caves contained. First chance I get..."

"We'll dump them in Deep Space. No fucker should have to deal what we have to."

"Precisely. I see we still think on the same wavelength after being apart so long." Beau said nestling closer to Eran where they lay talking.

"Can you answer why just you and I are infected?"

"I can actually. We ingested them. They tend to work their way into living organisms and become a part of the whole, just walking over the moss, as most people did, would not allow them inside

the body. They will leave shoes and even skin, too many dead cells on the outer epidermis for their liking, they'd bugger off shoes and skin for the grass you're walking on instead. I tested several theories. How we got infected was easy to deduce after I exhausted my testing and ideas. Simple conclusion, we pulverized the moss hosting them with our antics, and then we slept in the mess we made. Not only did we inhale the little bastards, we swallowed some, and I'm positive a few got into other regions I'd rather not mention."

"So in other words, one big fucking accident."

"Bingo. An accident I hope won't ever be repeated. I have them all in a nice sealed container currently living off algae in the controlled environment. It's buried in the cave for now in a big titanium box." Beau said stretching and popping joints in the process.

"Haven't you ever left this planet?"

"How? I had to hitch a ride home in the first place. I have no ship, I'm still a hand to mouth starving musician and I don't trust anyone to ask them to take me into deep space so I can jettison out a fountain of youth. Too many questions and the thought of them landing into the wrong hands..." Here Beau paused with a shudder "...I just kept them hidden waiting for you."

"Sorry I took so long. I hated coming here, I never left the spaceport when I did, I thought I'd lost you and this place just only served to remind me what I lost or rather THOUGHT I had lost And I am not letting you go again. I hope you're not too attached to this rock." Eran said leaning in for a deep kiss.

Beau smiled as their lips parted. "No. The only thing I'm attached to is you. I'm going where you go. My home is with you Eran and I knew if I put your song out there with enough people you'd eventually hear it and come pick me up."

"You have always been clever as fox."

"I had to outwit you, that's hard to do." Beau chuckled as his stomach rumbled from hunger. "I hope you will feed me."

"With my cooking?"

"You still can't cook huh?"

"Nope."

Beau sighed and laughed as he stood and stretched. "Where's the galley then?"

Eran pulled on his pants and began to lead the way when Beau paused and fingered the ring on the chain hanging from Eran's neck.

"Mind putting that back on?" He asked and Eran smiled and tugged the chain free and slipped the ring back on his finger.

"I was afraid of losing it during the wars. And by the time they were over, seeing it on my finger hurt, so I kept you closer to my heart instead. I've never taken it off." Eran said happily twisting it on his finger.

"I hid mine too while I was in the camp so they wouldn't take it from me. I understand. Afterwards I needed it desperately to remind me you were out there somewhere." Beau replied looking at his fondly.

Eran took Beau's hand and kissed the ring and still clutching that hand led his husband toward the galley to feed their rumbling stomachs.

-----

Both men just dressed in pants, barefooted and shirtless rummaged through the galley for something to quiet the hunger, Eran pausing occasionally to rub up behind Beau suggestively.

"Didn't I tell you before the kitchen is off limits? People eat in here."

"After a hundred and sixty years give or take I think it slipped my mind."

"Lying sack of shit." Beau chuckled shoving a pickle in Eran's mouth. "Suck on that instead you horny bastard."

"Can you blame me? I've been celibate for a century and a half and you're hot as ever."

Beau turned around and winked. "Later love, as much as I want to see you naked and sweaty again in the very near and I do mean VERY NEAR future, I need food now." Beau said popping an olive in his mouth.

Eran was chuckling and starting a pot of Coffee when Mandala walked in and just stopped in her tracks. Not only was Eran smiling and laughing, he had obviously just crawled out of bed and had someone with him who also looked as if he had crawled from the same bed. "What the hell?"

Beau smiled as Eran turned around to grin, GRIN at her. She knew Eran had finally gone psychotic. "Mandy, this is my husband Beau. Beau this is our medical officer and all around great woman, Mandala Corcoran. Tell me you've come to cook Mandy."

"HUSBAND? Since fucking when?"

"What date is it on Pirotaine?" Eran asked Beau who grinned as he began fixing a sandwich.

"Auger the thirteenth, 4675."

"Really? Hey tomorrow is..."

"I know."

"Hello? I asked a question here!" Mandy said seeing as the two men in the galley were distracted, making sickening doe-eyes at each other and totally catching her off her guard.

"Sorry Mandy. We were married on Auger the Fourteenth, 4515; tomorrow will be our One-Hundred and Sixtieth anniversary. Jesus Christ I turned a hundred and eighty-two last month. I lost count."

"WHAT THE HELL?" Mandy fell into a chair, eyes wide as saucers and jaw agape.

Beau shook his head. "Should I tell her or do you want to?"

Eran smiled "I'll fill her in and catch her up to speed. Fix me one of those too please? I'm starving." Beau nodded pulling out more bread acting totally non-pulsed as Eran gave Mandy the condensed version of their lives from beginning to current events as Beau continued making cucumber sandwiches.

"I always wished you'd open up more about your past, be careful what you wish for Mandy. Holy hell. Coming from anyone other than you I'd not believe a damn word." Mandala gasped reaching for the coffee, she needed something stronger, but coffee was handy.

Beau set Eran's sandwich in front of him on the table and sat beside him reaching across the table to take Mandy's hand. "I know it ludicrous to hear, but it's true and a hard secret to keep."

"I can imagine. Wow. Welcome aboard I guess is in order and like Eran, I'll never see you for medical reasons I suppose."

Beau smiled. "Healthy as a man with a symbiotic life support system I'm afraid."

Mandy chuckled. "I'd love to study them."

Beau looked horrified. "Too dangerous, but I'll be more than happy to give you all my research data if you'd like."

"Good enough. I might even be able to figure out how to purge you of these things eventually if you'd like."

Both men looked hopeful. "Mandy, I think we'd both take you up on that offer. No human is meant to live as long as we have. I'm grateful to have my Beau back, but I always sort of looked forward to becoming a crotchety old fart with him, liver spots and all."

Beau choked on his sandwich. "Liver spots? You're still disgustingly gross at a dinner table I see."

Mandy smiled at the banter, Eran was alive, truly alive. Gone was the shell of a man she had always known, his dull eyes were vibrant with joy, his smile had not left his face and she had to admit, she'd never seen a more handsome couple before, they complimented each other in personality and looks.

She was about to comment when Enjoe walked in and nodded to the pair. "Joe did you know?"

"Yes. It was quite... heartwarming to witness." His voice was low and looked rather sad.

Eran quirked an eyebrow perceptive to Enjoe's non-mood swings. "Sit down Joe and Mandy call Farin and Tinks in here? I might as well tell you all so I'm not repeating myself over and over."

Farin was just across the hall and Tinks was still not back on board, Eran sighed. "Tinks, is he the one I met earlier drinking his sorrows into whiskey, killer hair?" Beau asked sipping from mug. Eran nodded.

"That would be him. Enjoe you were with him."

"He left." Enjoe said just sitting in his chair arms folded over his chest.

"I swear you are pissing me off now Joe." Eran growled shoving his chair back and running a frustrated hand through his hair. "Go out and find him damn it! Farin you take the hopper, I'll take the shuttle with Beau and Enjoe walk the port local. Mandy wait for him here."

Eran and Beau returned to Eran's cabin to dress and while dressing Beau broached the subject. "What's up?"

"Enjoe being a dickhead."

"Care to elaborate?"

"I picked him up when he was ten or eleven, he'd have been a fucking mercenary assassin had I not gave him a job. Five years later I picked up Tinks who was twelve and picking my pockets, or trying to. Mandy, Farin and I practically raised them." Eran said as he headed toward a small shuttlecraft hanger that held a shuttle that would let them hover around the port city outskirts in search.

"Tinks was always a nice looking kid, grew into a nice looking man. He hit puberty, figured out he like boys, Enjoe in particular."

"I can guess. Enjoe doesn't like him back?"

"No he DOES, but for some insane, known only to Enjoe reason, he treats Tinks like absolute shit, barks insults at him, and totally makes Tinks shut down sometimes. Don't ask me why, because I've no fucking clue. Tinks is so used to Enjoe being an asshole he's all but given up, Enjoe's gonna be shit out of luck if he doesn't face the facts." Eran said as they settled into the Pilot and co-pilot seats and headed out.

"You can't force a man to come out of the closet. Some men think love is a weakness."

"It's got nothing to do about coming out of the closet. Enjoe's no stranger to bringing back one-night stands. Tinks will wander out and come back much later his eyes all red and complaining of allergies. It's obvious he's cried his eyes out. When Enjoe forgets to be mean and allows himself to just be real, he's a nice guy and Tinks falls for him all over again, the second he gets close though, Enjoe goes all bastard again and we're into round two. Between Mandy and I we must have told him a million times to just fess up. No good."

"How sad. Poor Tinks."

"Yeah, and he's probably drunk off his ass somewhere trying to wash it away. He's ended up really messed up a few times. He tends to gravitate towards men who treat him like shit."

"Oh no."

"Yeah. We gotta get to him before he ends up in a ditch somewhere passed out drunk with his pants around his ankles. I try to keep an eye on him, he's been getting better, I worry when I don't know where he is."

"You're a good father."

"More like a big brother. But yeah, I feel responsible for them all."

Beau smiled proudly and just watched Eran's profile as they flew out and around the city looking down into alleys for any sign of the wayward communications officer.

----

Tinks for a change was not drunk, not even tipsy, as he walked up and down busy streets, his hands shoved deep into his pockets kicking trash occasionally, just downright blue and contemplative.

He thought about Eran and the absolute hell he must have endured. He had no idea how Eran was as nice as he was, he knew had he have had to go through a life like that he wasn't sure he could be kind to strangers, much less thieving smart ass pre-teens like he had been when Eran had picked him up off the streets and gave him stability and a home.

Eran had always listened to him ramble on and on, sometimes offering advice, sometimes making Tinks figure out his own answers. He was father, brother and friend in one.

He made the loneliness bearable.

Mandy was more like an older sister. He couldn't talk to her like he could Eran. Farin never talked much to anyone, not even his own wife. Enjoe ... Thoughts of Enjoe just twisted Tinks' gut. For years he had loved the handsome youth, and no matter how hard he tried, he had never been able to get Enjoe to like him. Enjoe made it plain; Tinks was tolerated because Eran liked him. Given half the chance, he'd have blown Tinks' out of an airlock ages ago.

Tinks often wondered just what he had done to cause such hatred, and he gave up trying to fathom the answers. It just was a fact. It was also a fact he still loved Enjoe, and could not think of a single reason why he did, again it was just fact and a love that defied explanation and was entirely one-sided.

Tinks rounded a corner and saw Enjoe walking up ahead and he ducked out of sight. He just could not face him at the moment so he hid behind a pile of packing crates and as soon as Enjoe passed Tinks turned and ran the other direction.

It was several hours later and Tinks was sitting on a pier overlooking the sea on the farthest western edge of the City, the dual moons of Pirotaine dancing on the water as he tossed bits of his uneaten flatbread sandwich into the water to watch them bloat with water as they floated away on the tide.

"I must admit I'm surprised to find you here." Tinks turned and offered Eran a halfhearted smile over his shoulder as stepped out onto the Pier, Beau by his side.

"Just thinking." Tinks said as Beau and Eran sat on either side of the Pier with him dangling their feet off the edge.

"And not drinking, that's a relief." Eran replied lighting up a smoke.

"Why are earth are you two out here?"

"We were looking for you." Beau said smiling at Tinks with a serene countenance.

"You shouldn't have. I was just making myself scarce so the two of you could have some privacy."

"You lie like shit Crispin Tinks." Eran scolded laying an arm around the youth's shoulders. "But I won't lecture. I tend to go off to be moody by myself too."

"You always did." Beau interjected resting his chin on his hand, elbow resting on his knee.

"Sometimes you need to be alone to sort out your thoughts. Sometimes it's dangerous to be alone because thoughts can consume you. It's a balance." Beau began turning to look at Tinks. "Thank you for being there for Eran when his thoughts began to consume. Don't be offended at the favor returned, we understand."

Tinks smiled, Beau was like a prophet the way he spoke, soft and lyrical in speech, his face a mask of kindness and sincerity, his young face held wise ancient looking eyes that set Tinks soul at ease. "Thanks."

"Anytime. And Thank You."

"For what?" Tinks asked as Beau leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"For many reasons involving Eran's sanity and for giving him my disk."

Tinks grinned. "Insanity you mean."

"Everyone needs a laugh Tinks. Even you." Eran said standing and offering both Tinks and Beau a hand up. "Come on, let's go back. I have some announcements to make."

Eran walked in-between Beau and Tinks, arms encasing both their shoulders as they walked back toward the "Infinity".

---

Everyone gathered in the Galley and over a very late dinner and coffee while Eran told them all the truth about his past, a little more detail in the second telling. After his tale he made an announcement.

"Beau and I were talking while we were out looking for Tinks. We're all irritable, tired and Mandy offered to help analyze Beau's data on our bug infestation problems. I plan parking here a bit, there's plenty of space to dock the "Infinity" near the caves, it will give Mandy and Beau time to do a little studying in peace and time for the rest of us to take a much needed rest."

"Hallelujah a Vacation." Farin sighed with a smile. "Tell me there's places here to barter parts. I wanna give the Infinity a nice overhaul."

"You'll need the shuttle. Beau and I used to live in the middle of nowhere, and the old village was never rebuilt. The closest city is ten clicks south now. We'll have total privacy, but close enough to civilization for necessities."

"Mind if I stay in the city if you don't need me? The country with nothing to do sounds boring as hell." Enjoe grumbled, in a sour mood.

"Do what you want, I don't care what the hell you do with your free time. Just keep a communicator so when we're ready to leave I can contact you." Eran said narrowing his eyes at Enjoe, he was getting worse daily, and of them all he needed a vacation.

"I've never been to the country." Tinks said looking into his mug. "But I'd like to see it."

Beau smiled "It's not as boring as you think. Honest."

Tinks looked up and smiled. "I always wanted to do some good old-fashioned fishing. I heard it's fun."

"Now that IS boring unless they're biting." Eran groaned and Beau chuckled.

"Just because you hated it does not mean he will." Beau stuck his tongue out at Eran. He had loved to fish. "I'll take ya Tinks. I love to fish, and I've a spare rod back at the house."

"Then let's head out, we can be there in an hour tops, it's not too far from here." Eran said as he headed into the cockpit and Farin headed into the Engine room to fire up the "Infinity" to dock her securely at the base of the caves in the very same field Beau and Eran had once walked through daily many years before.

Enjoe grabbed a duffle and left the ship as the others headed out. He made his way to a local hotel and checked himself in at the front desk there was no way in hell he was going to the country. It was bad enough in deep space, he didn't need to watch Tinks be a little nature boy in the middle of nowhere without distractions.

He wasn't needed and he was feeling angry about life in general. He needed to be alone. He made sure he left orders at the front desk never to be disturbed and then slammed the door behind him as he went to bed.

----

The "Infinity" was a small freighter, designed to carry precious and specific cargo. Cargo that needed to get to point A to Point B in the fastest time possible with enough weaponry to project the cargo from hijackers both from the Federation and Pirate organizations.

"You always did lean to the left of the law." Beau mused where he sat curled up in the co-pilot seat as Eran set the "Infinity" down next to the cave face and literally merely a dozen paces from the small house built in front of the cave he and Beau had once frolicked in.

"It pays good and is never boring." Erin replied as he shut down the control panel.

"My rouge." Beau laughed as he headed down the gangplank that dropped from the ships hull.

As Eran followed Beau he drank in his surroundings. Some things never changed much. "You built this right into the rock." Eran mused as Beau keyed the security pad on the front door.

"I wanted no one just wandering into the cave. Mind the regular dust, I've not been back here in a while." Beau said as the door whooshed back and stale air hit them in the faces.

Tinks came up behind them and coughed. "I'd fire your housekeeper." He joked and Beau smiled.

"Careful, I'll put you to work." Beau playfully threatened as he flipped on the lights. Eran's breath caught in his throat, it was like walking back in time. The single room dwelling was almost identical to the one he and Beau had shared. A double bed was in the left back corner of the room, next to it a door that probably led into the cave itself. In the opposite corner was situated a small kitchen area, a few cupboards, and a small stove with a single burner on top, a cooling unit and a small sink. There was a small sectioned off part of the room that obviously contained a bathroom facility and then the living space held a table and two chairs, a small couch and a fireplace. All of the surfaces covered in tarps to protect them from time and elements.

"Dear God..." Eran breathed his hands almost shaking.

"I know. It looks like our old place. Pre-fabricated units don't change much Eran. Like I could build anything more? These are cheap, it's why we lived in one in the first place remember?" Beau said moving to fold back a tarp from the couch.

"I know, it's just... It feels like yesterday it all happened." Eran said, phantoms from his past flashing past his eyes and he sank into a chair, tears coming on suddenly his shoulders shaking. Beau was instantly there and was folded into an embrace as Eran clung to him, purging years worth of loss into his chest. Tinks stepped back into the shadows, in all the time he had known Eran he had never seen him cry, much less show the sort of emotions that were breaking free like a flood tearing down a feeble dam in it's wake.

How much pain had Eran been hiding from them? Eran who was always there for Tinks to lean on in times of need, always there to offer advice if asked for, Eran had always been his rock of support and to see him suddenly shaken proved he was human after all. It suddenly made all of Tinks' problems seem trivial. He had a family of sorts, he had Eran and Mandy and Farin, he had

a good job, and he had food in his belly and no major problems other than a crush on someone out of reach and rapidly falling from his heart. It seemed trite now to him in comparison. He also felt like an intruder all of a sudden so he slowly edged his way back out, intercepting Mandy and Farin before they could walk in on the scene.

Eran needed a few minutes to purge and compose himself first, no man ever wanted to be seen in a moment of weakness, Tinks refused to let Eran's pride suffer when he needed this good cry. Tinks took charge outside instead, he helped Farin set up work tent and helped collect firewood for Mandy and just made himself useful until Eran and Beau reemerged from within.

Beau and Mandy quickly went back inside to get the kitchen clean and useable for several people and Eran took Tinks aside.

"Thank you." Eran said and Tinks shrugged it off.

"Hey man, no worries."

"No Tinks I mean it. You've no idea some of the things I've seen, and they all sort of came crashing down on me in there. I appreciate your tact in my moment of vulnerability."

"Listen Eran, you've been there for me more times than I can count. You're the only family I got so like I said no worries okay. You can trust me."

"I trust you more than anyone other than Beau. I mean that too, I've never met a more loyal person and I've known a lot of people in my time. You're a good man Tinks, don't let anyone ever tell you different."

Tinks just smiled and shrugged. "It's nothin' Eran. Come on, Mandy is dying to cook in a real kitchen and I gotta help Farin set up temporary housing for us since he's taking the "Infinity" off-line for over-haul we're all camping out."

"Why don't you take the shuttle into town, see if there are any pre-fabs in salvage. They'll be warmer than tents, it's the end of summer here, fall comes fast and winter even faster."

"How long we staying?"

"I don't know yet. Until Mandy can get some work done and Farin gives the ship a good solid make over. I know my cabin will need a bigger bunk in it." Here Eran grinned and Tinks laughed.

"Dawg."

"Woof."

Tinks almost doubled over laughing; He decidedly liked the new Eran a lot more. He had suddenly become a lot more fun to be around, that was for sure. He made a mental note to thank Beau for that later as he pulled out the small shuttle and set out for the small village just a few minutes away, hopefully someone would be open, it was very late or very early depending on how you looked at the situation.

The small port town of Rael was quaint and situated at the edge of the sea and a connecting River. It was obviously a good trading port for all sorts of commerce from agriculture to various other wares coming in from the Capitol to be distributed inland. Tinks piloted the shuttle to what

obviously looked like a machinery district and landed the craft at the end of the street. Many of the shops were closed, but the second hand surplus supply store was open at this hour and he walked inside. A very tall, and very nice looking young man with dark auburn hair, piercing dark green eyes and perhaps just a few years older than Tinks was sipping from a mug of coffee, reading a manual at the counter he was seated at and had an old food processing unit torn apart on the counter where he was obviously trying to make the ancient device usable again. He smiled as Tinks walked in. "Early Bird or Night Owl?"

"Today the Early Bird and Night Owl combined, not been to bed yet and probably won't for a while." Tinks answered as he walked up to the counter. "Damn man, good luck getting that contraption to work again. That unit hasn't been made since before my Great Grandmother's time."

"I know. It's just a hobby of mine. I like Antiques. What can I help you with stranger?"

"My shipmates and I are combining a little R&R with some research and maintenance on the ship nearby, I'm looking for a pair of pre-fab dwellings we can set up for a while."

"How big? I got a couple of salvage units from military issue out back."

"Anything is better than a tent while Farin overhauls our ship and turns off the amenities."

The clerk at the counter chuckled. "Follow me, I'll show you what I have."

The young man lead Tinks out into a warehouse space and down a few rows until they came to some large crates. "I've got these three units here that are all interconnecting. They're dual room with facilities. You have to dig the septic system trench, but these come with all the plumbing. Pre-wired for power, just plug them into a generator and they're good to go. They take no time to set up, and you can make them free standing or connect them all together for a larger space."

"That's more than enough space, how much for all three? We already have one unit, same issue already set up, these will be easy to add onto the space."

"You mean that old unit set up near the caves? That unit belongs to someone already."

"It belongs to one of our crew."

"Impossible, Beau doesn't belong on a crew, he's a musician and he's not been back since I was a kid."

"Ah you know Beau? His husband is my Captain, I'm not pulling your leg man."

"Mind if I come with you to verify? He asked me to watch over his place before he left."

"I have no problem with that. But you never answered my question. How much?"

"If those are for Beau? Nothing. I owe him a lot. Where's your craft I'll help you load the units."

"This way... What's your name?"

"Vitale, Valerian Vitale. Just call me Val." The youth said holding out his hand, Tinks took it and shook.

"Tinks, Communications officer for the "Infinity". Nice ta meet ya Val, you saved the day. Looks like I picked the right shop."

Val smiled "Tinks? Strange name."

"Nickname that stuck. Tinks is my last name." Tinks said as Valerian pulled out a hover pallet jack to move the boxes out to load.

"And just for shits and giggles, what's your first name if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't mind its Crispin." Tinks said as he helped guide the boxes out without a catastrophe in the cramped warehouse.

"Good name, shame not to use it."

"Just a name, I answer to just about anything. Shithead, asshole, idiot..."

Val laughed. "I'll reserve judgment on those for now."

"Smart man. Here's good, let me open the hatch."

"Nice shuttle, what sort of ship you work on?"

"Cruiser Freighter called the "Infinity". Small but a damn good ship."

Val stopped and eyed the young man with the sinfully long hair coming loose from a haphazard braid. "Smugglers?"

Tinks just grinned. "Want the truth?"

"Please."

"We skirt a few laws here and there."

"Interesting." Was Val's only comment but his eyes looked intrigued as he loaded the boxes and locked up the shop and sat in the co-pilot's chair as Tinks flew them back to the caves.

----

While Tinks was gone, Beau and Eran excused themselves and walked along the old overgrown road that ran alongside the field. The sun was just rising and as they walked they collected wildflowers from the obliging field.

Their feet had not walked this deserted road in many years, but they remembered the way as if it was walked mere days before.

Their first reminder of the loss was a large stone that lay in the road, Eran remembered the day he had put it there and how he had etched the words with an abandoned Tsion blaster rifle into it's surface.

