

"Giubilante Con Calore"**(Jubilant Warmth)**

T H E I N F I N I T Y S E R I E S

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"Cris, come look at this one!" Beau hollered across the store holding up a large stuffed octopus. Cris stuck his head around the corner and quirked an eyebrow.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"What's wrong with it?"

"That is the ugliest stuffed toy I've ever seen." Cris made a face at the garish green and purple striped nightmare.

"It's fun!"

"It'll give her nightmares." Cris laughed as he looked over the huge pile of toys with Beau. "Here, this is much nicer." Cris said pulling out a large leopard in white with rainbow spots.

"Oh, that is nice. But I think that one suits Valeria more. I'm shopping with Bo in mind."

"That octopus is bigger than she is, she's only three, and seriously Beau, I'm getting images of tentacle nightmares here myself. Do you really want to give your namesake cause to see a shrink the rest of her life?"

"You're probably right." Beau set the octopus back and dug deeper into the pile pulling out a huge blue lamb.

"Oh no, wrong again, worse much worse."

"What's wrong with this one?" Beau asked wondering what the hell Cris had to complain about a lamb for.

"Can you not hear the Bo peep jokes?"

Beau dropped the lamb like it had a virus. "You're absolutely right. Bad idea."

"What about a doll? Is she too young for a doll?" Beau asked looking at the frilly dolls in pretty dresses on the store wall.

"Yes, both she and Valeria are too young yet really. Remember they'll be chewing on these more than likely. Erin on the other hand is almost five, she's old enough. I already bought her one though, you're too late." Cris grinned finding a small teddy bear that was perfect for Valeria, just small enough for an eighteen-month-old beauty. It was soft and squishy and Beau sighed.

"I give up, I'm losing my touch." Beau grumbled.

"There's just not a lot here, Mirastor is not famous for catering to children. I bought Erin's doll on Lotorax last month, Val picked it out." Cris said as he helped Beau search through the toy store for their nieces' Winterfest Presents. This would be their first time back in five years, they weren't

about to go home empty handed, and certainly not when they hadn't even met the two new additions to the extended family. Mandy and Farin's second daughter they'd named after Beau, and the most recent baby named after Val. Four men couldn't wait to get their hands on those girls, all three of them were gorgeous, and Winterfest was a time to spoil children rotten after all.

The front door chimed and two men walked in stamping snow off their boots. "I knew we'd find them both in here." Eran said rolling his eyes.

"Naturally." Val smiled as he saw his husband and Beau deep in debate over the perfect toy.

With Eran and Val's help Beau finally decided on a little kitten that played music when you pressed it's nose. It wasn't like this was the only present he had, they'd been stocking up on toys all year long for this Winterfest, it was a good thing Mandy and Farin had a lot of room, one spare room would certainly be full of toys by the end of Winterfest. Twelve days of gifts, twelve days of squealing children and parents.

Mandy was going to be showered with kitchen gadgets galore and Farin was getting a new workshop for the homestead and it would be totally outfitted with power tools. Val had been the one to help them all select Farin's presents, if he liked it or grunted over it with engineer lust, they knew Farin would.

As they left the shop, bags in hand a little girl, probably around four or five came running out of nowhere and slammed into Cris, hiding behind his legs. "Whoa, what the?" He censored his language as a Man came out of the same alley, furious.

"There you are you little brat. Give it back!"

"I didn't take it!"

"You little liar!"

The little girl clutched Cris' pants, shaking with fear.

"OI! What the hell is going on here? You've got her scared out of her wits. Just what has she supposed to have stolen?" Cris asked resting his hand on the little girl's shoulders protectively.

"She's got my wallet! The little pick-pocket!"

Cris turned to look at the child and then squatted down eye level. "Honey, do you have it?"

"No I don't! I saw Phineas take it! He did, honest!" The little girl sobbed, her face dirty and she was dreadfully thin, Cris' heart sank into his shoes. He was looking at himself as a child.

"Little liar!, Turn out your pockets!" Cris stood, anger in his eyes.

"I don't think she's lying, and will you stop yelling at her." Cris moved in front of the child and Val, Beau and Eran moved to box her in behind Cris, all four of them furious.

"Don't let that little bitch fool you. She's always running around here stealing!"

"Ever stop to think she might be HUNGRY?" Cris growled.

"Who the hell do you think you are? These fucking urchins are everywhere, fucking whores dump their bastards every day of the week. Not my fault those bitches can't keep their legs shut."

Cris hauled off and punched him sending him flying back into a pile of snow. "It's people like you that make this place foul. Not these kids. You sure don't mind going around making these babies, but none of you sure stick around to take care of them." Cris was livid with fury. He knew precisely what that little girl felt like, he'd been there in her shoes.

The man stood up wiping his bloody nose. "It's a whore's job to take the birth control drugs. It's law here. Not our fault they spend it on drugs that just get them high. Just who are you to think you're so high and mighty?"

Cris was about ready to tear this man a new asshole when another man came forward and grabbed his friend. "Turk don't! That's one of them Callum brother's you don't wanna fuck with them man."

"You have a smart friend. I'd walk away if I were you before I bury my foot up your ass." Cris said rolling up his sleeves.

Turk spit on Cris' shoes. "Fucking pirates."

Cris watched the man turn and storm away, he'd always hated men like him, it felt good to no longer be terrified of them. He turned to the little girl kneeling again in front of her. She was crying and he wiped her tears.

"Hey now, no crying sweetie." Cris comforted reaching into his discarded shopping bag and handing her the stuffed bear. She was afraid to take it. "It's alright honey, you can have it. What's your name?"

"Tovi." The small voice hiccupped as a tiny hand touched the toy reverently. Cris' heart ached for her, her wide stormy gray eyes were so empty and scared and her light brown hair, the same shade as Cris' was a rat's nest of snarls. She didn't need a toy, she needed much more, and Cris just could not leave her alone to her cruel fate.

"Tovi, do you have a mommy or daddy?"

When she shook her head no, Cris felt gutted. "Where do you live sweetie? DO you have someone that takes care of you?"

When she shook her head no again, Cris felt Eran grab his shoulder. He looked up to see him smile. Val knelt beside Cris and took the child's hands and folded them around the toy. "That's yours sweetheart, you can have that." He encouraged and then looked at Cris and he too smiled.

"Things always come full circle Cris, you should know that. It's impossible to save them all, but you can save one. Like I did." Here Eran smiled fondly at Cris. "Give to her what you know she needs and what we all know you want to." Eran said and Cris turned and met Val's eyes. He looked happy and he nodded encouragingly.

"Tovi, would you like to come with us? I was like you too when I was little. I didn't have a mommy or daddy either."

"You didn't?" Tovi asked as Cris held her hands and the bear she held tightly.

"No I didn't. I know how scared you are, I promise we will never hurt you. My name is Cris and this is my husband Val." Cris said softly reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

Val cupped his hands around Cris' who held Tovi's "Would you like to be our little girl?" Val asked, his rich deep voice soothing and comforting. Cris could see in his face what he felt. This sad, lost little girl needed them, fate was once again at work in their lives.

"Really?" She asked in disbelief, her face awash with hope and tears.

"Really." Cris smiled and the small child burst into tears nodding and Cris pulled her into his arms and held her gently. She was shaking and she was so small in his arms. He felt an overwhelming urge to protect her, she belonged here in his