*We were the Village of Mistrelle.*

*We were peaceful people.*

*Most of us are now gone.  
 But we will never forget  
 And we will live on...  
 Those of us who lived  
 We will not let our loved ones die in vain.  
 Mistrelle  
 Founded Niice, 28 3457 – Destroyed Decee 8, 4515*

Eran laid his flowers at the base of the marker and bowed his head for a moment of silence. Beau followed suit and knelt, his head bent in solemn prayer. Eran took his hand and quietly they walked past the marker and into the ruins of their village, time and nature reclaiming much of what had once been and a few earthy mounds and a few stone columns were all that remained of what had been the town center monument fountain.

It wasn't until they reached the remains of the fountain Beau broke the silence. "You put the marker there, didn't you?"

Eran only nodded.

"I thought so. It sounded like you." Beau's voice was far away as he folded himself into Eran's arms.

"Upon these stone stairs, I bind myself to you..." Eran began and Beau noticing where they were standing took but a step backward, his hand holding Eran's.

"Upon these stone stairs, I bind myself to you..." Beau echoed the wedding vows they had made on this very spot on this very day so many years ago.

"My path joins yours by will and by love."

"My path joins yours by will and by love."

"My soul is bound to yours as this ribbon now binds our hands."

"My soul is bound to yours as this ribbon now binds our hands."

"Together we walk life's road."

"Together we walk life's road."

"I, Eran Marius Callum, vow to love you and be faithful to you until the end of my days. By witness of those we both hold dear as we stand here today as one."

"I, Beau Galen Shannon, vow to love you and be faithful to you until the end of my days. By witness of those we both hold dear as we stand here today as one."

"Happy Anniversary Beau. I love you."

"Happy Anniversary Eran. I love you too. Here's to the Next one-sixty."

"Or more."

They shared a melancholy and bittersweet kiss as they finished repeating their impromptu vows, paying long overdue respect to their fallen friends and families memories and then walked slowly back to the caves, arriving just a few minutes before Tinks returned from his trip into Rael.

"Where did you two wander off to?" Mandy asked as the shuttle landed nearby.

"Paying our respects to our loved ones. The village we lived in is not far from here." Beau said as Tinks and a familiar looking stranger walked out the side hatch. "It can't be!" Beau gasped with a smile spreading across his face.

"Know him?" Eran asked and Beau nodded.

"That red hair is a dead give away. He grew up nicely. He was only twelve when I left."

Val turned and the minute he caught sight of Beau he dropped everything and ran over and lifted him up in a large bear hug. "BEAU! You've come back!"

"Put me down Val." Beau laughed as Val set him back down. "Who said you were allowed to grow up taller than me?" Beau teased grinning fondly at the man who so resembled the boy he loved like a little brother.

"I'd not have grown up at all if not for you. I wish Mom were still alive, she'd have loved to have seen you again."

"Oh Val I'm sorry. How long ago did she pass?"

"A few years now. It was peaceful in her sleep." Val said as Tinks and Eran just exchanged looks.

"I take it Val knows about, you know?" Eran asked and Beau nodded.

"I couldn't hide the truth."

"We sort of figured it out when Beau saved my life."

"How? If you don't mind me asking?" Tinks asked his insatiable curiosity piqued.

"Not at all. My father was a horrible bastard of a man. He used to beat my mother and I constantly. It was worse when he'd been drinking. I was all of ten and I used to come out here to hide from him. That's when I met Beau. I was crying in one of the caves when he found me. He let me cry it out and then walked me home to intervene and get mom and I out of that house. I begged him not to, my dad was huge and I just knew he was going to hurt Beau too." Val began as Mandy and Farin walked in to listen to the tale.

"When we got there my dad was drunk and poor mom was a mess. Beau burst in and confronted my dad. They fought and dad pulled out a blaster and fired at mom and me. I was trying to move her outside. Beau jumped right in front of the blast. He never even flinched."

"I did flinch. I may not be able to die, but I still feel pain. That bloody hurt. Hit me right in the shoulder and shattered my collarbone. You just saw it through a child's eyes."

"You still managed to wrestle away the blaster."

"Your father was in shock, it wasn't difficult."

"You're making light of it Beau. You took a shot meant to KILL us. By this time the noise had drawn the neighbors and my father was arrested and Beau..."

"Healed before the Doctor ever got there."

"Mom and I kept his secret, and he helped us get back on our feet. My father was arrested and was taken to prison in the capitol. Beau helped us take over the salvage yard and run it ourselves. Then one day he said goodbye and that was the last we saw of you."

"People like Eran and I can't stay in one place too long Val for obvious reasons."

"True. But I am glad to see you again, and glad I can return a favor and help you out for a change. I have three pre-fabs that are all yours."

"Don't be daft. We'll pay." Eran began and Val vehemently shook his head.

"I don't want one credit chip. I refuse to take it. I owe Beau my very life, this is the very least I can do to say thanks."

"Thanks Val. It's nice to see you grew up so nicely. Are you married? Any children?" Beau asked and Val shook his head.

"Neither. One, I've not found the right person and two, the particular people I fancy aren't equipped with the right anatomical abilities to produce the latter."

Beau laughed. "Gotcha."

Informal introductions ensued as the shuttle was unloaded and Tinks used the laser cannon on the "Infinity" to blast a precise trench for a septic system.

"Nice Aim" Val commented as Tinks reemerged from the ship.

"Thanks." He quipped as he passed, his braid bouncing gaily behind him as Mandy called a halt to construction for breakfast. Val's eyes trailed after Tinks, his eyes finally taking a good sweeping look at the young crewman. Beau chuckled as he came up behind Val carrying various boxes of supplies from with the ship.

"He's got great hair. Doesn't he?"

"He got Great everything. Wow, where the hell have I been looking all night?"

"You've just now noticed He's cute?"

"Yeah."

"Val, we have to work on your perception." Beau teased as he continued on his way to deliver the goods to Farin and Eran who were mapping out the layout of the three additional units. One unit they would attach to the front of the existing unit. Making that the main living and working area and the other two would attach in a diamond shape. The one to the left would be Farin and Mandy's area, the original dwelling would remain as Beau and Eran's space and the one added to the right would be Tinks and Enjoe's space if Enjoe ever deigned to join them.

After breakfast the septic system was laid out and Tinks was once more back blasting a well out for fresh water. Plumbing was added to the foundation and Val supplied the water filtration system and piping they needed.

Lunch came and after lunch they finished the groundwork and the easy part of their task of erecting the pre-fabrication units was finished just about dinnertime.

Dinner was subdued. Everyone was working on pure adrenalin and lack of sleep. It was easy to see the moment they finished eating, everyone was turning in for an early night. Val noticed Tinks half asleep in his soup, sitting at an awkward angle holding his shoulder. "You okay?" He asked as he sat down next to the exhausted youth.

"I'll be alright. I'm not built for heavy labor. I'm puny. I'm more the let's play with the electronics geek. I hook up the generator, I don't usually tend to be the one lugging it around." Tinks said laughing at his physical limitations. He was fairly tall but thin; his muscles were toned but functionally small. He honed them doing sit-up in his cabin, not lifting things four times his size. He was worn out.

Val on the other hand was tall and quite well built. He was used to heavy lifting occasionally. He wasn't overly large, but he was a fair size, and his bone structure was large. He was just naturally big and was used to a good days labor. Like Farin he was an engineer and got his hand dirty daily. He had also had sleep the day before; he moved behind Tinks and laid a large hand on the offending muscle.

Tinks hissed.

"That one the one hurting you?" Val asked as squeezed.

"AH! Yes. OUCH not so hard."

"It's gotta loosen or else come morning you'll be locked up solid unable to move. Mandy do you have any muscle creams in your stash there?"

Mandy nodded tossing over a bag. Val rummaged and found the tube of camphor smelling ointment. "Dude that stinks."

"Yes it does, but it works and clears your sinuses all at once. Take off your shirt, trust me you'll all need this before bed."

Farin laughed. "He's right, save some for me!" he said rubbing his own older muscles.

Tinks just rolled his eyes and obeyed. Stripping off his shirt as Val rubbed the ointment into his tired muscles.

After about a minute he was purring like a kitten. "You have forever to do that. Man, goodnight all, I'm about two-nanos from crashing out here. Ugh, magic hands." Tinks' eyes rolled and he sighed in bliss.

Val laughed "You're sufficiently putty I see, I think that muscle is still gonna give you fits in the morning, but not nearly as bad. Keep it warm tonight and you should be fine in a day or so." Val said wiping his hands off with a towel to remove any cream residue then passed the cream to

Farin. Who applied some to his shoulder then tossed the tube to Eran and Beau who just smiled and tossed it back.

"We're fine."

"Sure rub it in you too." Tinks winked as he yawned. "I guess I should take you home first huh before I pass out here."

"Just go to bed, I can walk from here."

"Don't be absurd, you worked as hard as everyone else. Take Enjoe's bed, it's not like he's ever gonna use it. Just be warned I snore." Tinks said fighting another yawn.

"So do I so we're even then." Val replied as they finished dinner and everyone moved to their respective dwellings to sleep.

----

Eran stoked the fire in the dwelling he and Beau had retired to for the evening and they both curled up together on the small couch. Both content to lie in the other's arms and watch the firelight dance on the other's skin. "This is one of the simple pleasures I miss while in space."

"What's that?" Beau asked sleepily where he lay against Eran's chest.

"Fire. There's something peaceful about it."

"I know. I don't know how many nights I lay here watching the flames thinking of you."

"I'm sorry for not coming back here sooner."

"Don't blame yourself Eran. You could not have known I was here and I knew that. We're together again, I'm content to just move forward with our lives now and lay to rest our past."

"There's a whole galaxy out there to see. You always wanted to travel."

"I did. There are hundreds of worlds out there, so much music to hear."

"That's all you want the music?"

"Pretty much. You know me; I'm easy to please. I don't need much. Just you and a good song and I am content."

"And sweets."

Beau laughed. "And sweets. Yes."

"Wait until you taste Lumarian Laugerberry cr me pastry. I thought of you first time I tasted it. I wanted to vomit it was so sweet and rich. You'd have loved it."

"Glad to know you think me at times you feel revolted." Beau teased sitting up to stretch. "Now I'm hungry."

"You could give Tinks a run for his money in the bottomless pit department." Eran teased as the pair wandered into the small kitchen and Beau showed he'd raided the "Infinity" and its kitchen. He held up a bag of cookies.

"These looked fabulous."

"Sweet tooth and don't let Tinks know you stole his cookies."

"I'll make it up to him. He seems as sweet as his tooth." Beau remarked as he savored the cookie.

"He is a sweet kid. Troubled though." Eran sighed opening a beer and leaning on the counter.

"Troubled?"

"I wish I knew Beau. I know about as much of Tinks past as he knew of mine. I can guess at a lot of it, but he's seen more hell than anyone his age should have."

"What do you suspect? Talk to me, sometimes another perspective helps."

"I picked him up just over a decade ago. He was twelve, picking my pockets, and knew far too much about the world for my liking. It's why I took him along really. You can see how nice he is on the eyes now; he was positively beautiful as a kid. Hard to tell if he was a girl or a boy back then." Eran began relating what he knew of Tinks, sipping at his beer.

"He was a mess. I took him back to the ship, and Mandy must have cried all night after examining him."

"Abused?"

"In the worst of ways. By God's grace he had no diseases, but had he continued to live on those streets he'd have been long dead by now. He was only twelve." Here Eran got angry and Beau took his hand.

"There are pigs of men out there, you saved him from that life."

"Yeah, PHYSICALLY. He's still emotionally a wreck. Don't let his clown like manner fool you. That's his mask. He's bleeding inside, and I just can't fix that, no matter how hard I try. He'd die for you, me, some stranger he just met. He's got such a capacity to care about people it boggles my mind. But offer to help him in return and he won't let you." Eran sighed swirling his beer around in his bottle.

"He used to have terrible nightmares, I don't even want to think of the sorts of memories he has to deal with on his own. I watch his behavior and I want to scream at him that he's worth more than he thinks. It's like he gravitates to those sorts of pigs who hurt him because he thinks that's all the better he can do. I can only guess from watching people and their behavior patterns over the years."

"Sounds to me he needs someone to love him, plain and simple."

"We love him, God Beau he's like a brother to me. He's indispensable to me. He's got a mind like a steel trap, there is not an electronic grid he can't walk like a master, not a code he can't break, he's witty, he's funny, and he's full of boundless energy. But he's dangerous to himself; he gets

into real nasty situations if I don't watch him. He's been getting better, but far too often I find him beaten up and used like trash. Enjoe does not help in the slightest. The more I think about that situation the more I want to toss Enjoe out an airlock. He's a real bastard towards Tinks. The same behavior that Tinks gravitates too."

"Because if what you said was true, that's the treatment he associates with love. He's not in love with Enjoe, he sees in him the type of man he's known. He's not known any others in that manner."

"That's what I think too. It's probably best Enjoe stayed in the city. Tinks could use some time to just be himself and to let go. He deserves someone to care about him, he really does Beau, I want to see him truly happy and there is only so much I can do."

"You're more a father to him you realize. You are a good influence on him, I'm proud of you."

"I just wish I could do more."

"We've his lifetime to help him. You'll get through to him eventually. I also suspect another influence is likely to do some good."

"What?"

"Val."

"Val?"

"For such a smart man sometimes you can be painfully unobservant."

"Okay sweet-cheeks, what have you noticed Mr. Keen Perception?"

"Only that every time Tinks walked by today, Val would drop something, hammer his finger or just stare like a fool. The same behavior YOU exhibited when you first met me."

"That was lust and hormones and..."

"The start of a crush, Love starts like that."

"That's good to hear. I'll have to pay more attention."

Beau just winked and smiled and finished off the cookies. "Just leave it and watch. No interference. Just observe and keep Enjoe OUT of the mix. It will only confuse Tinks."

"Enjoe is not likely to turn up here until I call him. He's probably gambling and whoring in the city. If he weren't smart and if he didn't scare me if I let him loose on the masses I'm serious, I'd fire him. He's too dangerous not to watch like a hawk. The only person he listens to is me. I don't know why, but I can keep him in line, and people don't die needlessly."

"Enough talk, it's getting late. Let's just observe a while."

"I agree. I feel like a voyeur." Eran chuckled falling into bed.

"It's a parents job to let babies spread their wings and fly."

"You're getting off on this parenting thing, MOM."

Beau just laughed. "So are you DAD. Face it."

Beau shut off the lights and crawled in bed, they spooned up together with a sigh and listened to the crickets chirp in the field.

-----

Tinks woke up in a cold sweat; he hadn't had that nightmare in a long time. He was shaking as he sat up and shivered. He looked over across the room to where Val was sleeping. It must have been his story and being overly exhausted that had brought back Tinks memories to haunt his sleep. He stumbled into the kitchen and found the closest bottle of whiskey to drown out the voices in his head. He was silently crying and shaking and halfway through the bottle when a large hand closed around his and took the bottle. "Are you alright?"

"I will be when I can no longer remember." Tinks growled reaching for the bottle and falling off the stool he was perched on. Val was there to help pick him up off the floor.

"You're drunk, how long have you been up?" Val asked helping Tinks stumble back to bed.

"Dunno."

"You're crying. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Allergies. I'm not crying." Tinks said wiping his eyes and Val nodded he knew pride, however feeble, when he saw it.

"Want to talk? Sometimes it helps to just tell a stranger what's eating you."

"I'm fine. I'm FINE!" Tinks grumbled standing and falling again.

"You're not fine you're a mess. Don't run off. I won't press for you to talk to me, but don't run away either. Okay?"

"Whatever. I'm not worth the trouble, just go back to bed. Leave me alone." Tinks as fighting tears, he was shaking like a leaf with tremors, and his eyes were haunted. Val reached around and pulled the blanket up over Tinks' shoulders.

"Okay Cris, I'll leave you be. Keep warm."

"What did you call me?"

"Cris. That's your name isn't it?"

"No one has called me that in... not since..." Tinks broke down in sobs and Val pulled him into a light embrace, he felt horrible for triggering something so painful.

"I'm sorry." Tinks said sitting up after a few minutes to wipe his eyes.

"Don't apologize. It's not necessary." Val comforted in deep baritone rich and soft.

"It is. You don't need my problems. I'll be fine." Tinks said this time standing and not falling over.

"Where are you going?"

"Fresh air. Go back to bed Val, don't worry about me. I'm not worth your time or effort." Tinks sighed walking outside and vanishing into the night. Val sat there confused but knew whatever was bothering Tinks was old and you couldn't force a man to tell you his secrets, no matter how much you wanted to help.

It was late morning and everyone was gathering in the main room for breakfast when Val wandered in lookin like he had not had a wink of sleep. Tinks was nowhere to be found.

"Is he not back yet?" Val asked and Eran paused buttering his toast and dropped his knife.

"He's gone? What happened?" Eran demanded and Val shrugged.

"I woke up to find him drinking himself stupid, I tried to get him to go back to bed he was miserable. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong and went out for fresh air hours ago. I waited up for him to come back and nothing." Val said raking his hair back from his face.

"Damn it." Eran cursed heading out to find Tinks.

He wasn't far. He was wrapped in his blanket, curled up next to a rock in the field, his eyes were swollen shut from crying and it looked like he cried himself into an exhausted sleep, his hands held a few withering flowers he'd obviously picked on his late night walk.

"Ah Tinks." Eran sighed squatting down beside him. "Wake up Tinks."

Tinks blinked open red-rimmed eyes and gave a weary smile to his friend.

"Nightmares?"

Tinks nodded. "I was too tired. I always get them when I'm too tired."

"You worry me. I wish you'd let me help."

"I'm not worth it Eran, really. You've done enough."

"No I haven't if after all these years those memories still hurt you."

Neither man heard Val walking up behind them.

"Eran really, you've got to know. Must I tell you what you already know?"

"I suspect. But you never did tell me the whole story." Eran said pushing Tinks' matted bangs from his face. Tinks smiled into the touch.

"It was Val's story, it made me remember my mother."

"I didn't know you had one."

"I don't now. She abandoned me when I was eight. It was before that. She was a whore and a drug addict and liked to sell her five year old boy to men for money."

"Ah god Tinks."

"Here Cris, Uncle Sendel has a come to play with you, be a good boy. He'd rip me apart while she got high. Then one day she never came back. She probably overdosed in an alley somewhere. The next four years I survived by picking pockets and being a fuck toy. You saved me from that Eran. Like I said you've done enough."

Val was horrified, no wonder when he had called him "Cris" he had broken down like a lost child.

"I never knew it was that bad. I'm so sorry Tinks." Eran said his mind reeling from picturing gentle Tinks' innocence being ripped away at a mere five years old.

Val was furious and deliberately made noise as if he'd just arrived and not heard the exchange. "Sorry to intrude. Did you find him?" Val asked playing dumb. Eran nodded and Val saw an elegant, finely boned hand lift from behind the rock and wave.

"I'm here, Good morning. Sorry I disturbed your sleep. I'm okay, fell asleep in flowers and now my eyes are all shot from pollen." The bright cheerful voice was like night and day to the ghostly sad and hollow voice that had told Eran the most horrific tale Val had ever heard. Eran frowned; the mask Tinks wore was back in place. Once again Tinks shut the turmoil of his past deep within and showed the world a bright façade.

"Come eat Tinks, you'll feel better." Eran said helping Tinks off the ground, Val almost gasped, Tinks looked horrible. Allergies were a bad ruse; you could tell he'd spent all night being miserable alone. He was only a year or two younger than Val and Val could relate somewhat to a bad childhood. An abusive father was peanuts in comparison to the hell Tinks had known. If Tinks wanted to forget, Val vowed to help him try to the best of his abilities.

----

Breakfast was subdued; Tinks normally the first at the table and the last to leave had taken just a few pieces of toast and disappeared back into his rooms.

"I haven't seen him like this in years." Mandy said sadly mindlessly stirring her coffee, the sugar long since dissolved in the liquid her attention was lost elsewhere.

"Me either. One step forward and two steps back with him." Farin commented pushing the remainder of his meal away his appetite gone.

"I think it's my fault. I think I might have said something to upset him." Val commented, as his own meal lay untouched before him.

"It's not your fault. Even the most innocent of comments can trigger a bad memory for us all. Tinks just has more than his fair share of bad ones."

"So you fill him with other memories to dull the pain of previous ones. What does he like?" Beau asked and Eran shrugged.

"Music. You'll usually find him with his ears buried in headphones off duty."

"Good. That at least I know something about. I'm fairly decent at distraction and changing subjects." Beau said picking up his guitar from a corner. He kicked off a bright melody, and ancient folk hymn that every Pirotaine Child learned practically before he could walk.

Eran nodded, he'd sung this many times with Beau, he hadn't sung in years but he wasn't too terribly out of practice. He took the melody in his strong mid range baritone and Beau took the higher counterpoint above with a bright clear tenor. What surprised them was Val, his voice a booming steady bass beneath them. Three-part harmony filled the room and it didn't take long for Tinks to wander in to listen, his face awash with shock and soon pleasure as he sat cross legged on the floor, leaning against the couch and just closed his eyes to listen.

Tinks loved music, he'd often get lost in it for hours, picking out various harmony parts to hum along to or adding his own harmony line if a solo voice was on the recording. He hadn't realized he was humming along, he didn't know the words, but the music was a simple chording hymn which repeated itself after a few stanzas and a soft fourth voice harmony just under Beau's tenor could be heard, Eran smiled and quickly scribbled the words down and nudged Tinks knee with his toe and handed him the lyrics.

Beau Paused "That's a unique harmony line you added. You have a great ear Tinks. Let's start again, don't be shy, trust your ear, you have remarkable pitch. Eran write down the words to "Jubilant Harvest." While you're at it."

Farin and Mandy settled on the couch with their coffee as the impromptu quartet sat at the table singing in beautiful four-part harmony. Perfectly in-tune and the rich blend of strong male voices singing of Harvest Blessings and Spring Rejoicing was like stepping back into the time these songs had been written.

"I could live here." Farin sighed tapping his foot as he listened. "This planet is called simplistic and backwards. I think the people just know how to appreciate the simple things in life. It's in their music."

"Eran always was simplistic and not prone to excess. It seems it's in the Pirotaine Blood." Mandy quipped sipping her coffee and smiling at Tinks who was laughing again without his mask. Real laughter and joy, as Eran and Val wrote out lyrics to all the hymns and traditional folk songs they knew.

"Eran we are not teaching him THAT!" Beau gasped as he looked over Eran's shoulders that were shaking with laughter.

Val grinned. "I'm running out of folk songs too Beau. What's a male chorus without a few bawdy bar songs?"

"They're vulgar! Especially that one! ERAN MARIUS CALLUM you nasty man."

"Oh I gotta see now." Tinks said leaning over Eran's shoulder and howling. "Come on Beau, teach me please?"

Beau just rolled his eyes and plucked out the melody. "I refuse to sing it, but go on I'm out voted."

Eran and Val kicked off the first verse which had Mandy's jaw in the vicinity of her chest and Farin laughing so hard his eyes were watering, "Marvelous Mandy the Madam of Mistrelle" was the most tawdry thing she'd ever heard and then the penny dropped as Eran grinned evilly at Mandy.

"You BASTARD! I'll give you Marvelous Mandy."

Tinks ducked the well-flung pillow that rebounded off Eran's head even as he continued to sing along without missing a beat.

Tinks had joined Farin laughing and howling in hysterics at poor Mandy's expense.

"I'll kill you both later. I cook your food!" Mandy playfully threatened, not really offended, but playing the part well.

The spur of the moment sing-a-long ended on that note and After Tinks picked himself up off the floor managed to pick at the leftovers still on the table. "That was fun. I didn't know you could sing Eran."

"I can croak a melody. Beau's the singer not me."

"Liar." Beau accused Eran with a smirk. "You're not half bad yourself." Beau turned to Tinks who shrugged.

"It's mathematical, just pick a note in the chord and sing it."

"That's called a good ear, it is mathematical in a way, but doing it well is an art. I take it you tend to make up harmonies a lot to your disks?" Beaus asked as the pair set themselves up at the sink to wash dishes.

"Melodies get boring after you learn the song. You can learn the song a dozen more times adding parts to it." Tinks said scrubbing at a particularly stubborn bit of crust on a plate.

"Spoken like a closet musician. I think you and I will get along swimmingly my friend. I'll share my disks if you show me what wonders you have picked up in your travels."

"DEAL!" Tinks grinned as Val carried over the last of the dishes from the table.

"How long you staying?" He asked and Beau turned to look at Eran.

Eran shrugged. "A month, a year? I don't know it depends on the work and how long we all decide as a group to stay. Why?"

"I was hoping you'd be here long enough for winter fest. I'm dreadfully short on males for the choir."

Beau stopped drying a mug. "Festival Choir? You've got a choir?" Beau looked possessed.

"Trying to get one together. Been working with Shaman Frieg to try and get one together for it. We've tons of women signed up to participate, just a handful of men."

"What's Winter Fest?" Tinks asked and Beau turned to Eran who smiled.

"It's only the best time of year in Pirotaine. Food, Singing, more food, candlelight in every window, pine on every hearth, and twelve days of giving to friends and family, it can break a man to a pauper and he'll sing as he gives away his last credit. It's a celebration of life and peace. The first Pilgrims landed on Pirotaine during these twelve days and it's giving thanks to the Gods for guiding them to this planet of bountiful land." Beau stated with enthusiasm.

"It's more of a spiritual holiday really a time of Thanksgiving and time to just be absolutely crazy with those you love. We give presents to everyone, we eat like pigs, and we are charitable to others less fortunate. It makes you feel good and makes other feel better. I think we should stay at least until Festival. I haven't celebrated it in far too long with you." Eran smiled at his beloved with fond nostalgia in his eyes.

"WONDERFUL! Will you join the choir?" Val asked hopeful.

"You couldn't keep me away Val. Eran?"

"I guess so. Beau would kick me if I said no. Tinks?"

"That sounds like a lot of fun actually. I've never done it though, feel free to kick me out if I suck asteroids."

"Farin? Mandy?" Val turned to ask and both looked about ready to bolt.

"I cannot sing. But I can cheer from the congregation." Farin said staking away the now clean plates.

Mandy finished wiping off the table and shook her head. "Like my dear husband, I sing like a dying Fengorian lizard. However, I can cook, that sounds like something I can get into for the season."

Val looked over the moon. "Fantastic! You saved me from having to go door to door begging. We rehearse at the town hall Fellsenday Evenings every other week until we get closer to the actual festival, then we'll decide how many more practices we'll need."

"It's still four months away, I think we have time." Beau grinned and hung his towel on a cupboard doorknob.

"Beau will you direct us? Like you did when I was a kid? That was the best Choir we ever had."

"How many from that old choir are left?"

"Just me."

"Then alright, it would be strange if too many people recognized me after all."

"Not even the Shaman is the same. You know Rael; it's different every time you turn around. No one stays too long before moving on to bigger or smaller." Val replied sitting back at the table.

"True, Rael itself never changes, but the people do. Speaking of town, we should go get supplies and take you home before people begin to think we kidnapped you." Beau chuckled and Val laughed.

"Yeah, Farin did want to raid my yards and no rest for the working man they say, thankfully I own my shop and I call the working hours. I'm all yours for the time being. I promised Farin I'd help him overhaul the "Infinity" and I must admit, this is a working holiday for me. I always wanted to get my hands on a baby like that."

"Then let's get ready to head out. One hour we leave, I need a shower first." Eran ordered as he disappeared into the back into his own dwelling to shower. Beau behind him needing to clean up himself, he abhorred being dirty.

Tinks was sitting on the arm of the sofa, undoing the braid in his hair, knotted from sleeping against a rock. "Damn it, one of these days I'll get up the nerve to chop this off. Fucking knots."

"Need a hand?" Val asked and Tinks offered him his hair.

"Be my guest if you can get out that knot you're more than welcome to try."

"I helped my mother when she couldn't do it herself anymore. Her hair was fine like yours, breathe on it wrong and it's knotted. There, you're free again." Val said as he let the long, golden brown strands slip through his fingers like silk threads. "You have beautiful hair. I will never sell you a pair of scissors." Val added and Tinks laughed.

"I know. Mandy and Eran would kill me too. I like it long, I just don't like knots, no worries I won't cut it anytime soon." Tinks said brushing it out with his fingers.

"Pardon me while I go wash it, it needs it. Oh and just so you don't worry or anything. Last night, it wasn't you okay? I don't mind you calling me Cris if you want to, it was other things bugging me none of it was your fault. Thanks for this morning, I'm looking forward to it." And with that Tinks disappeared to shower.

Val just stood there smiling at the closed door. He was happy something so simple could make Cris smile, he was positively radiant when he smiled. He also much preferred Cris to Tinks too, Tinks was something you called a scamp of a boy. Cris was more befitting to the handsome young man who had just walked through the door beyond.

A young man Val desperately wanted to reach out to, to help, to comfort, and more eventually if the gods were kind. He would take it slow and show Cris the time of his life without pressure.

-----

An hour to the minute Tinks came running out to the rest who were already loaded into the shuttle his hair still wet and loose.

"Why do we always have to wait on you?" Eran asked as Tinks climbed into the shuttle.

"You try washing this hair, it's a PROCESS." Tinks replied flopping into the last available seat and tried brushing his hair as Eran lifted off. "HEY rocket man, can you try a steady lift off so we don't go rolling about back here?" Tinks grumbled almost falling off his seat and trying in vain to braid his still unruly wet hair. Val took his brush.

"Turn around." He said and Tinks obliged.

"Now remember I'm a BOY here. Don't style it like I'm yer mom now." Tinks warned with a grin Val bopped him in the head with the brush.

"Don't worry and sit still. I can manage a simple braid fool."

Just a few minutes later Tinks examined the nice tight braid that hung over his shoulder. "Nice job, I can never get it this neat by myself. Thanks."

"No problem."

Beau who had been watching the scene from where he sat up front next to Eran smiled enjoying the interplay between Tinks and Val.

"Hey it's a good thing Enjo's not here, you're in his seat Beau. He gets pissy when someone takes his seat." Tinks teased and Eran rolled his eyes.

"When isn't he pissy? Let's not talk of Mr. Anti-social. Let's decide on a game plan here." Eran remarked as Rael came into view.

"Eran, Farin and Val can go be dirty men in a mechanical candy store. I claim Mandy and Tinks."

"And do share pray-tell what you plan on doing?" Eran eyed Beau suspiciously.

"Stocking up. So please my dearest I may need to raid your credit purse."

"Oh HELL NO Beau. Not a hope in hell, I know you when you don't have a budget."

"No budget? Oh tell me did my husband go off and get rich on me?"

"Beau, I mean it. We need more than sugar to live off of."

"You evaded my question."

"Beau... Yes all right damn it don't look at me like that. We're fine for money does that satisfy you oh glutton of gluttons?"

"Of course. Hand over the credits and no one gets whined at." Beau said holding out his hand and Eran irritably slapped a credit disk in his hand.

"You are absolutely rotten to the core Beau. Mandy I'm begging you, buy me real food!"

"Don't worry Eran, I'll baby-sit." Mandy chuckled from the back as Eran landed the shuttle out front of Val's salvage yards.

Tinks grinned evilly and hooked his arm through Beau's "My new best friend. Did you steal my cookies?"

"Absolutely, I'll buy you more."

"Rock-on. At last someone I can pig out with who won't yell at me."

"Come on Boys. Val point us in the direction of the Food markets?" Mandy asked shouldering a bag and a list of items they needed. Tinks grabbed a collapsible hover pallet-jack to help cart the bounty back to the shuttle on foot.

"Beau should remember, it's not moved. Four blocks north, three blocks east."

"Is the Bakery on Fontesque still there?" Beau asked Val who nodded.

"That's our first stop, I'm already drooling." Beau said leading the way with a light step and they left Farin, Eran, and Val to take care of the non-edible supplies.

"You'd better buy me real Peridia coffee beans Beau!"

"Yes! And your Sandril lager and your cigarettes don't worry!" Beau called back already halfway down the block.

Eran shook his head amused as Val opened up the storefront and the trio stepped inside to go over the list Farin had of upgrades and servicing he wanted to do to the "Infinity."

Mandy, Tinks and Beau sat around a small table over rich foamy coffee and steamed milk laced with chocolate and peppermint. And licked the remains of puff pastry off sticky fingers.

"That was fabulous what was that called again?" Tinks asked wiping his fingers on a napkin.

"Pirotaine specialty. Mocha with Peppermint and Crème horn pastry, we had a lot of original settlers from Earth ions ago. These creations came with them among other things like our holidays and such. Where are you from Mandy?"

"Aergus. Industrial cesspool. There's no agriculture left there, the entire planet is one huge city. All food comes from here actually." Mandy said and Beau nodded.

"I know Pirotaine still supplies 25% of the food to the galaxy. We're on of the largest agriculture planets still to this day, Four times bigger than Earth. There are strict laws on building here; most of our land is allocated to farming only. Where are you from Tinks?"

"Mirastor. Like Aergus, it's a shithole. Gambling centers and Diamond mines and fuck all else."

"Then let me show you both a little life at a much slower pace. Ever been to an open air market where the produce was picked yesterday?" Both shook their heads. "Then follow me." Beau said tossing a tip on the table as Mandy and Tinks followed him down the street.

Mandy was in heaven, everything from fruits and vegetables to the meat was fresh and bountiful. The fresh cream and milk from a local dairy was divine and the thought of cooking with real butter for a change had her buying a good gallon of it in a tub. Beau and Tinks trailed behind her in her buying frenzy. Both men sharing smirks, here Eran had been afraid Beau would go nuts. Between him and Tinks just a few bags of cookies, various bits of candied confections and a cake or two were in the rapidly filling crate on the hover jack.

Beau added a nice large bag of Eran's favorite coffee beans, he still preferred to grind them himself before brewing, his favorite brand of lager, and his mint laced tobacco cigarettes.

"Mandy I think we have enough for an army for a month. Thankfully it's just five minutes away by the shuttle if we run out of something, the market never closes." Beau teased as the crate was filled to bursting.

"True, just one more stop, I want some local cookbooks, I might as well try something new while I'm here." Mandy said stopping and dashing into the first bookstore she passed, coming out with a few books with pictures on the covers that made Tinks hungry.

"It's almost lunchtime and we have perishables, I wonder how the others are doing. I hope they saved us room for Mandy's splurging." Tinks said as they turned the last corner and the shuttle was in view. Full. "It looks like two trips."

"Food first, I need to get the dairy products in cooling units. Did you see the cheese I bought? Oh I'm gonna gain a hundred pounds on this R&R. Hallelujah." Mandy cheered as they reached the shuttle and the others came out from within the shop.

"Good lord woman! What did you buy?" Farin gasped and Mandy grinned.

"Everything. Come on, this stuff is FRESH and won't last out here in this heat. I love this planet, I love that Market, I am in a cook's paradise."

"Then let's load up and head out. We're only taking the generator back now. There's room. Val's gonna stay with us at camp since it's just more convenient than him commuting back and forth everyday." Eran said and Val laughed as he hung up a sign on the door.

***TEMPORARILY CLOSED VIP CLIENTELE JOB –  
CONTACT VALERIAN IN EMERGENCIES ONLY  
598.765.9993.90076***

"I figured if someone needed something desperately, which is unlikely, they can contact me on my communicator frequency number. Hope you don't mind a bunkmate Cris."

"Not at all." Tinks replied cheerfully as he loaded the groceries into the shuttle with Mandy.

Beau looked to Eran, they'd both noticed the name "Cris" and Beau nudged Eran in the ribs.

"Yeah I noticed. I'm not that dense. Come on let's get back I'm starving." Eran chuckled climbing into the pilot's seat.

"I'll meet you back at camp, I need to swing by my dwelling and grab some necessities myself, I'll meet you back at the caves."

"Need a hand?" Tinks asked as he shut the hatch.

"Not really, but the company would be nice."

"Sweet-talker. We'll meet you back at camp!" Tinks said cheerfully as the shuttle took off and Tinks followed Val down the street.

"I don't live far, just at the end of the Pier there at the Inn. Just want to grab some clothes and my toothbrush." Val said as they reached the cheap Inn and climbed the stairs.

"Hey no worries, I've a spare two hands man. Oh SWEET! A Hoveby! Does it work?" Tinks asked as he saw the old hover-motorcycle propped in the corner."

"Absolutely. I take it out in the field occasionally. Want me to bring it? We can ride it back if you wear the back-pack it'll ride two."

"Does a Fengorian Lizard eat it's young? I always wanted to ride on one of these babies."

Val grinned as he shoved some clothes and his toiletries into a backpack and handed it to Tinks. "Strap that on and I'll lug this brute downstairs. It may hover but it's awkward on stairs."

"Yeah but leave it outside and it's stolen."

"Precisely."

The pair laughed and Tinks helped lock up Val's small one room apartment as he trailed Val down the stairs and once outside Val climbed on and Tinks settled himself behind Val and wrapped his arms around Val's waist. "Hold on tight, this thing's got a kick on take off. You'll fall off the end if you're not careful."

Tinks squeezed. "I'm ready. HIT IT!"

Tinks was whooping and hollering all down the block and out of town, his braid whipping out behind him as he clung to Val who was laughing himself as they drove out and managed to get to the camp to help unload the generator.

With the second generator installed, there was enough power to cover the load of the additional three units so the auxiliary power they had been taking from the "Infinity" was disconnected and taken off-line. Mandy was in her element, the three kitchen units that had come with the pre-fabrication dwelling had been combined in the main room making a large kitchen area and Mandy had all the cupboards and cooling units full. The rest of the main unit had been turned into living and dining space. The other two units were sleeping quarters.

The unit Tinks and Val would share was set up as a large double bunk sleeping room that shared the bath facility which had been set up to the rear of the room. One double bed was on either wall, a card table in the middle of the room with two chairs and a fireplace stuck in the far corner near the front door of the room.

Farin and Mandy's was just like the original unit of Beau's a suite for the pair minus the kitchen that the original unit still had in tact. Beau's unit had not been touched and was in its original fully functional state. Eran and Beau needed the privacy; they still had a lot of catching up to do after all.

Tinks helped Val settle in just as Mandy called them all in for a mid-afternoon lunch feast.

Everyone gathered at the long table with six mismatched chairs, and everyone was elbow to elbow but enjoying the family like atmosphere of good friends, good company, good conversation, and great food.

"Mandy my love, you just get better and better." Farin groaned feeling positively bloated.

"Good ingredients make ALL the difference." Mandy added thrilled at having the means to cook like she'd always wanted.

"I am too full and too lethargic right now to do anything other than let my food digest and piss around the rest of the day. WE ARE on R&R leave aren't we?" Eran asked lighting up a cigarette and flopping onto the couch shoved against the wall in the main living space.

"It's nice to have no schedule for a change." Mandy spoke up from where she was wrapping up leftovers with Tinks at the counter.

"A little bit a day, it gets done right and properly and we get a recharge. Just what we need. We're on the go so much; it's nice to shift to a lower gear. I'm not getting any younger." Farin sighed undoing a notch in his belt.

"Last I checked you were forty, that's hardly old Farin." Eran replied with a smirk. "I got you beat thrice over and then some."

"Aye but you have an advantage oh walking fountain of youth." Mandy retorted as she flopped down beside Eran on the couch.

"I could live here. I envy you and Beau being born here. What a wonderful planet."

"So live here. You both don't have to stay on the "Infinity". Just because I picked you up, you're not obligated to stay forever you know." Eran said and Mandy looked shocked, she'd never even considered leaving Eran.

"Don't look like I said something alien. I know you and Farin always wanted kids, retire while you're young enough to still have them. You can't raise kids on a ship." Eran said and Mandy looked about ready to cry.

"Eran's right. If you want a family, this is the place to have one." Beau said pouring another cup of coffee for himself as he sat on a stool by the counter.

"God it would be like severing a limb to leave you and Tinks behind with sour old Enjoe for company. What would Tinks and Enjoe do if they got sick?"

"I'm well versed in medical. I had a lot of time to learn new things over the years. I'm going, they'll be fine." Beau said and Mandy looked to Farin.

"You'd need to hire another Engineer, Tinks is good, but he don't know everything about engines, he's the electronics whiz kid."

"Mind if I pipe in here? If you two plan to stay behind, can I be first in-line for a job application?" Val asked and Eran chuckled.

"Planet bound boy want adventure?"

"Seriously. I always wanted a job as a flight engineer. But I had the shop and Mom I couldn't leave her to run it alone. I'd gladly turn the shop over to Farin for this once in a lifetime chance."

"Farin?"

"I'll give him the appraisal. We'll see how the "Infinity" likes him."

"Fair enough. If Farin thinks you can replace him, the job is yours Val."

"WOOT!" Tinks hollered hugging Mandy's shoulders. "I so want a gazillion-million pictures of any rugrats Mandy. You hear me?!"

"Aye Tinks, everyone hears you when you talk loudmouth. I promise. Oh god I'm gonna cry now. Promise you guys will VISIT occasionally."

"That's a promise Mandy. But we're not saying good-bye for months yet. No getting sappy." Eran demanded standing and heading toward the door. "I do believe There's A Hoveby out here I'm dying to get my hands on. Val?"

Val just tossed Eran the key-lock control. "Go wild."

"YES!"

"Don't break your neck Eran!"

"Like it won't fix?"

"But it hurts!"

"I'll be careful Beau. Christ you're like a mother hen. Go lay an egg worry wart."

Beau just stuck his tongue out at Eran as everyone filtered outside to take turns riding the sports bike through the field. Even Mandy tore around the field like a madwomen hollering like a banshee.

It was late and all the leftovers from lunch were picked at for dinner as people began to retire in groups for the evening. Farin and Mandy to their room to watch a few classic vid-files they'd been meaning to catch up on. Beau and Eran had long since taken their leave of the others and Eran had only came out wrapped in a sheet to grab his cigarettes and beer before going back into their room again.

Tinks and Val were sitting outside at a small portable card table playing cards and laughing at whatever the other was talking about.

Life was tranquil and both moons shone full and bright over the camp on a muggy late summer's night.

----

Val was already in his bed as Tinks wandered around the room getting ready to turn in for the night himself. His toothbrush was hanging out of his mouth as he padded around the room in just his stocking feet and colorless gray military boxer shorts. He tossed his dirty clothes into a basket in the corner of the room, and then vanished into the bathroom.

Val had to stop himself from drooling down his own bare chest as Tinks returned from the bathroom, his hair unbound and falling in wave after wave down his back as he brushed out the day's braided confinement. "Damn it, it's humid, my hair is still wet from this morning in places."

"I'm not surprised your hair is thick and you did braid it wet."

"You braided it, and Thanks again, it stayed in place all day even on the Hoveby. Mine always manages to fall out two hours after I do it."

"My mother always said, and I quote, 'It's a pain in the ass to do it by yourself.' And hers wasn't as long as yours either." Val said as he watched Tinks brush almost hypnotized at the way the lights played off the myriad of shades and highlights.

"Your mom was accurate. Ow." Tinks hissed as he caught a particularly stubborn snarl. Val was itching to get up and brush it for him, but that was a little too intimate too quickly so he'd just oblige his growing fetish for long hair by watching Tinks groom himself. Soon Tinks had it brushed and rather than braiding it again, he contained his hair in a myriad of small cloth bands, half a dozen or more placed at intervals beginning at the nape of his neck right down to the end. It kept his hair from becoming tangled overnight, even if Val would have loved to have seen him keep it loose for more than the time it took to contain it. It really was extraordinary hair, he knew at least a dozen women who'd kill to have his locks.

"Ready for lights out?" Val asked as Tinks took off his socks and crawled under his sheet.

"Yup. Night Val, Thanks again for today, I had a blast."

"Me too. Night Cris." Val flipped off the light and could no longer see the wistful contented smile on Tinks' lips as they both relaxed to the sound of a distant owl hooting and nature singing a symphony in the moonlight.

Val woke up in the middle of the night with a protesting bladder and quietly made his way in the dark to the bathroom to relieve himself and was shocked to find on his way out that Tinks was not in his bed. He'd never heard Tinks get up and he was usually quite a light sleeper. Val sighed and slipped on his toe-peg sandals and walked out into the night.

With the moons full, it was quite easy to see outside and it didn't take long to find Tinks. He was still just dressed in his boxers and barefoot. He had his arms wrapped around himself where he sat on a fallen log, watching fireflies sparkle in the field. His shoulders were shaking and the night was warm so it was not cold that made Tinks shake this evening.

"Cris..." Val breathed and Tinks whipped around startled, hurriedly wiping his eyes.

"You scared me man. I tried not to wake you up."

"You didn't. My bladder did. Cris, I... is there anything I can do?" Val asked wanting desperately to help.

Tinks just shook his head turning back to look at the fireflies dancing in the night. "So pretty. Like stars."

"The fireflies?"

Tinks nodded.

"I haven't watched them in years. I used to catch them in glass jars as a kid and then let them loose in my bedroom to watch." Val said sitting next to Tinks on the log.

"The only insects in Mirastor are nasty things you would not want to set loose in your home. They never leave."

Val nodded as he reached out and gently caught a firefly that lit up his palm as he brought it back and then let it go to crawl into Cris' hair, lighting up the ends of his hair at the end of his banded ponytail. Cris smiled as the illuminating creature took wing and joined his fellows again.

"You don't have to keep me company Val. I don't sleep much. I hate sleeping."

"I know I don't have to, I want to."

"Why?"

"Because I like you. Do I need a reason to want to help a friend?"

"I suppose not." Tinks sighed, it was obvious Val wasn't planning to go anywhere any time soon.

"If you think these are pretty to look at, I've got a something for you to see." Val said taking Tinks' hand. "Come on."

Tinks allowed Val to take his hand and lead him back toward the dwelling. Val just held up a finger and ducked back inside for a moment, coming out with his spare set of sandals for Tinks to put on. "It's a bit rocky for bare feet." Was all he said before taking Tinks' hand again and leading him along the cave face, picking an entrance and leading Tinks inside.

"Were are you taking me?"

"You'll see, trust me." Val said as he led them a good way inside into a pitch-black passageway. Where he stopped and moved behind Tinks to place his hands over Tinks' eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying not to spoil the surprise, I want you to get the full impact. Shush." Val said urging Tinks forward blindly around a turn. "Ready? 1-2-3..." At the count of a breathless three Val took his hands from Tinks' eyes to reveal a cavern that seemed to positively glow with a bright luminous blue. From the pool of water on the ground to the stalactites to the stalagmites, everything was covered in what looked like liquid neon.

Tinks gasped and just drank in the sheer magnificent beauty of this hidden cave. "Oh Val!"

Val walked up behind Tinks and placed his hands on prominent hip bones and pressed his chest against Tinks' back, leaning close to breath into Tinks' ear. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Tinks practically melted into him with a shiver. "Phenomenal. I've never seen anything like it."

"Mm. I know. It's a natural wonder of these caves." Val said trailing his finger through the soft cool slime and bringing a little back on his finger ran it up Cris' arm. Leaving a glowing trail on skin.

"It's cold."

"I know." Val purred again in Cris' ear eliciting another shiver, once more drawing a trail of glowing gel like slime up Cris' other arm like finger paint.

"Val?"

"Ssssh, live in the moment Cris. Just breathe and look around you." Val said drawing more of the cool glow across Cris' chest. Spiral patterns, stars, circles and more, and doing it all from his position from behind Cris. Never obstructing his view of the cavern. Cris' knees were growing weaker by the moment.

"Val." The name was spoken no more than a desperate whisper.

"So beautiful." Val said, his lips brushing the ridge of Cris' ear in a phantom near kiss. Cris shivered and his knees did give out, but Val supported him and held him up. Cris' hands were gripping Val's thighs for support. "So very beautiful."

"Val." Cris' breath was short, needy and desperate. Val just turned him around slowly in his arms, Cris' arms wrapping around Val's neck, chest to chest making a mirror of patterns on Val's chest where they meshed and the glowing gel smeared between their bodies.

"May I kiss you?" Val asked and Cris' eyes went wide, no one had ever asked before. They always took what they wanted, no one ever asked.

"I may cry if you don't." Cris replied totally under Val's romantic spell.

Their lips met with a tentative touch and Val pulled back tasting his lips before pressing back in gently again. Another small caress of lips, another pause to savor the touch and then a lingering taste that had Cris clinging to Valerian's shoulders, his knees long since unable to support him under the tender onslaught.

Val pulled back for a final time and pressed his forehead against Cris' and just smiled fondly. Cris was breathless with wonder and both of them just wearing thin boxer shorts it was painfully obvious they had both enjoyed their first kiss. "As much as I would love to throw decorum out the window. I haven't wooed you near enough yet to warrant earning anything other than that beautiful kiss."

"God Val. That was... I have never been kissed like that. Ever."

Val just smiled Cris still in his arms. "You should never be kissed any other way."

Tinks eyes grew wide in almost panic and tried backing away. "No, God Val don't. I'm, I'm..."

Val held tighter and pulled Cris back in his arms, he'd half expected the sudden recoiling. "Cris, don't pull away from me and don't you dare tell me you're not worth the effort. I think you are."

"No, you don't know anything about me. I'm trash you deserve better."

"Damn it I know more than you think I do and it does not change my mind. I care about you; I want to get to know you better, I want there to be more between us in time. Don't shut me out Cris please."

"You don't understand. I was a WHORE, you don't want the leftovers."

"First I think I can decide what I want, which is you. Second, stop Cris. I heard you tell Eran. I know."

Here Cris almost fought to be free of Val's arms, but Val was bigger and stronger and just held on until Cris broke down and began to cry in frustration. Melting against Val in defeat. Val kissed his forehead. "Cris, you're worth every effort to me. I don't see your past when I look at you. I see a future I'd like to have alongside you. You had no control over your past; none of us do as children. Look at who you've become, please try and see what I see when I look at you."

"Val... I need, I'm so... lost."

"Let me help you find the peace your soul needs. I'm begging you to let me try. You're not alone; you're surrounded by so many who care for you just as you are. Let go of the past and embrace your future. If you can't turn to me, go to Eran, Beau, Mandy, Farin they all love you so much."

Cris nodded and Val smoothed his bangs back from his face. "You are a wonderful man Crispin Tinks. I refuse to leave you alone until you see it yourself."

"I promise not to run away if you promise not to press if I can't talk about it."

"Okay. I don't expect you to tell me all your secrets at once. I just want you to lean on me when you need comfort. That's all."

Cris nodded leaning into Val for a gentle embrace. "Let's go home, it's late and we both need sleep." Val said and Cris nodded and he slipped under Val's arm holding Val's waist as they walked back to their dwelling in silence. Once inside Val went to the bathroom and brought back a warm damp washcloth and smiled as he wiped his artwork off Cris' chest and arms. Rinsing the cloth off in the sink and hanging it to dry while Cris sat looking pensive on his bunk.

"Val?"

"Hm?" Val asked flipping off the bathroom light and crossing the room to kneel at Cris' feet.

"Thank you."

"Anytime beautiful."

Cris smiled and laid an elegant hand to Val's cheek. "You make me feel like it. Honestly."

"Good. Because you are."

"You don't have to ask you know."

"Ask what?"

"To kiss me."

"Yes I do. I will never take anything from you, not even a kiss, that you are not ready to give and that I have not earned."

"A gentleman. You're a rare breed Val."

"So are you Cris. So are you." Val said going to stand and a soft touch on his shoulder kept him rooted to the floor.

"May I kiss you?" Cris asked and Val smiled and nodded.

Cris first kissed each of Val's eyelids that fluttered shut as his gentle brush of lips. With lips quivering Cris slid to his knees in front of Val, his arms folding around Val's shoulders as their lips met. Val's strong arms came around his back and held him close. It was a drinking in of the senses. Darkness behind closed eyes, warm hands and smooth skin under fingertips, pollen and soap and natural musk from skin filling nostrils as they flared for air as lips and mouths tasted the newness of awakening affections.

Val was once again the one to pull apart gently. "I am so very much infatuated with you."

"The feeling is very mutual." Cris said laying his cheek against a broad shoulder.

Val smiled and kissed Cris' forehead before patting the bed. "Get in, I'll tuck you in." Cris chuckled but crawled into bed. Val did indeed tuck him in kissing the end of Cris' nose.

"Do I get a bedtime story too?" Cris asked grinning up at Val.

"Once upon a time there was this handsome prince who liked to stall when it was well past the time for sleeping. His faithful servant after dutifully tucking in his Prince told him a story of brilliant glowing caves of blue. The Prince dreamed of fireflies and slime and had sweet dreams." Val said with a smile and Cris laughed.

"You tell rotten stories."

"I'm not a storyteller." Val winked and stood. "Sweet Dreams Cris."

"Sweet Dreams my faithful servant."

Val bowed and crossed the room to his own bed for that night. He lay watching Cris for a while, who lay watching him in return. Soft smiles shared in the moonlight until eyes grew heavy and slumber could no longer be denied.

Neither awoke until Beau came to get them for breakfast.

For the first time since they'd met, Cris awoke looking rested and content.

They shared a chaste kiss good-morning, initiated by Tinks who found a certain 'tousled from sleep' redhead too much and too tempting first thing in a beautiful morning as Val tried to come around to wakefulness rubbing his eyes and stumbling to the bathroom. He seemed to perk up quite nicely as Tinks stole a peck as he vacated the bathroom for Val.

They headed to breakfast in the main room hand in hand and full of good cheer.

----

Over a few weeks things seemed to settle into a routine of sorts. Everyone gathered for breakfast first thing in the morning. Mandy had gone so far as to have Tinks build her a make-shift chicken coop and pen about fifty paces from what everyone had taken to just calling "The Homestead" and she had bought a dozen or more fat, live chickens and a rooster and now had fresh eggs daily. She was a woman in her element and she seemed to glow with happiness, even if Tinks threatened to strangle a noisy rooster who liked to make too much noise for his liking.

When she wasn't cooking up something new to fill up bellies, she was bent over a portable computer interface going over Beau's extensive data. Beau had been correct the creatures had permeated the very cells of the host. Removal would be impossible. However a test with fire proved that the mites would burn with the body. It was a rather painful end but one possible choice.

The other was quicker and painless. She sighed, it wasn't like she wasn't going to tell Beau and Eran something they didn't already know, but it still hurt to think about. "I'm afraid you really

only have one option. You're not ever going to age or change. But when you become too weary of life to go on, just turn off the life support on the ship. The mites will die in the absolute zero of space. You know bodies will explode almost instantly in the void of space, the internal pressure is too great and even the mites cannot adjust your body that quickly, the adrift cells will freeze. You can suicide with no pain. It's your choice though."

"I think it's a long way off yet, but I'm sure Eran and I will one day want to stop and rest. At least one won't have to live without the other and we can go together. That is a blessing." Beau said and Eran smiled and nodded.

"I may not get to see you as an old man, but you won't hear me complaining at what I do have. This is a huge universe, I'm sure will find many things to keep us entertained for a while yet." Eran said kissing Beaus cheek, then taking the data disk out of the computer and tossing it in the fire. "No records of this. The less people know of these creatures the less tempted they will be to seek out a fountain of youth. The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"That's probably very wise." Mandy said watching all the data disintegrate and float away up the chimney.

"Believe me Mandy, I know people. There's always somebody out there looking for a quick buck and who does not consider the consequences. Imagine if the Tsions had been immortal? None of us would be free now. All it would take is one ill-considered sale to the wrong person. There are people out there evil to the core, add being immortal into the equation? That is just a curse on the entire galaxy."

"For now we'll just keep them buried in the cave. When it's time to leave, we'll take them with us and let them go out in space." Beau said as Tinks wandered in to grab a few cold drinks.

He had a rag tied around his head to help keep the sweat out of his eyes; he wore a pair of cut off pants and a tattered tank top.

"You look like absolute shit." Eran muttered as Tinks drank almost his entire bottle of cold carbonated raspberry soda in one long gulp.

"Thanks for that assessment. You stay purdy in this heat. I'm baking up there."

"What are you doing?"

"Working on the radar grid relays. I want a longer range scan function and faster jamming and encrypting capabilities. I have the whole matrix torn apart up there. It looks like a night crawler orgy after a thunderstorm. I just needed a break, no shade and shiny steel. I'm a Fag on a Hot Tin Roof."

Everyone just burst out laughing as Mandy went to the cupboard she'd designated as first aide and came back with sunscreen. "Put that on, you're burning."

"Yes, Mom."

"I mean it Cris. I don't want you getting sunstroke on me. Erect some shade."

"With what? I'm taking breaks, don't worry."

Val chose that moment to walk in with Farin, both of them looking worn out too. "It's too damn hot out there today. I thought you said Osteril was a cool month." Farin said grabbing a drink and tossing one to Val.

"It normally is. Heat wave. Last ditch effort for summer before autumn bites us in the balls." Val said running his drink over his forehead first before draining it down his throat. He looked at Cris who was getting dark in the sun.

"Nice tan, but you're getting pink around the edges." Val said going to look for the sunscreen.

"Mandy beat you to it. I'm smeared. I only have an hour or two left before I can call it quits. I'm almost done and that's the last of my modifications up top. The rest I can tear apart inside."

"You'd better hurry. Take a look towards the ocean. We have a storm rolling in, and it's gonna be a good one, I can see the thunderheads from here." Beau gestured toward the window and Tinks nodded and headed back outside.

"I'll hurry." He replied quickly and hurried back outside and up the ladder to finish his job before water ruined his grid work.

"Did he tell you what he's done?" Farin asked as he took a break on an obliging stool.

"Faster Radar?"

"HA! Not just faster the little fucking genius. He's hooked the cannon and laser tracking systems into the radar. All sensory relays are on one interconnected matrix. They all talk to each other now, no mistakes. That boy thinks way outside of the box. He can control everything right from his station, or yours, or Val's even down in engineering. If he locks onto you with one system, he's got you targeted on all systems. From Navigation to trajectory to targeting, he's made you one very smart ship." Farin said impressed.

"Holy shit. Why on earth did he do that?"

"He wanted you to have the power of veto if needed. All command consoles are interconnected. You can see what he, Val and Enjoe are doing at all times and you can cancel orders with a push of a button."

"He noticed huh?"

"Yeah. He did, Enjoe's been a little too free with the cannons lately. He wanted you to be able to lock him down faster I suspect."

"Remind me to give Tinks a raise." Eran said quite relieved that Tinks had taken it upon himself to find a way to keep the first officer in line without making it LOOK like he'd done it to keep Enjoe monitored.

"Anyone heard from Enjoe at all?" Mandy asked and Eran shook his head.

"Nope. I sent a message to his communicator, letting him know our coordinates and intentions to stay until the New Year. All I got in reply was 'message received and acknowledged'. What an Asshole."

"You finally noticed? Enjoe has always been an asshole." Farin barked setting his empty bottle on the counter. "Sour kid, mean teenager, foul adult. That boy isn't right in the head I think sometimes."

"He's Augmented. They're all a little different." Mandy sighed.

Eran's eyes went wide. "AUGMENTED? And you were gonna tell me that when?"

"Christ Eran I thought you KNEW." Mandy answered back just as much in shock.

"What's Augmented?" Val asked, knowing of the elusive Enjoe from conversations with Cris.

"Military alteration. They stick a chip in your head, makes you really smart with strategic brilliance and deadly. If those chips go bad you can have a psychotic killer on your hands." Farin supplied the answer and Mandy continued.

"Not in Enjoe's case. He's new issue, if the chip goes bad, it'll release a corrosive. It'll kill him. Too many older versions did the mass murderer thing. New issues just have a meltdown, literally."

"Fuck. I wish I had known that before. Remind me to TRIPLE Cris' salary. He just gave me a huge piece of mind giving me control of Enjoe's movements."

"Why do you think he did it Eran? Even with a brain chip modification, you can't out wit Cris. He's too smart, he's lived outside the box his whole life, it's second nature to him to find a way when there is no way conceivable. Did Mandy ever show you his IQ test? 202, fucking 202 at age twelve. I'd wonder what he is today." Farin said and Val just smiled, he'd quickly made that observation on his own watching Cris work day to day.

Val was so far gone there was no return. He was totally in love and in awe. All those brains, all those fabulous good looks, all that gorgeous hair, all that insane energy and all of it tempered with huge amounts of genuine humility. A perfect package if ever he saw one.

It helped that over the past few weeks they'd had a lot of time to just sit and talk. Even after six weeks, it had not gone past simple old-fashioned kissing and petting in private corners, long walks just holding hands. They had grown to truly know the other; it was a solid friendship first and foremost. Sometimes taking things slow was the best way to grow into a solid relationship. The love was strong and growing stronger every day. Val could quite easily now envision spending the rest of his natural life with Cris. He didn't need to look anywhere else. Cris was everything he'd ever wished for and more.

Cris hadn't had a nightmare since that night they'd kissed for the first time and his confidence in himself was growing by leaps and bounds, it was nice to see Cris finally had a little self-esteem returning. It made everyone happy to see, not just Val. The change in Cris was palpable, he was a joy to be around, he was infectious and Val and everyone else were gratefully infected.

----

The storm rolled in just as Tinks managed to securely fasten the access hatch closed atop the "Infinity" the skies opened up in torrents as he screwed the last bolt home.

"Get off the ship you lunatic! Do you want to be electrocuted?" Val hollered through the wind as he emerged from within the ship, just finished himself with his days work.

"I'm coming now!" Tinks hollered back as he slipped and slid on the wet surface and down the ladder just as the thunder crashed. Val was waiting for him at the foot of the ladder.

"You're soaked!"

"So are you!" Tinks laughed holding his arms wide to the storm. "I love the rain!"

"Nut job. Come on." Val grinned but Tinks just shook his head and went running through the muddy field laughing like a boy possessed. Val naturally let Cris sweep him away into the spontaneous moment of frivolity and chased him.

Val caught up to Tinks as he paused to splash in a large puddle. "You're crazy you know that. You don't play in thunderstorms." A large boom and a flash across the sky punctuated Val's warning.

"I know. We just don't get many of these in space." Tinks replied raking back his hair that was plastered to his face. His braid half undone and hanging like a drenched rope behind him.

"I'll show you how to enjoy a rainstorm." Val insinuated with a waggling of eyebrows.

"Oh really? Do show me Don Juan." Tinks slipped into Val's arms tilting his head back offering, and Val took the invitation and kissed him slowly as rain fell on them in hard heavy drops.

Val and Cris tracked in water in their wake as they returned to their rooms, shedding soaked shirts on the floor near the door to be hung up to dry.

Val stoked a fire in their small hearth and set up a chair near it to drape their clothes over. "Alright you, strip and get in something DRY." Val ordered and Tinks obliged giving Val a nice view of his backside as he walked back across the room to wrap up only in his blanket.

"Dear God, don't tease me gorgeous."

"I like to tease."

"Devil."

"Why thank you for noticing."

Val just smiled and stripped to his own bare skin, Cris whistled low. "One of these days I'm going to be absolutely wicked and play connect the dots with all those beautiful spots."

"My Freckles? Curse of the Redhead, and don't you dare." Val shook a warning finger at Tinks as he wrapped in his own blanket and joined Tinks on his bunk.

"Oh see now, you told me not to. Big Mistake."

"You don't do what you're told?"

"Not if I can help it." Cris chuckled and Val smirked.

"Don't kiss me."

Cris laughed and gleefully pounced. Cris was flat on his back being kissed within an inch of his senses on his bunk and was breathless when Val sat up. "Such a wonderful temptation you are."

"So agonizingly slow you are. What do I have to do to get you to forget about being a gentleman? You're driving me crazy."

"Patience is a virtue."

"Screw Patience."

Val smiled and sat up "Believe me Cris it's hard not to. I want this to be special when it happens, I have... plans."

Cris cocked an eyebrow. "Plans? Such as?"

"Such as I am not telling you. It'll spoil it."

"You are so sickeningly romantic, even if you have me so wound up I feel like a wrist watch with a stripped thumbscrew."

"Where do you come up with your analogies?" Val chuckled Cris just shrugged.

A bright flash of light and deafening crash of thunder shook the dwelling and all the lights went out and both men flew to the door. "That was fucking close." Cris said his eyes straying to the "Infinity" but it wasn't the ship that had been struck by the lightening, the generators however weren't so lucky.

"Fuck. I know what my job is tonight. No sleep for me." Cris grumbled hoping he could salvage the wiring without having to 'borrow' from the "Infinity". Cris went to get dressed and Val laid a hand to his arm.

"You're not going out there in this weather."

"We sorta need power. Mandy went shopping earlier, the cooling units at least need power A.S.A.P."

"And risk getting electrocuted over milk?"

"I can at least get a trickle of power out of them I can direct to the kitchen in a few minutes if it's not fried totally. And lightening never strikes twice right?"

"Wrong."

"I do believe we are having our first argument." Cris grinned and Val just frowned and crossed his arms.

"Do I have to tie you up?"

"Oh, now there's a thought. Sounds like fun, but later handsome and I'm all yours, I'll bring the rope."

"Cris I'm serious. The storms here are notorious bastards. Milk can be replaced, you can't."

"At least let me LOOK then so I can see what I'll need to fix it. Okay?"

Val knew a losing argument when he saw one and sighed. "LOOK. Do not touch metal when you're not grounded."

"Duh." Cris said pulling on thick rubber gloves from his toolbox as he headed toward the door.

Five minutes, turned into ten and then fifteen. "Fucking idiot." Val grumbled getting dressed to go grab the fool who was NOT supposed to be working but looking.

Just as he hit the door, the lights came back on. Val threw his hands up in defeat.

Tinks waltzed back inside, drenched again looking pleased. "Simple. Just the circuit board."

"What part of LOOK is such a hard concept to grasp?"

"Val. I didn't work it outside. Took it off, brought it in, changed the board, put it back. Can you trust me not to be a fool? Please? I do know electricity and water don't mix for goodness sakes."

"I was just worried."

"I know, I'm touched, really. But last I looked I'm a big boy and this is my job."

"Point taken. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I really am touched you care." Cris said once more stripping down to bare skin to place more clothes by the fire and then dripped across the room naked to the bathroom for a towel. One wrapped around his middle and one around his head and hair he came back out to see Val sitting at the little card table they had set up, looking upset.

"What's wrong?"

"I feel like an ass. I didn't mean to treat you like that, I know you're not stupid and I should have never treated you like you were."

Cris smiled, he suddenly felt overwhelming affection for Val wash over his senses. "Val, look at me." Val turned and faced Cris as Cris sat in the chair across the small table. "I know what you meant. I can tell concern when I see it, you treated me like you loved me and were worried. I would hope you meant that."

Val smiled and took Cris' hand. "I do love you. Very much."

"I love you too. So please don't beat yourself up over something so silly. Okay?"

Val nodded and leaned across the table and met Cris halfway for a kiss. Cris' large almond shaped eyes were full of affection. His long dark eyelashes framed pale hazel almost golden eyes and with the fire reflected in them, they seemed like living flame. "You are mesmerizing."

"You are mushy. But you won't hear me complaining that you like to flatter me to the point I'm blushing like a girl. You spoil me."

"You deserve it."

"There you go again." Cris said taking the towel from his hair and dropping it on top of Val's head as he stood up to get dressed. The storm had made the very hot temperatures to plummet and on top of everything else Cris did not want a cold.

Val smiled and watched Cris raid his footlocker. "I gotta do laundry soon." Cris chuckled pulling out a t-shirt and his ever-present gray boxer shorts.

"Cris? DO you own anything that isn't colorless and doesn't have at least one hole in it?" Val asked noticing that Cris' wardrobe was something a pauper would turn down.

"Nope. All of these are pretty much all hand-me-downs. Except my underwear."

"You're not broke, don't you spend money on yourself?"

"I buy disks."

"Not enough to go broke. I meant clothes, mementos?"

"I've never even been in a clothes store. Most of my stuff is fine for the ship."

"You're gonna freeze. It gets cold here. Do you even own a coat?"

Cris shook his head and Val sighed and walked over to the trunk by his head and pulled out a sweater and tossed it to Cris. "Too big for you I know, but it's warmer than that sorry rag you call a shirt. When the rain lets up I am dragging you into town to buy some decent clothes."

"I don't wanna waste money. I may need it someday."

"True, but you need clothes too."

Cris just shrugged and pulled on Val's sweater. There were some things that Cris still had problems with, he never treated himself to anything other than the occasional music disk and sweets. He owned nothing even remotely personal, no pictures, no games, no jewelry, no luxuries of any kind, no cheap trinkets, the only thing he had was an old faded credit bill in a cheap Lucite frame. Val had learned that was the credit he had taken out of Eran's pocket the day Eran changed his life. And that he kept buried in his footlocker. Only Val knew he had it.

He did however notice in spite of Cris' denial to cater to his own whims, if anyone he cared about expressed an interest in something, Tinks usually bought it for them. He was beyond generous to others, and denied himself even necessities.

"You're worrying about me again. Quit frowning Val."

"Can't help it."

"Look. Growing up I didn't have anything, I'm used to making due with what I do have. Its just habit, I'm frugal."

"I won't argue Cris. I will however take you shopping for warm clothes and clothes that fit you properly."

"Whatever." Cris said pulling on a pair of socks and grabbing the deck of cards. "Play with me?"

"You're a shark, but deal." Val said sitting at the table as Cris shuffled the cards. Val's back was towards the door and Cris was facing it as the storm raged outside and the wind hammered at the door.

Cris was in mid shuffle when the door blew open and he froze solid and the cards went flying. Val turned around, about to get up to secure the door and halted. A man built about the same height and weight as Val stood in the doorway, his hair sodden and his steel blue eyes hard.

"Enjoe..." Cris' voice was shock and disbelief. "What are you?"

"Doing here? Am I not a apart of this crew?" Enjoe barked tossing his wet bag on the floor. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Valerian. Your new engineer. You must be Enjoe."

Enjoe just snorted. "Which is my bunk?"

"Hold on a minute here. We weren't expecting you, you just can't waltz in with no warning..." Cris began and melted when Enjoe locked him in a stare that defied description.

"You're out of line. Answer my Question Tinks."

Tinks like a scared child just collected a single pillow off his bunk. "You can have that one. I'll move to the Main room."

"You will not! I don't know just who the hell you think you are! But you can't run a man out of his bed because you feel like it. Had you informed us you were coming we'd have made arrangements for you. Common courtesy would dictate you take the fucking couch until we can get you a bunk."

Enjoe flopped down on the bed and lay down his back to Val and Tinks. Soaking the bed with his wet clothes, he didn't even respond.

By the time Val turned around Tinks was gone. Eran however was livid and flying into the door. "Enjoe Moira get on your feet!"

"I'm tired."

"I don't give a shit. What the hell did you do to Cris?"

"Cris who?"

"TINKS you idiot."

"Nothing."

"So why is he silent and bunking on the COUCH?"

"I need a bed."

"So you took HIS? You heartless bastard!"

"You did give mine to him" Enjoe hooked a thumb over his shoulder blindly indicating Val.

"Val is part of this crew! I am not talking to your backside EnJoe. Get the fuck up or I'll drag your ass up."

EnJoe deigned to roll over. "Tinks is smaller, the couch is fine for the likes of him."

Eran was pissed off, and his fist was about to connect EnJoe's face when another did it for him. Val was flushed and angry red, and his eyes were burning with rage. "How dare you. You pompous bastard! The likes of him? THE LIKES OF HIM? Let me tell you, you son of a bitch if you insult him again in my presence I'll kick in your fucking teeth."

EnJoe rubbed his cheekbone and glared daggers at Val. "its just Tinks, What the fuck was that for?"

Suddenly Tinks was there, stopping Val from diving in for a brawl. "Stop Val. He's right, I'm not worth it. Don't fight, please."

"Cris..." Val was deflated, all the progress made shattered in five minutes.

"Get me towel Tinks." EnJoe ordered and to Val and Eran's utter dismay, Tinks' obeyed.

"Stop right there Cris." Eran growled by this time everyone else had arrived to witness the ruckus of EnJoe's return.

"I am Captain here, I am the ONLY person giving orders is that perfectly understood? Good. EnJoe get the fuck up off that bed immediately. Cris I don't care if he tells you to get him TOILET PAPER you do not take orders from him that shit stops now. Val, okay I can't yell at you, he deserved that punch. EnJoe you are not moving. GET UP." Eran grabbed hold of EnJoe's shirtfront and pulled him bodily to his feet.

"I fought Tsions twice your size. Don't fuck with me EnJoe. Do not even TRY. Until we can set you up somewhere to stay on NO NOTICE you sleep in the main room. This is THEIR ROOM and you leave them alone."

EnJoe shook free and stormed out pushing past Mandy and Farin who stood there in shock.

"Eran, really it's no trouble I..." Cris began and Eran held up his hand for silence.

"No Cris. I will not let you be bullied by him. He treats you like shit and I'm not going to stand by and let him do it anymore. Val, I trust you won't allow it either?"

"Absolutely not."

"Good."

"Eran I think we need to talk about this." Beau looked worried and Farin stepped into the room and shut the door.

"He's right. He's worse. Eran you do not want him with you in deep space. I recommend a severance package and walking papers." Farin said and Eran sighed torn.

"This was his last chance. If he's does not get better before the New Year I'll take your advice."

Everyone nodded solemnly and shut the door behind them as they left Cris and Val alone.

Cris crawled into Val's arms and cried quietly. "Ssssh. Did he always treat you like that?" Val asked trying to contain his anger, Cris nodded.

"No more Cris. You're better than that."

"I thought I loved him for a long time." Cris whispered and Val's blood ran cold at the thought.

"Now?" Val desperately needed to hear Cris say he loved him.

"Now? I know what I felt wasn't love. I know what that feels like now. I love you Val."

Val was relieved and Clutched Cris to his chest. "I love you too. I do not let people treat those I love like that either. No more Cris, I won't allow him to treat you like that any more."

"I feel sick."

"I know. I know." Val just held Cris close and let him slump against him for comfort.

Mandy and Beau came back with Hot Chocolate and cookies. Those seemed to lift Cris' spirits a little, but he begged fatigue and was going to go to bed until he realized his was wet. Val wasted no time in tucking Cris into his bed for the night, crawling in beside him to just hold while he slept.

The nightmare Cris was having woke Val up several minutes before Val could wake Cris up from it. It was a long night; everything was back to square one. Cris had crawled back into his shell, faked smiles that never reached his eyes and for the first time in six weeks, he was looking for alcohol and escape.

Val just held him and let him cry it out until he could go back to sleep, exhausted emotionally.

Val for the first time knew what hate was, he hated Enjoe with every fiber of his being for doing this to the man he loved.

----

The following Morning over breakfast the brave face Cris wore fooled no one. They'd gotten used to seeing Cris jovial and bright naturally, the forced cheer with blank eyes was disturbing. Enjoe was surly, ate without comment and just his presence seemed to curtail any frivolous banter that had become routine at breakfast.

"Where am I going to sleep and what needs to be done?" Enjoe said finishing his coffee.

Eran resisted the urge to slam his mug down. "First, we have to see if there are any more pre-fabs in Rael, second, just lend a hand to whomever needs it. Your particular skills during a maintenance schedule really are rather useless. You can't overhaul an Engine and Cris has the network under control. You, like me, are relegated to being a fetch boy."

"Fetch Boy?" Enjoe raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. If I can do it, you can."

"Don't forget, practice is tonight." Beau stated pointedly changing the subject. Cris seemed to brighten.

"I forgot! I didn't practice at all this week." Cris moaned and Val chuckled.

"You already know the part, and you sing in the shower, that's practice." Val grinned and Cris winked.

Enjoe just sat there wondering what the hell they were talking about and why were Val and Cris so - close?

"It's still raining out there and it's cold. DO you mind if I steal Cris this morning? His wardrobe needs a little warming up."

"Finally someone else noticed. Yes, take him please. Cris I'm begging buy anything but Gray. In fact, take me with you?" Beau asked and Cris blinked.

"Hey, not you too. Val gave me a lecture already thanks, I don't look that bad."

"Yes you do." Enjoe said and Cris looked hurt for a split second and Val's eyes narrowed.

"You don't look bad, you just look unkempt. Can I help it if I wanna see my man all dolled up?"

Enjoe's head whipped around and his eyes widened when Cris leaned over and kissed Val tenderly. "I guess you're allowed I suppose."

"That's settled then. SHOPPING TRIP!" Beau cheered holding out his hand. Eran rolled his eyes.

"Oh hell no Beau. I'm going too, I'LL hold the credit disk. Spend-a-holic."

"Spoil sport."

"WHAT. THE. HELL?"

Enjoe's outburst had everyone pause to look at him. "What?"

"First off since when did that happen?" Here Enjoe pointed to Cris.

"About twenty-three years ago, some cheap chick squatted and pushed." Cris growled.

"No you idiot. Cris, since when do you suddenly start going by Cris and what the hell is going on between you two?" He pointed at Val who was smirking.

"Cris is my name and I dunno. Val started calling me that and it caught on with everyone else I suppose and is it not OBVIOUS what's going on?"

"I'd say you're... together." Enjoe was going to say 'lovers' and changed his mind. He couldn't say it, it was incomprehensible, Tinks was his, the little whore was anyone's if he was drunk enough. Hell he'd even screwed him a dozen times or more. Granted Tinks had been so wasted he never remembered, but Enjoe did, every alley they'd ever done it in actually. Tinks would usually pass out half way through the process and Enjoe would have to finish with a limp body. He liked those moments best, Tinks was really pliant when he was out of it, not that he wouldn't be pliant

sober, Enjoe just had never wanted emotional baggage from the idiot, Tinks not remembering was a good thing, the wonderful little whore.

Sometimes it took a few well-placed powders in Tinks' drinks to get him stone drunk faster, but once he was out of his senses he was perfectly broken in and quite built for the rough stuff. Tinks never cried, even when Enjoe had him flat against a wall without an ounce of lubrication other than spit. A drunk Tinks was a very useful Tinks. There were a few times however he'd almost been caught by Eran and had to leave Tinks naked from the waist down in some alley, but most of the time, they just thought Enjoe had found him drunk and carried him back to the ship. No one, not even Tinks knew the truth. Tinks was his, not this interloper's.

"You'd be right, we are together." Cris stood and walked around Val and laid his hands on Val's shoulders. "He's the best thing that ever happened to me and I love him. You had better not have a problem with that."

Enjoe registered shock, who'd have thought the little gutter slut would find someone? Enjoe assumed Val just didn't know the truth about Tinks; he'd make sure he found out later. Enjoe's outward appearance however never changed. How dare this man take what was his. Enjoe was furious, his mind was already pondering future courses of action.

To everyone else, it was lovely to see Cris standing up for himself, but he usually did stand up to Enjoe, he just didn't fight for long most times, he grew weary of fighting fast and gave in ninety-nine percent of the time.

"Whatever. Until you need me then I'll be reading." Enjoe left the room and everyone took a much-needed collective breath.

Enjoe disappeared into the "Infinity" to collect his books and Mandy flopped onto the couch. "Well, there goes the neighborhood."

Eran snorted. "That's it, I'm calling an R&R from the R&R. Day off for everyone, Christ I need to go blow off steam."

Beau nodded and looked to Tinks. "I'm sorry."

"Hey don't sweat it man. Enjoe is just being surly. Especially when he's not privy to all our crap. Not our fault he didn't come with us." Cris said turning toward the door. "And if we are going out I need a shower first I feel like crap."

"I need one too actually." Val said grinning and standing to follow Cris.

"You just wanna look at my naked ass."

"That too."

Eran and Beau chuckled as the pair left the room.

"Speaking of beautiful posteriors..." Eran turned to look at Beau.

"I'll go start the shower."

"Good idea."

Farin turned to look at his wife still seated on the couch. "Wish I was that young again."

"Farin honey, don't knock yourself. You didn't hear me complaining last night did you?" Mandy grinned over her coffee mug.

"I'm a lucky man. You get sexier every year. I must say I thought you were gorgeous when you were eighteen, you at thirty-five? No comparison. You are all woman and a damn fine one."

"Glad you still think so, I have news for you."

Farin raised an eyebrow; he knew his wife and her news flashes. He was glad he was sitting down. "What?"

"Did you happen to check your pocket this morning?"

"No..." Farin fished in his pocket and felt a small tube. He pulled out the small sealed test tube filled with a blue liquid. "...What's this?"

"A test."

"A test?"

"For such a brilliant man, you can be a little slow on the uptake, dad."

Farin just smiled and looked into Mandy's eyes. "You only just stopped taking the drugs."

"Six weeks ago. You knocked me up first fertile cycle stud."

"Hot damn! Come here sexy mama."

Mandy met Farin mid room and got a kiss that curled her toes.

"I'm really enjoying retirement." Farin chuckled and Mandy winked.

"Retirement? Ha, you've got a family to support now."

"I think we'll scrape by with the business Val so graciously gave us. I took a look at the books, damn profitable; he gave us a gold mine. I love that kid, I love it here, I love the people here, and I REALLY love you."

"I love you too, you need a shave."

"Yes, ma'am." Farin saluted and headed into their room for a shower like the rest, Mandy waltzing in behind him.

"You've got a nice ass too ya know." She snickered as she shut the door.

----

"Beau what are you looking at?" Eran asked as Beau peered through a shop window as the quartet stopped for coffee at the Fontesque Bakery.

"The toys in the window over there. I think we should take one back for Mandy and Farin."

"Whatever for?" Eran asked as Val and Cris were collecting their coffee at the counter still.

"The baby of course. Duh."

"She's got eight more months to go yet. We don't even know if it's a girl or a boy."

"Five credits it's a girl." Cris said as he and Val joined Beau and Eran at the table in the corner near the window.

"You're on. Five on a boy." Beau countered pointing at the toy store across the street.

"Oh good idea. We should get her something to celebrate the news." Cris said and Beau turned an "I told you so" look towards Eran.

"That's what I thought too." Beau said holding out his hand and Eran sighed and dropped his credit disk in Beau's hand. "Thank you oh light of my life." Beau chirped pocketing the disk.

The group wandered across the street after they finished their coffee and came out several bags heavier. The baby had everything from plush toys to a crib by the time they had finished shopping. A quick detour to the shuttle to drop off unexpected purchases and they were once more off on foot walking the streets crammed full of shops and boutiques of all shapes and sizes.

"Now for what we came for... To the men's shop with you my fine handsome fellow." Val said grabbing Cris' hand and setting off down the street. Beau taking Eran's as they followed.

"They are fabulous for each other. I'm watching us when you were wooing me, you were and are such a romantic fool." Beau said and Eran smiled.

"I know. No telling my secrets Beau. I have an image to maintain I'll have you know. I think I'm finally going to enjoy life for a change. I've got you, we have them as friends, we'll have fun together."

"We already are. Oh look the music store! I need new strings for the guitar." Beau changed gears so quickly Eran had almost forgotten what a flighty spontaneous joy he was to be around. Eran just followed and watched Beau blow his credits, not giving a damn. He had always wanted to be able to spoil Beau rotten, now was his chance. They caught up to Val and Cris a few minutes later and Cris was just standing there in the men's clothier foyer looking daunted.

"I think he's overwhelmed." Beau teased swooshing past and grabbing Cris' hand in the process. "Green if you do not buy something green to wear with your coloring it would be a crime."

"Purple. He's must get something purple. I love that color, it will look great on him." Val added and Beau brightened.

"OH! Definitely." Beau nodded approvingly.

"Save me Eran!" Cris looked horrified.

"Deal with it, I do. I'm going outside for a smoke, Beau please buy me a warm coat while you bankrupt us please? You always dressed me well I trust your taste. Have fun kiddies." Beau nodded, glee in his eyes at being under orders to not only buy both he and Eran some decent winter clothes, but everything for Cris was going to be a gift of thanks.

Eran knew if they had told Cris beforehand they wanted to treat him to a new wardrobe he'd not accept the offer, so while they showered that morning, Eran and Beau formulated the plan to get Cris to try on everything Beau shoved under his nose. Once Beau had an inkling of size and taste he'd then let Cris be frugal and pick the few things he's opt to buy on his own.

Then the trap would be sprung. Beau would just grab everything that fit Cris as well as the ones Cris had chosen to spend his pinched and saved credits on and Beau would buy the whole lot.

The boy, who saved every credit for a rainy day, was about to be showered with appreciation and his hoarded credits would still be there for the next rainy day to come along.

Eran left the others to outfit Cris; he knew whatever Beau and Val decided on would be fine. He was not much to shop for himself either, he felt sorry for Beau's victim as he lit up and watched the hustle and bustle of the town around him while he waited for the others to finish.

----

Cris was done shopping in his mind. He was tired; he must have tried on dozens of outfits to humor Val and Beau. He had taken up to the counter a single shirt in purple because Val liked it, a new pair of denim pants, a Green sweater because Beau had liked it and a black leather jacket because he had liked it. He would have picked up a few of the rather funny t-shirts he and Beau had laughed over, but he was here for something more substantial than a t-shirt. Even if Beau was already wearing one over his longer sleeved shirt.

The front of the light blue shirt had big dark blue lettering that read: "I suffer from Attention Deficit Syndr... Oh look SHINEY THINGS!"

Eran had taken one look at Beau, stuck his head in the door and remarked with a smirk "At least it's accurate advertising flake."

Beau just grinned and waltzed up behind Cris as he laid his measly few selections on the sales counter with his arms laden. Beau had everything Cris had tried on and all the things Beau had picked out for Eran and himself to wear piled on the counter and had shoved himself in front of Cris to pay for it all.

You can't do that. No don't let him do that!" Cris argued with the sales clerk. Beau just nudged Cris out of the way with his hip and handed the giggling girl Eran's credit disk.

"Val come hold your man out of the way. We'll take it all thanks, oh and the one I'm wearing."

"Beau are you CRAZY? I can't let you buy all that stuff for me!" Cris was dumbstruck and wide-eyed.

"I think he and Eran have other plans." Val smirked as Beau paid for the bounty.

"But, But!"

"But nothing. You'd have told us no, like you're doing now, if we'd told you we were going to do this. Deal with it Cris. You do a lot for us, we want to return the favor that's all." Eran said as he walked inside to take the bags off the counter to help carry back to the shuttle.

"Eran... Beau... I..." Cris stood there in shock stammering.

"I don't even want a thank you damn it. Come on, I'm hungry and I want lunch over at the pub after we drop these off. I'm in the mood for some fish-n-chips." Eran quipped just toting out the bags. Beau held up the purple shirt, those hot black leather pants Beau had insisted Cris try on and were exactly like the pair he'd gotten for Eran too while he was at it and the new jacket.

"Go change into these." Beau ordered and Cris in a daze changed out of his ratty flannel pants and shirt and came out looking downright sinful in the new clothes he'd just received.

"You're right Val, purple is so his color."

"I told you so." Val drank in the sight, with his hair loose for warmth on a chilly day Val thought he was looking at a God as Cris walked out shyly.

"I still think these are too small." Cris said as Val helped him on with his new leather jacket.

"You said that before. They are just the right size for you. You just aren't swimming in your clothes for a change. I mean look at that build! Show off your ass, you got a great one." Beau grinned as he flounced out of the shop pleased with his handiwork.

"Beau's right, I love seeing you look like this. You're gorgeous." Val breathed as he pulled Cris' hair out of the back of his jacket and Cris took his arm. Even the shop counter girl complimented the new look. Val was blushing as everyone headed down the street for lunch at a local tavern. They just made a pit stop at the shuttle to add the bags of clothes to all the baby paraphernalia already in the back.

Cris had recovered sufficiently from his shock to curse them all for being sneaky, thanking them profusely for the wonderful surprise and gifts and vowing revenge on them all at his earliest opportunity amidst several rounds of fish, chips and lager.

During their meal a few of the girls from the choir came in and immediately gravitated over to Beau. "We're still having practice tonight right?" They asked obviously infatuated with the talented Choir leader.

"Naturally." Beau smiled affably. Eran just smirked into his brew, girls forever flirted with Beau and the shit let them. The adorable attention whore he was ate it up like there was no tomorrow.

"Oh hey Wow, I didn't even RECOGNIZE you Cris. God I want your hair, I've never seen it down. I'm so jealous." One of the trio of young girls came over and sat beside Cris on the bench. "You look great, what's different?" She asked scrutinizing Cris as he sat there trying to finish his lunch.

"New outfit, he's hot huh?" Beau teased and winked at Cris.

"Fucking Flirt." Eran chuckled under his breath.

"You get off on it." Beau shot right back and Eran winked.

"I'll say he looks great. Too bad you won't stay on Pirotaine."

"Sorry, no can do. Someone has gotta keep Eran from getting into trouble out there with the Feds."

"That's very true." Eran just stated fact.

"Val you're leaving with them too aren't you?"

"Afraid so Serine. I gotta keep him out of trouble." Val winked at Cris who smiled and chucked a chip at him.

"I'm low maintenance. Be glad."

"Trust me I am." Val grinned and the three girls finally realized a sad fact. Cris was off the market.

"Wait a minute. Are you and Cris a couple?" Serine asked Val who winked.

"OH MY GOD! How ROMANTIC!" Serine was toast, history, off in cheap romance novel land complete with obligatory stars in her eyes.

"Quite sickening really watching those two make puppy eyes at each other all the time." Eran grunted and Beau kicked him.

"Liar."

"Ow! Damn it Beau. Spousal Abuse!"

Three girls turned as one. "Those really are binding rings?"

"Last I looked they were." Eran was getting tired of seventeen-year-old girls, quickly.

"Oh man Tergie is gonna cry she SO has a crush on you." Serine said to Beau who shrugged.

"I'm sorry girls, I'm a bonded man, have been a long time."

"Ah well, we'll see you guys tonight, gotta get our lunch and take it back, we're only on break from next door."

All three girls came and went and four men paid their tab and headed out to wander the town for a while and kill time until practice.

"How come no one ever gets a crush on me?" Eran asked as they walked, he wasn't bad looking; in fact he was rather the extreme opposite. Beau hooked himself under Eran's arm.

"I got a crush on you." Beau purred and Eran smiled.

"Okay, how come no GIRLS ever get a crush on me?"

"Dude, you're scary. Girls crush on you from afar. They LOVE the bad boys, but only if their parents don't find out." Cris stated as they paused by a vendor selling hot chocolate and popcorn on a street corner.

"God that smells GOOOOD" Cris sighed.

"And nothing smells as BAD as burnt popcorn." Val chuckled buying everyone a small bag of it and hot chocolate to wash it down with.

"That's true enough." Beau wrinkled his nose as they perched themselves on some obliging planter boxes to eat the treat and just continue to enjoy the day and each other's company.

They were seated outside a small jeweler's, and in the display case window Val's eyes caught something he knew he'd want a closer look at and while Cris walked out of ear shot to throw everyone's bags and cups away Val grabbed Beau. "Keep him OCCUPIED for ten minutes."

Beau gave a conspiratorial grin and waylaid Cris and hauled him into a local arcade. Eran along for the ride and Beau's credit needs, Eran was enjoying himself more than he had in far too many years. It was fun just being a twenty-three-year old again, he felt young and alive, it was a magical feeling he'd thought lost forever. Being old chronologically no longer meant having to act like it, being young at heart was the cure for being immortal.

As soon as they were out of sight Val dashed into the jeweler's, he had to be fast. "The set in the window. How much?"

"Which one?"

"The silver and gold braided ones."

"Oh pretty, those we got in yesterday."

"How much?"

"Seven-fifty."

"Sold. Hurry I don't wanna get caught."

"Ah, surprise eh?" The girl asked as she took Val's purchase from the window and wrapped them up, taking his credit disk and ringing up the sale.

"Yeah, gonna save it until Winterfest. Was gonna do this anyway, but those really caught my eye. Figured get them now before they were gone."

"Good idea. I knew those would go fast. Simple but stunning, I'm sure the one you're going to give this too will love it."

"I hope so. Thanks!" Val hid his purchase in his vest pocket and dashed into the arcade.

Eran and Cris were battling each other on a racing game as Beau tackled him.

"SHOW ME!" Beau was giddy as they hid around a bank of games. Val handed Beau the small package for a quick peek.

"Val! Gorgeous! Oh my god, when you going to?"

"Winterfest I think. If I can wait that long."

"Hurry, put it away. He's gonna love it."

"You think so?"

"Val, you have NOTHING to worry about. He'll melt into his shoes."

"Good." Val said tucking away his gift as Cris and Eran finished and Cris came away smirking.

"Dude you never have and never will beat me in that game."

"Fucker." Eran sulked as Cris slipped under Val's arm.

"You look smug." Val teased and Cris smiled.

"Of course. What's next?"

"It's almost time actually, we should head over to practice." Beau said checking his watch and once more the group was off, Cris none the wiser that he was leaning against a present tucked in Val's inner coat pocket.

----

Beau was seated at the piano at the front of the room, everyone else were seated in their sections. Eran and Val in the bass section, Cris with the tenors all of them with very old books of festival music.

"All right, everyone's here, let's do a quick warm up first and then I want to do a run through of "Good men, Goodwill." Beau stated doing scales on the piano for the voices to sing to for warm up.

Warmed up, Cris was ready to settle into a run through of the song when Beau made his heart fall into his shoes. "Cris, please try the cantor line."

"What?"

"You heard me. Take the high cantor."

"I can't sing that."

"Yes you can. Don't argue with the director."

"Beau!"

"One, two, one, two, three, four..." Beau just smiled and counted time, the choir began to sing and Cris grumbled under his breath that he was going to kick a blond ass later.

As the Choir sang through the first verse Cris began to panic, during the last verse, he'd be singing a counterpoint to the choir, now he knew why Beau had made him "practice" with him. The lying sack of shit, Eran better not be too attached, Beau was dead meat. The Choir sang and during the last chorus, Cris would sing a cantor descant in counterpoint.

Oh ye Good Men who led us all hence  
From famine and war and pestilence.  
We sing of you our forefathers of Peace  
Who gave us all grace, good will and love.

Sing all Good Men, Good Ladies and All  
Sing to your Mothers and Fathers, Honor them True.

Sing to your Sisters, The Fair and Bold  
 Sing to your Brothers the Brave and Strong  
 Sing to your Loved Ones Both the Young and Old  
 Sing to the heavens of Goodwill and Love.

Pirotaine our beacon of Hope  
 You shone for us in our darkest hour  
 We came to you, lost sheep from the stars  
 You gave us all grace, Goodwill and Love.

Sing all Good Men, Good Ladies and All  
 Sing to your Mothers and Fathers, Honor them True.  
 Sing to your Sisters, The Fair and Bold  
 Sing to your Brothers the Brave and Strong  
 Sing to your Loved Ones Both the Young and Old  
 Sing to the heavens of Goodwill and Love.

Sing all Good Men, Good Ladies and All -- **(All hearts rejoice in this season of Peace)**  
 Sing to your Mothers and Fathers, Honor them True. -- **(Young and old we sing for you)**  
 Sing to your Sisters, The Fair and Bold -- **(Lovers hold each other close.)**  
 Sing to your Brothers the Brave and Strong -- **(Friends will raise another toast.)**  
 Sing to your Loved Ones Both the Young and Old -- **(Honor the founding with your songs)**  
 Sing to the heavens of Goodwill and Love. -- **(Oh Pirotaine, we've come home.)**

"That was GREAT CRIS!" One of the Altos cheered.

"I knew it would be." Beau smirked and crossed his arms across his chest and Cris flipped him off.

"I hate you Blondie. I am so not doing that again."

"Why not?" One of the sopranos asked looking deflated.

"Because BEAU is the soloist, not me. I'm not even FROM Pirotaine, you are Beau."

"I thought it was beautiful, and you're here now and it's the spirit that counts Cris. Please?" Val looked about ready to piss himself. Cris caved in like an anthill made of sand. He could not tell that man no, damn it all.

"That's settled then. Serine please sing the solo in "Rejoice, Oh Sister" ready everyone?" Beau carried on with rehearsal.

He had picked enough old classics to feature everyone in the small choir at least once. Granted, he was a self-admitted ham, but even he wasn't so vain as to think he was the ONLY one good enough to sing solo. That wasn't in the spirit of the season. Yes, he was good, so were the others in their own unique ways. He happened to be a fan of Cris' voice; he had an untrained natural beauty. Val made his toes curl in the best of ways, he always did like a good booming bass voice, he'd so make him sing "Drink of Cheer, O Brother!" He was positive he was going to be given hell for it at home, but it was worth it if he got them to sing. He would not dare try and make Eran sing solo, he had to share a bed with him and he knew Eran hated to sing at all, it was a shock he was even here in the first place. Beau knew not to hedge his bets; he'd fold the cards and walk away still ahead.

Soon enough the practice was over and everyone was heading home for dinner, including a quartet of young men who had all had a wonderful day with each other. Mandy was crying over the presents for the baby, Farin was trying to get her to stop, Cris was putting away his new clothes, Val was hiding Cris' Winterfest gift in his trunk under an old pair of socks, Beau and Eran were helping in the kitchen and Enjoe was watching them all wondering what the hell had happened in six weeks.

They had all gone DOMESTIC. He could not wait to get off this backward planet, so he stuck his nose back in his book and ignored them all.

----

During the day while the others had been out Farin and Mandy had set about making space for Enjoe, it would serve two purposes, since this was their home now, they had built a totally separate room in their vast private section of the "Homestead". Right now it would be Enjoe's room, but once he left, it would become the nursery for the baby. Close enough to sleeping parents to attend to until the child was old enough to have it's own room where Cris and Val were currently living.

Everyone was gathered around the table for dinner and as they ate Mandy struck up a conversation. "I have a question for the Pirotaine natives. Your binding rings, how come some of you wear them on the right hands and some of you on the left?" Mandy asked and Beau smiled and swallowed before answering.

"Simple. They start out on the right hand. You're BANDED if they are on the right hand. That means you intend on being bonded but have not taken any vows yet. It's a symbol of intent and commitment. You move them to your left hand and become BONDED during the vow ceremony. Some people stay banded some bond. Like take Eran and me for instance, I think I wore my ring on my right hand all of a week before Eran had me up taking vows in-front of all our friends. My sister, god rest her soul, was banded three years and had two children with her partner until they got around to the vow ceremony. It's different for everyone." Beau stated diving in for seconds of the peas and carrots on the table.

"AH, now that makes sense, practical." Mandy nodded understanding the difference.

"Why do people have to attach symbols to sex? Its just sex." Enjoe grumbled sawing away at his steak.

"It's not about sex idiot. It's about love." Cris replied rolling his eyes.

"Same thing."

"Hardly." Val said pouring more tea into his cup.

"I fail to see the point. Emotions are excuses for explaining natural and biological behavior. Sex is a Drive, Like Hunger, breathing, sleeping. All people have the need. But they repress sex and have to make up an excuse to have it. Stupid."

"Is that really how you see it?" Cris asked a little shocked.

"Of course. You want it; you take it, why make excuses? Just do it without guilt, without emotional baggage. It's a hormonal impulse."

"How sad. Really." Cris sighed. "I used to think that too. I really hope you find someone to Love Enjoe, you'll see the difference. "

"Sad? I call it fact. If you're so wise on the subject now, enlighten me."

"It's like, I dunno. It's hard to describe a feeling. I wake up and I can't wait to see him, I go to bed and he's the last thing on my mind."

"It's good sex and the desire for more."

"Very wrong." It was Eran's turn to speak. "Sex is meaningless gratification. Feels good in the moment and is gone. Love remains and after you fall in love, really and truly you find a piece of your soul and then there is nothing left after it's gone. Believe me, I know."

Enjoe just looked to the only man in the room he respected and just raised an eyebrow. "What the hell happened to you?"

"You knew a very dead me Joe. You knew me after I thought I had lost everything that meant something to me. I was a shell; I was nothing but emotional baggage as you call it. Sex means nothing after you experience it with a partner you love. If you lose that partner, even the joy of sex is gone."

"Bullshit. It's denial."

"Christ Joe, you're stubborn. Believe what you like, find one empty relationship after another if that's your view on it, but you knock everyone who does not think like you. There's an entire planet here of people who'd disagree with you, and I'm sure there are more out there as sour as you. Can we kill this stupid argument? Just accept the fact that there are people in this room who do want to have that emotional baggage. I feel a hell of a lot happier than I have in almost two centuries. I do not plan on going back into that shell you knew. Accept the change or fuck off I really don't give a damn."

"I still think this so called Love is just a by-product of really great sex."

"See that's where you're wrong. Val and I haven't yet. But I still love him desperately. Love is not sex. It has nothing to do with sex." Cris said understanding now why Val made it a point to wait before they slept together. He finally understood, he had been like Enjoe a once; Val opened his eyes to what Love really was all about.

"You haven't? You!?! Look how you're dressed like a slut, Mr. Tight Pants, tell me you're not advertising merchandise for sale. The last person I'd believe falling for love is you. You make a poor argument knowing how you'll make any man happy with a couple of drinks down your throat." Enjoe was shocked, he was positive Cris was flat on his back already.

Cris looked crushed for a brief moment then angry, but rather than argue he just got up from the table. "Why do you always have to insult me? Did I kill your mother in a past life?" Cris grumbled taking his leave of the table and out the door.

Val fumed. "If you bring up his past again to hurt him out of spite again I'll murder you." Val shoved up from the table, knocking his chair over and headed outside after Cris before he kicked in Enjoe's teeth.

Enjoe just could not understand what the hell was going on, he only stated the truth. Everyone always got bent out of shape when faced with the facts. He failed to understand people, he was done for the evening and was about to go to his room when Eran appeared before him and shoved him back into his chair.

"You sit the fuck back down before I shove my foot up your ass." Eran growled backhanding Enjoe across the face hard enough for him to see stars.

"I picked your sorry ass up off the streets too and I'd be more than happy to put you back. You wanted to know what the fuck was wrong? What happened? I can ask the same question you ungrateful, mean-spirited little punk. Just what the hell is wrong with you? Why do you torment Cris?"

Enjoe rubbed his jaw and scowled. "It's FACTS."

"No it's insults. Christ do you think he wanted the life he was forced into as a kid? Of course not! He's trying to move on, you keep shoving him back. Why? DO you get some sick pleasure in hurting him? I thought you loved him!" Here Eran's jaw dropped, he'd just connected the dots.

"Enjoe, you have five minutes to explain yourself before I kill you."

"Explain what?"

"I'm not stupid. All that talk about sex and love. You son of a bitch. All those times, all those times I found Cris left like a used rag doll in shit-holes, it was YOU wasn't it? WASN'T IT?!"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Enjoe never met Eran's eyes.

"I can't prove it, but if I do so help me God I will kill you with my own hands! I trusted you! You betrayed us all. Get out, you're dismissed from duty, you are no longer a part of this crew. You have one hour to collect your things and get out of my sight."

"Eran! I..." Enjoe looked in shock, surely this wasn't happening.

"He said leave." Beau was beside Eran, arms folded across his chest, flanking Eran to the right, Farin appearing at Eran's left.

"You stay out of this Pretty Boy!" Enjoe barked at Beau, which was a mistake. Eran's fist was slammed into Enjoe's face sending him flying out his chair. No one had noticed Val and Cris had come back into the room, Cris trying to stop the sudden tremors. He'd heard Eran's accusations, all the pieces of blank puzzles rushing back.

All those times he'd been literally torn apart and he could never remember how he'd gotten into those situations to begin with, those horrible memories, days of feeling gutted and dirty, all of them Enjoe's fault.

"Tell me it wasn't you. TELL ME!" Cris cried out sobbing and Enjoe stood, wiping the blood from his nose and he smirked.

"You always wanted it, I just gave you what you wanted. You little whore."

Val charged like a raging bull, tackling Enjoe in his rage and both of them flying over the table, knocking it over in the brawl. Val was showing no Mercy and neither was Enjoe as they punched and kicked and tore each other apart.

"You raped him you son of a bitch!"

"He wanted it, the little slut was built for the job! Rape would have been against his will he always went willingly! He's a fucking nymphomaniac!"

"SHUT UP! He was always drunk and no doubt drugged if he was so stoned he couldn't remember anything! You bastard! I'll kill you!"

"STOP! STOP!" Cris was sobbing trying to dive in to tear them apart before they really did kill one another and before he heard another word.

"He is mine! You want my sloppy leftovers?" Enjoe taunted grabbing Cris and holding him between Val and himself like a human shield. Cris' arm was bent back at a horrible angle where Enjoe held him prisoner by the wrist.

Val dared not lunge, Cris' arm would snap. "Let him go you fucker! You've hurt him enough!"

"Enjoe! STOP THIS!" Mandy cried out, Eran holding her back from going into the fray herself. Cris was sobbing from pain and grief and a shattering of spirit. He felt sick and vile and wanted nothing more than to run and never stop running. He was five years old again, helpless and lost and gutted.

Enjoe dragged Cris across the room to the door. "He is mine."

Cris' eyes widened in horror and struggled to be free, but Enjoe was stronger. "NO! Let me go you bastard!" Cris wailed anger welling and fear, total overwhelming fear surging from within.

"Let him go!" Val was rushing forward and Enjoe's hand closed around Cris' throat cutting off his air.

"One step closer and he dies."

Val halted in his steps his eyes begging for a miracle, any opening to get Cris out of this situation. Enjoe let Cris breathe again and continued backing out the door and out across the yard towards the small two man hopper.

"NO! God no! Enjoe please don't! Let me go!" Cris begged as everyone raced after them.

"Enjoe don't you dare! LET HIM GO!" Eran ordered and when the blaster appeared and was pressed against Cris' temple everyone froze.

"Get in the hopper." Enjoe ordered and Cris' eyes turned to Val's devastation in their depths.

"I love you." Cris' voice was haunted as he was pushed into the hopper.

"CRIS! CRIS! Please don't do this!" Val was desperate, the gun pointed at his chest from across the yard kept him rooted to his place.

Enjoe climbed into the hopper and before anyone could rush the vehicle, the engines fired and they were gone.

Val dropped to his knees and cried out "CRIS!" Beau and Mandy were instantly at his side holding him up as he sobbed.

"Cris is smart, he'll find a way to get out this, have faith in him. Farin, help me track that hopper." Eran said going over to the shuttle and firing it up for a chase.

Val anger driving his motions; followed them scrubbing tears off his face. "He touches Cris, I'll kill him with my own two hands."

"You'll have to beat me to it." Eran hissed slamming the controls wide open as Mandy and Beau shut the hatch. The shuttle was soon on the chase and tracking the hopper that headed back into the Capitol.

----

"Jam them! They're tracking us." Enjoe ordered and Cris punched up the console, and tapped out a few commands. He was no idiot, he was going to amplify the signal, and naturally it looked like they were running silent.

"There's our boy! Red Hot signal! Way to go Cris!" Farin punched the air with his fist. "You got him Eran?"

"I see it, pray they don't land and bail. Tracking on foot in this area will be like finding a needle in a haystack. Everyone take a communicator in case Cris finds one to contact us with."

Luck didn't hold out, by the time they found the hopper, it was abandoned.

----

Cris was dragged down one slum and one street after another, every big city smelled the same, even on Pirotaine it smelled of sweat, oil, feces, and alcohol. One alley after another they ran, Cris stumbled along as Enjoe dragged him by the wrist. "Move your feet."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I said shut up and move."

"No damn it, why?"

"You talk to much. That's why. I want your body, not your annoying habits."

"You're insane. Let me go god damn it!"

"I said shut up!" Enjoe used the butt of the blaster to slam into the side of Cris' head. He crumpled like an autumn leaf.

Enjoe shouldered his limp body and ran down darkened alleys.

-----

Cris woke up lying in a pile of mildew and trash. He smelled like someone had pissed on him, he was wearing only his shirt, which was torn open, and his pants were nowhere to be found. He was hurting from head to toe, covered in bruises and there was blood on his legs. Cris curled into a fetal ball on wet pavement, frozen to the bone and wept.

-----

"I found him. Do NOT let Val back here." Eran said turning off his communicator and kneeling beside a broken youth.

"Don't look at me."

"Cris... I'm sorry we weren't faster." Eran laid a hand on Cris shoulder; he was shaking and cold to the touch. Cris flinched and shied away.

"It's not you, it's me. Once a whore, always a whore. Just leave me with the trash, I belong here."

"No you don't and never did. Had I known, I'd have stopped him years ago."

"It's not your fault."

"Yes it is, I failed to protect you when you needed me most." Eran lightly stroked Cris' hair.

"Just leave me Eran. I can't face him."

"Val?"

Eran was answered with a choked sob.

"He loves you."

"I'm dirty, he's too good for the likes of me."

"Cris. Please don't say that. None of this is your fault, it's mine, I was blind to this for so long."

"I didn't even know, to think I thought I loved him. I'm such a fool."

"You were abused, you are no fool and I failed you. I pray you can forgive me."

"Eran, please stop. How can this possibly be your fault?"

"When I took you in, I should have been a father to you. Now you are the brother I never had in my heart. Please lean on us, we love you. We'll never let him hurt you again, I swear." Eran was in tears as he collected Cris into his arms and lifted him up. He was weeping and fragile as a newborn. His arm was twisted; it looked broken at the elbow and wrist.

"Just leave me, I can't face him."

"Yes you can. You love him, he loves you, you'll both get through this. It'll be hard, but you will make it." Eran said carrying Cris back to the shuttle. Mandy was there waiting and was already setting a broken arm and ribs just as Val came running back.

"CRIS!"

"Stop Val. Wait a minute." Eran looked grim and kept Val from going inside the shuttle. "I have to tell you first so you're prepared."

"No..." Val's knees went weak and he sank onto a trashcan crushed.

"I'm afraid so. He will need us all, you most of all even if at the moment he is terrified to face you."

"Why?" Val cried as Beau softly walked over to comfort Val.

"Because he loves you most. He's afraid you won't love him anymore. Irrational fear, he's out of sorts emotionally."

"Did anyone find Enjoe?" Val was furious and distraught.

"No, he's disappeared." Farin sighed running his hand through his hair.

"He'll be back for Cris, not tonight, not soon, but he will, I feel it in my gut. I order you all to shoot him on sight." Eran ordered lighting up a smoke and Beau shivered.

"It's murder." Beau whispered and Eran exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"It's Mutiny. I am his Captain; I am the law where he is concerned. My orders override planetary jurisdiction. Federal Interplanetary law gives me the power to dispense justice on my subordinates. Pardon me while I go put a price on his head." Eran said walking over to a freestanding communicator panel. He called the local federal outpost and supplied the warrant on Enjoe's head.

"Captain Callum, your warrant is issued, he'll be tracked. What's the bounty?"

"One million credits. I want his head."

"You'll get it for a million reward. Dead or Alive?"

"Preferably Dead."

"So noted Captain Callum. The notices are being sent and posted."

Eran walked away from the communicator vid grid wall and Beau looked blank and void of emotion.

"The war did that too him. He can be brutally cold sometimes." Farin said laying a hand on Beau's shoulder.

"I know. So can I actually. We saw both sides of that War. It left its mark on me too. I do not forgive easily, even if I am hard to anger, I carry long, long grudges. I agree with Eran's choice here. I shall never forgive Enjoe, never." Beau stated walking after his husband into the shadows to talk.

Farin sat with Val while Mandy sedated and tended to Cris in the back of the shuttle. He was asleep by the time she had him stable and everyone went back to the homestead very late that night.

Cris looked pale and frail as he slept. His arm in a sling and his ribs and his forehead were bandaged and Mandy had him on a saline IV drip with painkillers. He was brutally beaten, it was a miracle he was alive at all.

Val sat by the bed all night, just keeping vigil and softly talking to Cris as he slept. Reassuring him that he still loved him and would never ever stop loving him.

It was a very long night for everyone.

----

Mandy poked her head in the door where Val still watching over Cris. "Val, can you come in here a moment."

"I don't want to leave him."

"He'll be asleep for hours yet. I sedated him heavily. I need you in here for a short meeting. I have finished my analysis."

Val nodded and joined the others, no one had been to bed yet, and everyone looked exhausted as they burned the midnight oil and the room smelled of stewed coffee. Once Val joined the others in the main room Mandy sat back at the table over her portable med unit.

"The good news, if any. He was not raped." The exhalation of every breath of relief in the room was palpable.

"However... It was obvious Enjoe wanted us all to think he was. There were no signs of actual sexual assault and the blood came from a different source. The bastard not only cut him, he carved up his back with what looked like broken glass."

"CARVED?" Eran was still furious and his voice was raised louder than it should have been and Mandy held up her hand.

"Eran please, let me finish. Yes, carved. He could have cut through spinal cord and almost did some of the punctures are so deep. Please that is all Cris is ever to know, I beg you NONE of you tell him what was carved into his back. I've stitched him closed very carefully and I've put every scar retardant I have on his wounds and I've ordered more so he'll never see."

"Mandy? What was carved into his back?" Val's voice was shaking.

"MINE" Mandy's voice cracked with grief.

Val sank into a chair, his face buried into his hands as he wept silently. Beau was by his side stroking his back in comfort immediately.

"There's more. Ah God Eran I was wrong, I did more research. You picked Enjoe up on Tiratine, they still used Phase one technology up until twenty years ago, they were the last to convert to Phase two. We have a big problem on our hands, Enjoe is showing all the signs of a corrupted synaptic amplifier."

"Which means?" Eran asked as he paced the floor.

"The amplifier targets endorphins and testosterone. It boots adrenaline and stamina. It explains his deteriorating behavior. He's..."

"He's 'Mission Targeted'. I know that much Mandy. I fought rogue augments after the TSION wars. I was a collector for about thirty years. Don't give me the science; give me the facts; how far gone do you think he is? Level One?"

"No he's not Level One yet, I don't think he's totally corrupted yet, he'd have just killed Cris if he was. According to the data and the input of symptoms. He's Level Three, distortion of reality, erratic behavior, a detachment of emotional recognition, possessive, single minded drive."

"I know Level Three Mandy. Level Two and we have a stalker bent on getting his target clean. He's already showed signs of Stalking, as evidence to Cris' encounters with him before. We just never noticed because his job was EASY. Not many places Cris could hide on the ship and he admitted to being the one during all those Port stops where we found Cris out of his senses and face down in gutters. He's already Level two. He's out there somewhere and he's monitoring us."

"Eran's right. For a time after the War, as I was trying to work my way back here, I ran into a few augments and collectors. We need a perimeter security system installed immediately, until he's caught none of us are safe."

"You were a collector?" Eran was shocked; Beau wasn't the type to be a killer.

"Of course not. I just happened to have been in a lock down situation. There was a Level One loose for six months. No one came or went except the collectors. It took seventeen Collectors to capture one Level One. This is no laughing matter." Beau said and Eran nodded picking up his communicator.

"Up the Bounty to Ten Million and be warned. We have a Level Two Rouge Augment." Eran communicated to the Federal outpost then made another transmission.

"This is Captain Eran Callum, Unit Alpha, Sector Alpha. I need the current commanding General."

The young Collections officer on the Vid line tapped the controls and scanned Eran's retina from the small vid Screen Eran was holding. "Captain Callum? Not THE Callum. He's must be dead by now. How can you match his scan?"

"Because you idiot, I AM Captain Callum and I do not have time to discuss my longevity with you, I need a Collector Unit in Sector Omega IMMEDIATELY. I have a Level Two Rouge."

"Patching you through to the General Captain."

Eran was impressive when he tossed his authority around, it was easy to see why he had been legendary during the TSION wars, he had always been a natural leader, seeing him being so deadly efficient sent shivers down Beau's spine. He was amazing to watch when he took control and it was obvious he'd had an extremely long military career. He wore experience like a crown and people recognized it without hesitation.

"Captain Callum. I see you resurface again. The legends are true then, you have an amazing service record."

"I do not need the ego stroke General. I need a unit here A.S.A.P. I have a Level Two containment needed Sector Omega. Last Seen Pirotaine Capitol City, twenty-three hundred hours. I have his target under my protection, but we're under manned and short on security. I need an E.T.A."

The General nodded, his Grandfather's Grandfather was a Boy when the legendary Captain Eran Callum has collected a never heard of record of three hundred augment rouges in his thirty-year career as a collector before he had an honorary retirement. He Quit. Everyone studied him when they trained to become a collector; he had been one of the first and in command of the original Alpha Unit during the Collections Bureau's infancy and founding. "I can have the Upsilon Unit en route and in your Sector E.T.A. nineteen hundred hours Pirotaine time."

"Not good enough. I have the target in critical condition, my other two officers untrained in rouge combat, one civilian, and one pregnant woman in the middle of nowhere here, my ship is off-line and cannot lift off, we're in the middle of an overhaul we do not have enough man-power to protect the target. I need it now. Do better."

"I can call Sigma Unit by 0-nine hundred."

"Call them, I can hold for eight hours. Get them here."

"Sending the orders now. Who's the target?"

"My Brother."

The general's eyes widened and tapped at the controls on his desk. "They are on their way Captain. Upsilon Unit is still en route too for back up. Can you transmit the stats on the level two?"

"Mandy transmit the data you have." Eran turned to Mandy who sent the data to Eran's communicator.

"Godstruth! We've been looking for this unit for almost two decades! Lost him on Tiratine fifteen years ago without a trace."

Everyone in the room bit their lips. Enjoe had had them all fooled from the very beginning.

"That's my fault General. He's been a part of my Crew; I never knew he was augmented until yesterday. He was just a child when he came aboard my ship."

"Killed his entire training unit and twenty-five civilians on Drenadine before he stowed away on a cruiser which he then hijacked to Mirastor, there he murdered four prostitutes and five soldiers before we tracked him to Tiratine where we lost his trail. You've a level one on your hands Captain and a very smart one if he even had you fooled."

"Obviously. Thank you for your help General."

"An Honor Captain. The Gods be with you." The transmission ended and Eran dropped the communicator and flew into action.

"Get Cris moved in here immediately, put him in the cave behind the door beside our bed, he's got to be protected and that's the most secure part of this structure. Farin, disable all weaponry

on the "Infinity" and the shuttle. Blow them up if you have to we can't have Enjoe using our ship against us. Val, I want you to weld all windows and doors shut except the main door, which we'll barricade. Move it, be done in an hour!" Eran ordered going to help Beau and Mandy who were already moving Cris and his bed into the cave for his own safety.

Beau and Eran were dragging in mattresses from the other rooms for the rest to lie on rather than the floor and after the bare necessities were vacated from the side structures, Val welded the windows and doors shut of the "Homestead."

Farin blasted the weapons control panels on both the "Infinity" and the shuttle. Those were easy enough to replace with new consoles; Enjoe however would be without heavy weapons capabilities. He was back inside in less than twenty minutes and helped Val finish welding in order to secure the "Homestead".

They tack welded the main doorframe shut, and then pressure bolted the door. No one was getting in and just as they finished, the generator died and the power and all lights went out.

"He's here. Probably been watching us the whole time. Smart bastard. That was nice timing." Eran said lighting up a cigarette, the flame illuminating his face and then pitch black again, the only light came from the flare of burning tobacco embers as he took a drag from his cigarette.

Beau was scared. Not for himself, but for the others and Eran was agonizingly calm about it. "Okay Mr. Cool. What do you want us to do now?"

"Nothing. Stay alert and awake. We only have to hold out six or seven hours. I don't think Enjoe knows I was a collector, I certainly never told him, he won't know I've called for back-up. He thinks I don't know what he is. That will be his mistake."

"I hope you're right." Beau said and he felt Eran take his hand and squeeze.

"We'll be fine. Val, go to Cris, keep him WARM it's cold back there. With no power he'll freeze. He needs to be monitored and that's your job." Val was already groping his way back in the dark toward the back. "Weld that door shut behind you too. There's food in our kitchen, you hole up in there and seal yourselves in. We'll hold out here and be the first line of defense. Mandy, you go back with them too. I don't want you here in your condition."

"Good idea." Farin said and Mandy saw the sense in it and followed Val into Beau and Eran's section of the "Homestead" and watched Val fire up the gas welder as he sealed them in.

That left Beau, Eran and Farin in the Main room to guard the others. "Crap." Eran sighed.

"What?"

"I have one cigarette left and my others are in there with them."

Beau rolled his eyes. "Cope."

-----

Mandy settled herself on the couch in the dark and curled up in a blanket to keep warm while Val took the remaining blankets and made his way into the cave where Cris was being kept. He lit a candle and the tiny flame gave just enough light to see without falling and Val rested it on a natural shelf on the cave wall and began piling blankets on top of Cris to keep him warm. Val

kicked something hard, stubbing his toe in the process. He looked down and realized what he'd kicked and carefully moved the small silver titanium box aside under the bed.

Val carefully stretched out beside Cris on the bed, adding his warmth, the cave was painfully cold and Cris was shivering. "Hang in there, Love." Val spoke softly and to his amazement Cris' eyes fluttered open.

The instant shame and recoiling broke Val's heart. "Don't look at me." Cris' voice nothing but a devastated whisper.

"Cris, love. Please." Val gingerly traced a cheekbone with his finger. "I love you."

"I'm dirty, please don't."

"You're not dirty, you're hurt. Cris he didn't rape you honestly Mandy said he didn't."

Cris turned sad, broken and tired eyes toward Val where tears were welling. He just cried, exhausted and Val leaned over to wipe tears away. "It's too cold in here for tears love. They'll freeze to your beautiful face."

"Val... What happened?" Cris sobbed, his voice shaking from tears and his shivering.

"He beat you up badly, that's all. You have some broken ribs, your arm is broken and your back is cut. The blood you saw was from your back love. I know you feel shredded and weak as a kitten, but you will be all right, we're all protecting you. He won't hurt you again."

"Where are we?" Cris asked his shivers coming in quakes making his abused muscles spasm in pain where he hissed and sobbed out in agony.

"In the cave behind the "Homestead". We're hiding, I won't lie to you, and I'll tell you why in a minute. Let me get you more pain medication first." Val said getting the box of med supplies by the bed out and finding a bottle of morphine he stuck a syringe in and pulled out a dose and gingerly administered it into Cris' IV tubing. "Better?"

"A little. What a rush. Please don't use too much. Morphine gives me strange dreams and nightmares."

"It does to most of us sadly. But it does kill the pain, and you need it right now." Val kissed Cris' nose before putting the bottle away and setting the used syringe out of harms way up on the shelf by the candle.

Cris was shivering from cold even under several layers of blankets so Val stood in the cramped space and began taking his clothes off to lie on top of Cris. "Val don't you'll freeze, I'm okay."

"No you're not. And don't worry I'm coming in there with you, my body heat will help." Val said and when he was down to only his underwear he crawled in carefully beside Cris under the covers, he was frozen to the bone with cold. He sighed when Val's warm chest made contact with his from where he was laying propped up on his side. He lay on his good right arm so his broken left and shredded back were free from stress, Val carefully slipped an arm under Cris' neck to hold him close against his warmer body.

"You're so cold. Is this better?" Val asked nose to nose with his beloved and Cris sank into the offered warmth still shaking.

"Yes. You have such a caring heart Val, why on earth do you waste it on me?"

"Silly question. I love you."

"I can't understand why."

"Because you're everything I ever wanted. You're brilliant, you're funny, you're kind, you're giving, and you're beautiful of spirit and heart. I'd be a fool not to want to hang onto a good man when I finally find him."

Cris smiled a little and buried his face in the crook of Val's neck, drinking in warmth and affection. "Val, you make my heart ache. In the best of ways."

Val kissed the top of Cris' head and lay back a little so Cris could use him as a support and living pillow and mattress. "Likewise. I can't ever get enough of you Cris. I really can't, you're a joy to me. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how much you mean to me."

"You mean that don't you?"

"Have I ever said anything to you I didn't?"

"No." Cris let a few tears slip that fell warm and wet on Val's chest.

"What did I say about tears?" Val smiled as his fingertips wiped them away from Cris' cheeks.

"I love you Val, I can't help them. No one has ever made me feel like you make me feel. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"It's both. Love is a double edged sword."

"You managed to shove that sword right through my chest and twist."

"Like you haven't done that to me? Think again Crispin Tinks."

Cris chuckled and instantly regretted it the pain tore through him and his back pulled. He choked back a cry and Val was suddenly sitting up, Cris was face down in the mattress and Val was checking his bandages.

"Damn it these are wet, I think we might have pulled your stitches moving you, the wound is open. Why didn't you tell me you were bleeding again?"

"I didn't realize. I just now felt it really, all I could feel a few minutes ago was cold."

Val nodded and tried stopping the blood flow. "It's leaking through your stitches, damn it. Hold on there's more padding in the kit." Val set about changing Cris' dressing, for the first time he saw the horrible word carved into Cris' lower back. He bit back a sob; it would do Cris no good to know the truth. Val dabbed at the leaking wounds, angry and red still and looking infected.

"Let me, get Mandy in here Baby. I don't want to hurt you. I'll be right back."

"Mmmmm, I liked that." Cris sighed in pleasure, totally out of context and he made Val pause in query.

"What?" Val asked as he got up to go get Mandy from the other room.

"You just called me Baby."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

Val smiled he himself hadn't even realized he'd used that tired old term of endearment, it just sort of slipped out unconsciously and he leaned over to kiss Cris' upturned cheek. "Well if you like it, shall I carry on calling you that?"

"Considering just one word turned me into an instant warm puddle Gorgonian Goo feeling no pain? Absolutely."

Val chuckled; at least Cris' inner humor was still in tact even if the rest of him wasn't. He called Mandy in to take a look at Cris' back. As she walked in and noticed Val's lack of attire she raised an eyebrow and winked.

"You'd better be half naked because you were keeping him warm." She playfully chastised as she sat at the foot of the bed to look at Cris' back where he lay flat on his stomach.

"He was a good boy Mandy, no worries." Cris said and Mandy sighed in relief, Cris had an amazing capacity to adapt, accept, and move on. His spirit was almost indestructible.

"I'd expect nothing less from Val. He treats you as you always should have been treated sweet-cheeks."

"I hope you are referring to my face and not my ass when you say sweet-cheeks, considering your angle at the moment."

Mandy laughed so hard she had to stop and wipe her eyes. "Damn it Cris, don't make me laugh when I'm trying to work."

Val held a hand to his face and tried to stifle his own laughter and failed. "I'd just like to interject for the record I think both are rather sweet."

"You would." Mandy rolled her eyes.

Cris just smiled, one eye trying to peer past Mandy's shoulder to see Val standing behind her.

"Damn it I wish I had more light, Val can you hold that Candle down here please. I want to take out some of these stitches, you're right it is infected and I want to drain this a little." Mandy stated and Val complied. Mandy gave Cris a local anesthetic and began working on his back, removing her stitches and cleaning out infection with Val as her makeshift assistant.

After she drained some of the infection, she shot some antibiotics into the wound itself. "Cris I need you to stay on your stomach a while, I can't close this wound yet I want to let it drain a little longer. Val please keep the dressings clean and change them every twenty minutes or so."

Val nodded as Mandy stood and stretched. "I need a nap desperately. You and I can take shifts watching him." Mandy yawned and Val moved out of her way.

"Sounds good to me. You look exhausted, go rest I'm fine for a while yet. I got a boost when he woke up."

"I'm sure you did. How you feeling Cris?"

"A mess, and whatever you shot into my ass I can no longer feel anything from the waist down to my knees."

"That will wear off soon. Don't worry." Mandy chuckled as she headed out to crash on the couch for a while.

Val once more crawled into bed with Cris helping to get him comfortable and warm. "I can never sleep on my stomach, I'm a side sleeper." Cris moaned and Val smiled and just played with Cris' bangs.

"I know. I'm a back man myself."

"I know, I watch you sleep remember."

"You watch me sleep?"

"Of course, you're hard not to look at Val. You're gorgeous."

"Really? I never thought so."

"Then you're blind. You're hot. And I am serious, one of these days I'm gonna play connect the dots on you."

"So long as you don't use permanent marker I might let you if you're a good boy and get better."

"Oh now there's incentive." Cris smiled into his pillow.

"You have a freckle fetish." Val teased and Cris turned his face to look at Val.

"No, I have a Val fetish."

"Oh good." Val purred planting a kiss on Cris' shoulder.

"I bought you something today. I was going to wait until Winterfest to give it to you. But I...I just cannot wait. I didn't think I could actually. I lasted a day at least." Val said digging for his coat, he'd taken his gift from his bunk when they vacated the side rooms; this was one thing he did not want Enjoe's hands on.

"What are you babbling about?"

Val sat back with a small box and smiled down at Cris. "Cris, you know how much I love you. At least I hope you do."

"I do Val. What is that?"

"It's for you, well it's for us actually."

"What's in it?"

"I'll show you in a minute speedy, there's a build up here I'm trying to get to."

"Oh, sorry carry on."

Val laughed Cris was just a joy on his senses. "What I'm trying to say is, Baby I love you and you would make me the happiest man in the galaxy if you would wear this."

Val opened the box to reveal two identical simple band rings in a silver and gold braided pattern.

"Val! Are those?"

"Yes. Binding rings. Will you band with me?"

"Val..." Cris gasped desperately wanting to sit up and throw himself at Val. "Oh God Val, you... YES!"

Val took Cris' good right hand and slid one of the bands on his ring finger and it adjusted itself to his size. Val spoke the traditional words of banding as he did so.

"I place this on your right hand as a symbol of my love and promise. I choose you as my future."

Cris was going to cry again, he just knew it, but he managed to reach into the box from his awkward position and take the second ring out of the box to place on Val's right hand.

"I may not know the right words to say here. But I think the point is Love, and I do love you. I can think of no better future. You're my light in the darkness Val, I love you and I am honored to be chosen as I choose you." Cris slid the ring home on Val's finger where it sized itself and both rings caught the candlelight and sparkled.

"The words aren't important, the feelings are." Val leaned over and gently helped to turn Cris' face up so they could share a kiss. It may not have been the most romantic setting, but the time was right. Cris did cry, so did Val as they lay there in the light of a single candle and held onto their newly banded hands and just looked at each other's eyes.

"You mean everything to me, the thought of losing you killed me earlier." Val let go of his pain kissing Cris' right hand and ring as he cried.

That hand moved to his hair and long graceful fingers combed though it in comfort. "I know. I saw it in your face. There was nothing you could have done to stop it Val, I know that, I thought it was all over too, I thought he was going to shoot you and that to me was more terrifying than what he was doing to me. I'm just content to forget now and move on with you."

"Same here, but we shouldn't forget yet. We're hiding in here for a reason."

"I can figure it out, he's still out there being Psycho."

"In a nutshell yes." Val sighed and then proceeded to tell Cris what they'd learned about Enjoe, Cris taking it all stoically.

"It makes a lot of sense really. I feel sorry for him."

"How on earth can you pity him after what's he's done?"

"Because he wasn't born that way. I could have been like him. Augments are all discarded children nobody wants. They're sold off to Military units before they can even crawl and have chips stuck into their heads. It's not Enjoe's fault he's the way he is, someone hacked his brain. My mother could have sold me too, but she didn't. I can thank her for that."

"You have a large heart Cris. I'm so very blessed to have you."

Cris just smiled ruefully. Life was full of Joy and Tragedy one came hand in hand with the other. He'd learned over these past six weeks that the only way to stop the sadness of Tragedy was to embrace the Joy when it found you. He was holding onto his Joy with both hands and never letting go. He held Val's hand and closed his eyes saying a silent prayer of thanks for this Joy in his life named Val.

"You need some sleep Baby." Val whispered pulling the cover up closer around Cris' shoulders. "Rest a while, I want to check on Mandy too will you be alright for a moment?"

"Of course." Cris yawned he was tired and Val was hardly out of the cave before he was asleep nestled into Val's leftover warmth in the bed.

----

Mandy was sleeping on the sofa as Val leaned over to check on her and he was about to stumble his way into the kitchen when a voice in the darkness chilled him to the bone.

"She's sleeping soundly. A little chloroform works wonders."

"ENJOE! How did you get in here?" Val couldn't see, the room was so dark but the voice was near.

"You can seal every window and door, you forgot about the chimney's."

"You bastard."

Val felt a cold metal barrel placed against his chest. "He's mine and you're in my way, but I'll be so kind enough to let you say goodbye first." Enjoe shoved and Val stumbled backwards toward the cave.

"You can't move him, he's hurt! You should know, you're the one that hurt him!" Val was desperate to stall to think of a way out of this.

"Tinks is tough, he'll live. Move it." Back in the Cave Cris was sleeping and Val wept, Cris' nightmare just never seemed to end.

"Tell him goodbye." Enjoe shoved Val to his knees beside the bed and the motion woke Cris up, the candle illuminating Val's pain stricken face and the blaster barrel pressed to his temple made Cris scream out in terror.

"SON OF A BITCH!!!" Eran swore from the Main room as he broke out his own blaster trying to break into the back room.

"SHUT UP!" Enjoe growled blasting Cris' leg making him howl in pain, the blast went right through the bed and into the small canister, cold liquid spilled out all over the cave floor soaking Val's knees.

"CRIS! You son of a bitch!" Val took the moment the gun was away from his head and tackled Enjoe trying to wrestle away the gun, their fight upturning the bed and sending Cris to the floor, he cried out in agony. His leg and back with open wounds landed in the puddle on the floor, the burning sensation where the liquid seeped into his wounds making him scream involuntarily. The candle was knocked from the shelf and went out when it landed in the water on the floor and then to Cris' horror the blaster went off and the fighting stopped.

"Val! Val!" Cris cried out into the darkness unable to move from the pain.

"Val! Val! God you're pathetic. He's dead." Enjoe mocked.

"I am not you bastard." Val growled, his voice sounded muffled as he spit. He had been shot and the wound on his side had caught him good, he had fallen into the water and whatever was in the water made his wound burn, he knew Cris must be in sheer agony. The water was rank and foul smelling, and Val spit out what had gotten into his mouth and he realized he must be worse than he thought, he could taste the salt of his own blood.

"Val oh god Val Don't! Please don't kill him Enjoe PLEASE!" Cris was begging trying to claw his way in the darkness through the water towards Val's voice. Another shot in his other leg left him face first on the floor gasping for air as the water filled his nose and mouth as he screamed in pain.

"CRIS!" Val couldn't see him, his senses were getting duller, his side was bleeding and another shot was fired and this time into his own leg and then the other, they had both been rendered completely immobile. They both lay there burning and bleeding and sobbing. A desperate hand flung out, it was Cris' right hand and Val grabbed hold and kissed it.

"I love you Cris."

"I love you Val. Whatever happens, I'll always love you." Cris cried clutching Val's hand in his own.

"This is what happens when you take what is mine and get in my way." Enjoe fired again and Val felt the pain blossom in his belly and the blood rush up to come out of his mouth, he choked and sputtered and began to thrash involuntary in the water before falling back to gasp for air as he lay dying unable to move.

He had never let go of Cris hand.

"VAL!" Cris wailed using his only good limb holding onto Val's hand to pull himself closer, despite the pain in his other extremities, across the floor and water to Val's side. His life was only just lingering, hanging on by a thread, his eyes were wide open in the darkness. He felt Cris at his side and he felt a hand to his face. There was no sound, he couldn't hear Cris' sobs, couldn't see him, but he felt that warm hand on his lips and a cool ring resting on his finger.

He kissed that hand and ring with a smile on his lips and then the world was gone.

"Val!" Cris sobbed as he felt Val kiss his hand and then stop moving. "No Val, please no. Don't you die, please God no!"

"Tinks you're absolutely pathetic. None of this would have had to have happened had you not tried to be something you're not!"

"And just what is that? Huh Enjoe? Tell me, because I somehow think you and I disagree on what I am and am not!" Cris was devastated and angry and as he lay there holding Val and bleeding to death himself, he still had the fire to fight back.

"You were always mine. I knew it the first time I saw you on Mirastor."

Cris froze, they hadn't met on Mirastor, they couldn't have. "What?"

"Always pretty you were. The first time I saw you I thought that. My associate Sendel showed me vids of what he used to use you for. I killed him for it, then I killed your mother for giving you to him, and then I lost you, you vanished and I had to leave."

"Oh my god!"

"It was several years later and it took some doing to set up the trip back to Mirastor, but I'd tracked you down, I knew you were working the Diamond Casino, I knew Eran would pick you up, such a fucking predictable soft touch! Don't you remember me? I was the one who told you to hit him up, that his pockets were loaded."

"That was you?"

"Of course. I planned it all, because you are mine and belong to me, everything you have you owe to me."

The banging on the door was getting annoying. Eran's swearing was even worse. "Enjoe..." Cris was lost. All along, Enjoe had orchestrated his entire life's course. It was Enjoe who had done this to him.

"You tried to leave me, I don't like that." Enjoe hissed and Cris gave up, there was no fight left in him.

"You can go ahead and Kill me Enjoe, you made my life hell, the least you can do is release me from it."

"You are mine." Enjoe fired just as the door flew open and Eran rushed in Grabbing Enjoe around the neck and hauling him back into the main room. Beau holding a flashlight raced toward the cave and sobbed in horror. Farin was behind him and Beau forcibly shoved him away from the cave.

"Get Mandy to Rael NOW! Get out of here!" Beau ordered not daring to let anyone near the cave.

Farin found Mandy still passed out cold and laid her on the main room floor as he threw open the pressure bolt and broke the tack welds on the main door. He picked her up again and loaded her on the shuttle and took off for Rael. He prayed Cris and Val were all right.

Eran and Enjoe were wrestling on the floor, the blaster was by Beau's feet and in his tears he picked up the blaster and fired, hitting Enjoe in the shoulder. Enjoe fell against Eran, and Eran ripped the blaster out of Beau's hands and finished the job.

"I want no blood on your hands. Mine are dirty enough for us both." Eran hissed as Enjoe lay dead on the floor.

They left him there and returned to the Cave where Val and Cris lay together on the floor in each other's arms, dead. The flashlight catching the brilliance of the rings on their fingers that lay bloodied and motionless.

"Fast thinking to get Farin and Mandy out of here."

"Get Enjoe out too. Burn him, we can't take chances with him just in case, this place is contaminated."

Eran nodded as Beau sank to his knees beside Val and Cris and prayed for their souls.

Eran joined Beau in his vigil, adding his own prayers for a miracle and adding his own tears for fallen loved ones.

----

Eran was sitting by a large bonfire outside, smoking a cigarette as a small cruiser craft landed and seven Collectors came out in a formation rush. "Save it. You're late." Eran

"We're a head of schedule, are you Captain Callum?" The Sigma Unit leader saluted as Eran nodded once.

"We'll set up your perimeter sir, I must say it's an honor to serve you sir."

"I said save it, you're late. The augment is there." Eran motioned toward the fire.

"Amazing, single handed. You really are all they said you were."

Eran just hauled off and punched the youth. "I don't need your praise. Any man who likes killing and is awed by it is not fit to fight." Eran growled as Beau walked out of the Homestead.

Beau tossed into the fire several sodden blankets and what looked to be clothes. "I don't want anyone in here or within a hundred paces of this fire." Beau told Eran as he went back inside.

"You heard him."

"What happened sir?"

"I've already filed a report with the bureau. You just stay away from the dwelling and the fire. We had a contamination and we're cleaning up the mess, it's not safe."

"Neither of you are covered for hazardous materials."

"We're immune. You are not. Don't question my orders."

"Yes sir. Are there any casualties?"

Eran sighed. "The augment left a string of casualties in his wake." He couldn't even say Enjoe's name, he felt responsible, he felt foolish, and he felt betrayed by a boy he'd tried to help. "Call

Upsilon Unit and cancel the orders, we don't need them. You are released back to your primary schedule."

"I'm sorry sir, we were the closet unit."

"It's not your fault, I know that."

"May I ask you a question sir before we head out?" Eran nodded, watching the flames.

"How old are you sir?"

Eran had known the question was coming; it always did when his past caught up to him. "Old. Very Old."

"What planet are you from? I've never met a humanoid race with your lifespan."

"I was born about fifty miles north of here. I'm human, same as you."

"But..."

"I will not answer your next question. I am still alive and that's all anyone needs to know. You're Dismissed Commander." The Sigma unit leader saluted and the collectors came and went without incident.

Beau returned to the fire with the remaining linens he'd used to clean the cave with dumping them in the fire.

"What I cannot understand is I'd had that canister buried in there. What it was doing out of that hole I can only come up with one conclusion." Beau said coming over to Eran who held the titanium box that had been blasted open shattering the canister within.

"I tested it, Enjoe's fingerprints are all over it. He must have snuck in there sometime earlier while Mandy and Farin were busy and we weren't here. The lock shows signs of tampering; he was probably going to use it on himself and Cris. It's my only guess, was that yours?"

"Yes. You confirmed it with the fingerprint analysis. Please go burn that."

Eran got up and tossed it into the fire.

"All that's left is to torch the cave, thankfully my scans show the only contamination is the cave itself. Mandy and Farin will be safe to return as soon as I get this done. Did you contact them yet?" Beau asked watching everything burn with Eran.

"An hour ago, Mandy is groggy, but fine. He just used chloroform on her, no damage to her or the baby."

"Thank goodness."

"They asked about Val and Cris."

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing, that sort of news is best done face to face." Eran said shoving a rag in a large bottle of kerosene fuel. He walked into the Dwelling with Beau and together they stood at the opening of the cave and Eran lit the rag hanging from the bottle with his lighter and tossed the bottle inside.

The kerosene exploded into the cave as the bottle shattered and they watched the controlled blaze burn hot and fast. Once the fuel was exhausted, Beau ran another scan.

"All clean. They're gone for good."

Eran nodded and went to call Mandy and Farin back.

----

Mandy was in shock as she sat beside the two men laid together on a mattress on the floor of the main room, a single sheet draping them. Beau had burned their clothes and the sheet was to cover their nudity and dignity.

"How?" she asked dumbfounded, both men were ghostly pale but breathing. They showed no outer wounds, even Cris' arm was no longer broken.

"Enjoe earlier today took the canister out of the place I'd had it hidden. During their fight it ruptured. He'd blasted enough holes in them both the algae had plenty of access to get into their blood stream. I don't even want to think about how badly that must have hurt in open wounds." Eran said as they all sat around Val and Cris.

"The mites abandoned the algae for a better meal ticket." Beau sighed running a hand through his hair. "Val was blown apart, just like Eran. But Eran and I had been infected months, I really didn't think they could work this fast. But Eran and I only ingested a small amount and they took months to take over our bodies. Both Val and Tinks were saturated with the Algae, they took in a lot more. And my scans show the mites are taking over at a staggering rate. They were both dead when we found them. I half hoped I'd be wrong, but we just waited to see what would happen."

"This means they're?"

"Just like us now." Eran said lighting up a cigarette.

"It's a miracle." Mandy was relieved.

"It's also a curse."

"Only if you let it be Eran." Mandy said taking both his and Beau's hands. "You will always have each other, no man is cursed who has a family around him."

"True." Eran said then grinned. "The "Infinity" just took on a whole new meaning. There's a big universe out there, we can get into a lot of fun trouble."

"Eran!" Beau chastised but smiled. "I call shot gun!"

"Naturally, first officer Shannon."

"Do we really need military titles?"

"What else would you call that position?"

"First Bard? First Boy? First Chair? Do you really think I'm cut out as an OFFICER?"

"You have a point I hate rank, it's really not necessary for us either. Rank will get old fast with an eternity in front of us. But we do need them to use with other people when they ask."

"Just be pirates and collect booty." Farin laughed and Eran smiled and reached out to slap Beau's ass.

"I have booty thanks." Beau slapped him on the back of the head.

"You really are a pirate, scurvy dog."

Eran laughed as Val moaned. "He's coming around, he's gonna be out of it for a minute give him time to come around. That first time you get killed is really tough to snap back from. Trust me I know."

Val's eyes were unfocused as he blinked them open his hand blindly groping until he found Cris at his side. He rolled over, still on autopilot his senses nothing more than a clouded haze. He was still living his last conscious memory, and he found it and curled around him protectively. "Cris." He breathed falling back into his un-conscious state a moment before.

Beau smiled and pulled the sheet up over them both. "They'll be fine, they have what we didn't Eran love. They will at least awaken at each other's side."

"You're probably right. Let's move them into their room, Farin can you please un-weld the door?" I think if we leave them with peace and quiet and some food, we'll see them when they're ready to have some questions answered." Eran said as Farin went to work getting the door open again.

Mandy took in a large bowl of fruit and a pitcher of ice water and set it on their card table as the others put a mattress back on Val's bed. Farin and Eran carried Val and Cris back into the room and laid them together on the double bed. Beau following behind the others with a sheet and blanket to cover Val and Cris with as they slept on unaware of the world around them and still healing from their fatal injuries.

Once they had them settled together, everyone left to go about making the "Homestead" home again. Mandy helped Beau clean up the back room while Farin and Eran placed a large steel panel over the cave, sealing it forever. Then Farin welded the original door leading to it shut. Removing the knob and making it a permanent wall, Beau moved a dresser in front of it and hung a curtain behind it; it would never be opened again.

----

Val awoke to the sound of weeping. Soft hair fell across his chest in waves and his chest was wet with tears. "Don't cry Baby."

"Oh God Val. I swear I thought you died; you're not even scratched. How?" Cris was everywhere kissing him touching him, crying with relief.

"How? Cris look at you? When did you?" Val sat up looking at Cris' healed arm and then his leg and then his back. Not a mark, no infection, no word carved in his back.

"Are we dead or did we just dream all of this?" Cris shook and Val took his right hand.

"Neither, look." Val rubbed the Banding ring on Cris' finger.

"Then how did we live through that? Val I felt you DIE! I died!"

Both men looked at each other "THE WATER! Was that?" Cris gasped and Val nodded.

"The Box was under the bed, I thought it strange it was out so I moved it away under the bed. When he shot you he shot it too. Oh my God!"

Both men were up out of bed, holding blankets around their middles as they burst into the main room to where the others were playing a hand of cards at the table.

"Welcome to Eternity Boys. Wanna ante up?" Beau said gaily as he tossed a chip into the pot.

"HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?" Val and Cris blurted out in unison.

"Don't play in mite contaminated Algae and don't get blown to bits where it has a lot of holes to get into. I raise you ten." Eran said tossing in two chips.

"Will you stop playing for two minutes?" Cris asked going over to Eran and grabbing his shirt and shaking. "Are you saying Val and I are...?"

"Infinite." Eran grinned and removed Cris' hand from his shirt.

Cris sank to the floor and Eran just patted his head. "While you're down there little brother, wanna shine my shoes?"

"Eran will you be serious?"

"I am. The best way to cope with it Cris, is to just cope. You just pick up the pieces and continue with life like nothing happened. And don't make a habit of getting killed, it hurts as you just found out."

Cris just sat there stunned and Val sank to the arm of the couch. "Fuck me."

"That's Cris' job. Eran you fucking shark you're bluffing. I'll meet your ten and raise you another ten."

"Can someone please tell us what happened? All I remember is Enjoe blowing holes in us and feeling like I was on fire, I remember DYING." Val was shaking and Eran laid his cards down and faced them both.

"Yes, you will always remember dying, that can't be changed. What happened is simple. You got infected, by fate or by accident believe either you wish. You were both killed and you both came back. I tend to like choosing fate, it's much more romantic." Eran winked once more patting Cris' head affectionately.

"I can't say I'm unhappy about this in the slightest. It's nice to know I'll never have to watch you grow old and die." Cris turned his face up and smiled, tears in his eyes.

Eran reached into his pocket and handed an old piece of paper to Cris. "I never showed you that, I never told you. I was afraid to then. But to get you off Mirastor I told them I was your brother and I adopted you. That's your certificate of adoption."

Cris opened it; his name read "Crispin Elias Callum" upon the page.

"Oh my god. Why didn't you tell me? Why the hell did you give me a name like Elias? Dude!"

Eran laughed. "You didn't have a middle name, I made one up. I liked Elias. That was my father's name. And I didn't tell you for a lot of stupid reasons that don't mean a damn thing, I'm telling you now."

"Well, Tinks was made up too. I never knew anything other than my first name anyway. It's nice to actually have a legal identity. Thank you Eran. For everything."

"Don't thank me. I never did enough for you when I should have."

"Please let's not go through this again. It was Enjoe. He told me everything. He's been working us for years, we were all blind."

"What did he tell you?" Val asked coming over to sit by Cris on the floor by Eran's feet.

"This was after he shot you and just before he killed me. Oh god, for years. He told me how when he saw me on Mirastor he marked me. God Eran this was when I was five, I never even remembered. But I know what he said was true; because he said a name he could not have known. Remember when I told you about Sendel? He was a soldier my mother brought home. He liked little boys. Apparently Enjoe was with him and when he found out about what Sendel did to me, he killed him and my mother for allowing it to happen."

"Christ! The General said he'd killed four prostitutes and five soldiers on Mirastor!"

Cris nodded, "one of them was my mother and the other Sendel. He said he came for me, but had to leave before he could find me."

"The collectors were after him. He could not have been more than eight."

"I know, he said he spent the next years tracking me down and getting you to take jobs closer to Mirastor."

"He did do that, I thought it strange but we made a lot of money in those sectors so I took his advice." Eran could see the dawning of the most elaborate, psychotically brilliant master plan unfold, no wonder none of them noticed. Enjoe was a master strategist and subtle, the moves had been so slow in the dance that by the time one step was finished and the next started no one except the one directing the dance would notice.

"I never told you, there was a boy in a hooded sweatshirt, he came up to me and told me you were easy meat with loads of cash. Enjoe was that boy. He said he'd knew you'd pick me up, he set us up."

"That's one thing I can actually thank him for." Eran smiled and Cris smiled in return.

"Me too."

"So why all of a sudden did he stop being subtle and turn blatantly off the charts psychotic? It just does not make sense."

"He mentioned that too." Cris said turning toward Val. "I left him for you Val. He blamed me for it because I fell in love with you. He was like a boy with a toy, I can see it, it's so clear now it's blinding, he was still eight years old and you came along and took his toy." Cris made a twisted face and his voice shrieked like a child's "MINE! MINE! MINE!" Cris threw a mock tantrum.

"Holy shit, that's it! Cris you are so fucking smart. That's exactly what he was doing! He threw a temper tantrum!"

"Precisely. He may have looked twenty-six, he was still eight years old inside emotionally, he was brilliant, but still a child in so many ways. I really truly pity him."

Eran sighed. "Pity? A little. But even eight year olds know better than to kill. He did that of his own free will. God knows how many others he killed we DON'T know about."

"It's hard to say, we'll never know. What happened to him?"

"He's dead. His ashes are in that Urn there. I thought I'd let you decide what to do with it."

"There's a beautiful cave here, full of blue neon. He had no beauty in life, I think maybe if he has it in death he can rest in peace."

Val took Cris' hand and kissed it. "You have an amazing capacity to forgive. You are so absolutely beautiful. I've never met a soul like yours."

Beau walked around the table and squatted on the floor to hug both men. "I think you're both beautiful people. Cris, I've never been prouder to call a man my brother."

"In-Law, brother-in-law" Cris teased and Beau laughed.

"Speaking of Brother's by bonding..." Beau said tapping the ring on Cris' finger "...when did he give that to you?"

"Back in the cave." Cris smiled as Val wrapped his arms around him from behind.

"I see. We sealed it, that cave caused enough havoc. All four of us became as we are in it." Beau said and Cris smiled.

"We also filled it with a lot of love the four of us, you two made love in it, Val proposed to me in it. It gave us an eternity to share it. I will never curse that cave." Cris smiled leaning back into Val's embrace.

Beau looked to Eran, neither of them had thought of it quite that way. "Leave it to Cris to put things into perspective." Eran said leaning over to kiss his husband at his feet.

----

Later that evening six people dressed in black walked in procession toward a cave, one carrying a small clay urn.

Eran set the urn on a rock shimmering with blue and Cris laid a small ceramic plate next to it, he'd written on it a simple epitaph.

***Here Rests our Crewman Enjoe Moira.  
You were a tormented soul in life,  
We pray you find peace in death.  
We forgive you, your sins against us.  
We understand they were not born from Malice  
They were born because you knew nothing else.  
We will remember you.  
Always.  
The Crew of the "Infinity"***

As they walked back together, Cris sighed. "So what happens next?"

"First lesson down a long road for you two. Always go on like nothing happened. You can't let others know, you must keep the masses unaware by going on like life is normal. We continue to fix the ship, we go to choir practice, and we act like normal every day people. The catch being we don't stay in one place too long. They start asking too many questions after a while." Eran said and Cris nodded where he lay tucked under Val's arm.

"Makes sense. But I sort have already figured out that part. I meant 'next' as in how long are we staying currently?"

Eran shrugged.

"Can I ask that you stay at least to meet the baby?" Farin asked and Eran smiled.

"That I think can be arranged. We should build a better "Homestead" if we're here for a while. We sort of wrecked the windows and doors."

"Let's just take one day at a time. None of us are thankfully in a hurry." Beau said as they reached the "Homestead" and called it an evening.

----

Val and Cris retired to their room and as Cris laid his clothes out to change into something comfortable, Val was suddenly behind him, arms pulling him close. "I love you."

Cris turned around and wrapped his arms around Val and laughed. "That's a good thing, seeing as you are stuck with me for a very, VERY long time." Cris purred undoing the buttons on Val's shirt.

"I can think of worse things." Val replied leaning in for a kiss.

Cris however had other things in mind and squirmed out of Val's grasp and picked up a pen from the table. "I want you naked, you promised if I got better..."

Val laughed and stripped and lay down on the bed. "I did promise, that had better not be permanent."

"It'll wash off." Cris cheered shedding his own clothes and coming over with a decidedly demented gleam in his eyes.

"That tickles! Cris!"

"Stop moving."

"What the hell are you doing to my back?"

"You so do not want to know love."

"Cris what are you drawing?"

"Just a huge penis."

"You are not!"

"I'm not?" Cris laughed he wasn't of course he was just drawing random lines connecting the freckles on Val's back, but of course Val didn't know that.

"I'll murder you."

"Sorry, you can't do that either."

Val growled and flipped over and tackled Cris into the mattress. He squealed and the pen went flying. "My turn."

"I don't have spots."

"I'm about to give you some Baby." Val dove into Cris' neck.

"No hickeys! No hickeys! Ah! Ooooooh." Cris purred as Val tortured his neck. "Mmmmm, never mind carry on."

Cris had half a dozen hickeys all over his body before he couldn't stand it anymore. "Val if you say we're gonna wait more I'll cry!"

"Oh no, I have no intention of being a Gentleman tonight." Val licked his way up Cris' abdomen to plant a huge wet sloppy kiss on his lips.

"Oh thank GOD!" Cris kicked and flipped Val on his back where he straddled Val's middle.

Val quirked an eyebrow wondering what Cris was up to, he found out as Cris slid down his body and proceeded to make him quite happy with lips in all the right places. He'd waited so long however that if Cris continued much longer it was going to be over before it started.

Val gently pulled Cris up and laid him back in the mattress. "My turn and I want you not to hold back, promise?"

Cris smiled and nodded and then lost all rationale as Val returned the favor and more, so much more.

They made love for the first time that night and as they lay there tired and sweaty and happy the crickets sang them a song outside and the fire in the hearth kept them warm and content shining on their rings and dancing in their eyes.

"That was beautiful Val."

"You're beautiful."

"I'm thirsty as hell."

"Me too, I'll go raid the cooling unit. What do you want?"

"Anything. And Food, I have the munchies too."

"I'll feed you. I'll be right back."

Val wrapped a sheet around him and went out to grab food. Beau and Eran were at the table playing cards and both men stared at him as he crossed the floor, both wide-eyed and Beau broke out in hysterical laughter.

"What?" Val asked and Eran took a drag from his smoke.

"Nice, um ART." Eran drawled as he exhaled.

Val had totally forgotten he was covered in Cris' handiwork.

"Blame Cris." Val grumbled raiding the cabinets and toting back cool drinks and various items to munch on. "And for goodness sake what the hell did he put on my back?"

Beau and Eran just grinned.

"Fuck! CRISPIN You LITTLE SHIT!"

They could hear his laughter come ringing out from the bedroom. "I LOVE YOU YOO!"

Val grumbled all the way back to his room.

"Nice flower. Cris draws well." Beau commented, discarding a four of hearts into the pile face up on the table.

"I'm absolutely positive Val thinks it's something else on his back." Eran chuckled picking up the four Beau discarded then laying his hand down with a smirk. "GIN!"

"Shit. You're probably right. It's your deal, you'd better deal me cards I can use shark." Beau pouted, one of these days he'd figure out how Eran managed to stack the deck in his favor.

Val went straight to the bathroom to look at his back. Cris came in behind him and smiled. "It's just a flower, like I'd draw a penis on your back?"

"With you I have no clue what you'll do next." Val grinned at Cris in the mirror. "Thank God."

Cris sipped from his bottle and sashayed back into their room.

They didn't actually go to sleep until almost dawn.

-----

Winterfest came, the choir was perfect, the "Homestead" was bedecked with all manner of festive cheer from the decorated pine in the front room, to the holly and ivy on the hearths and during the first day of twelve of festivities, Val and Cris stood in the field dressed in warm white robes with tufted furred collars, a red ribbon wrapped around their joined hands and Shaman Frieg officiated the ceremony in front of all their friends and loved ones and they exchanged vows, moving their rings from their right hands to the left.

"Upon this snow covered field, I bind myself to you..."

"Upon this snow covered field, I bind myself to you..."

"My path joins yours by will and by love..."

"My path joins yours by will and by love..."

"My soul is bound to yours as this ribbon now binds our hands."

"My soul is bound to yours as this ribbon now binds our hands."

"Together we walk life's road."

"Together we walk life's road."

"I, Valerian Vaughn Vitale, vow to love you and be faithful to you until the end of my days. By witness of those we both hold dear as we stand here today as one."

"I, Crispin Elias Callum, vow to love you and be faithful to you until the end of my days. By witness of those we both hold dear as we stand here today as one."

"By the power vested in me by the people of Pirotaine, I hereby proclaim to one and all that from henceforth two have become one..." Shaman Frieg began the ending of the ceremony as he took the rings off their right hands and kissed them both and lifted them toward the heavens and then brought them down placed them on the ribbon-bound hands of Cris and Val, placing them on their left ring fingers. "...Please seal your blessed union with a kiss."

The kiss Val planted on Cris, curled everyone's toes. Cris' unbound hair was crowned with white and red poinsettias and waved in the cold winter breeze, but not a soul was cold in the warmth created from love in that field. Everyone cried and laughed and sang and danced, it was a bonding day to remember.

The celebration of their bonding lasted all night.

Everyone exchanged gifts and ate and laughed and enjoyed life to it's fullest. Eran could not remember a more joyous Winterfest.

-----

It was summer, the ship was finished and so was the new "Homestead". They had turned the pre-fab units into the foundation of a much larger home. They left the original unit alone, as a

monument to Eran and Beau; it would always be their home on Pirotaine whenever they wanted to use it again. They gutted the other units, turning Val and Cris' section in a permanent guestroom for them to use when they visited, Mandy insisted that no matter where they went, their "home" was always here where they were loved and had fallen in love. This was the "Homestead" for them all.

They had built a larger two-story structure right off the cave face and right on top of the existing pre-fabs. The remaining two prefab-units that were gutted were turned into a huge kitchen and living area, with a large welcoming table big enough to fit them all comfortably and hold a feast upon it if Mandy so chose, which she did quite often. The second story consisted of several rooms, most still empty, but with seven identical rooms, and two bathrooms, guests or children would be well accommodated. The third and final story was nothing but a huge suite for Mandy and Farin, a nursery adjacent was filled to overflowing with toys and white linens. Soon to be occupied. It was a home as unique as the people who'd built it; it was their home and had plenty of room for an entire brood of children, two parents, and four eternal uncles.

Cris and Beau paced the floor of the living room downstairs waiting for news. Val sat reading a book that he kept looking up from, Cris kept hovering by the stairs, Beau must have checked his watch a dozen times while Eran chain-smoked at the table, his ashtray overflowing and Farin, the father, looked the calmest of them all as he relaxed on the couch waiting.

The mid-wife came down the stairs smiling. "It's a girl!"

"You owe me five credits Beau!" Cris grinned trailing Farin up the stairs into the bedroom on the third floor to get a look at his "niece".

Mandy lay in a large bed, holding a pink wrapped bundle looking tired but happy.

"Name? What's her name?" Beau asked fawning over the beautiful newborn in Mandy's arms. She had mix of colors from her parents. Mandy's very dark skin and Farin's fair skin making a rich chocolate color on the baby, her hair was like her mothers white and curly, and her eyes were her father's, golden, almond-shaped and slightly upturned at the outer edges. She was in a word, stunning.

"Erin Christina."

Eran and Cris looked at each other then back to Mandy and Farin. "After us?" Cris asked and both parents smiled.

"You are our family, of course." Farin stated matter-of-factly.

-----

"Cris, give the baby back. No... not to BEAU! Damn it you two!" Eran rolled his eyes; those two were wrapped around that baby's finger. They were never getting off the planet at this rate.

Little Erin was a few weeks old when the Crew of the Infinity kissed everyone good-bye, Beau and Cris reluctantly returning their niece to her mother. They promised to come and visit soon as Mandy and Farin stood in the field waving them off one early morning, wondering what trouble Eran was going to get them all into and just how long they'd be gone before they came back.

Eran punched up the power and Cris in the co-pilot's seat threw open the channels. "We're good to go Eran. Let's shake off the cobwebs."

"Beau you ready?" Eran asked Beau who sat where Cris had used to sit in the cockpit, it made more sense to let Cris actually ride "Shotgun" as he called it, since he actually new how to work the ship, besides, he sort of liked the brotherly bond thing Eran and Cris had going on. "The Brothers Callum" would be notorious more than likely Beau mused with a sardonic grin, and in all honesty, there were some things Beau had no desire to learn.

Flying a ship was one of them.

"I'm all set. I'm just sitting here after all."

"Val you secure down there?" Eran pressed the com-link to the engine room.

"We're lit up green across the board. We're good and my tray table is in the upright position."

Eran chuckled and the "Infinity" lifted off.

"Coordinates?" Cris asked as his fingers twitched on his console, itching to be working again.

"Second star to the right and straight on till morning!" Beau sang and Eran turned around to glare at him.

"Shut up Peter Pan. Get us in orbit; we'll decide as a group which job we take. I have a huge back-log of requests, we'll be busy a while." Eran said and Cris set the controls and lifted them off into orbit.

"To Infinity and Beyond!" Beau postured in his seat.

"Beau don't make me hurt you or ban you from the cockpit." Eran slapped his forehead and Cris just laughed.

Life was certainly never going to be boring having each other.

"Hey Beau, We'll always have Paris!"

"CRIS! DON'T ENCOURAGE HIM!"

"A long Time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

"BEAU! I'm banning you two from watching old earth vids! STOP IT."

Cris and Beau just laughed. The com-link buzzed from the engine room.

"My Schwartz is bigger than your Schwartz." Val added, after hearing the exchange and laughing down in the engine room.

"I. Hate. You. ALL!" Eran mumbled as they settled into orbit and he broke out his cigarettes.

Eternity was a very long time, especially when you were trapped on a ship surrounded by blithering and annoying idiots.

Beau broke out into a jaunty song and Cris joined him in harmony as they broke free of the Pirotaine stratosphere and the main view screen became awash with stars.

But then again, Eran mused; having them around always sweetly singing wasn't such a bad fate after all.

----

END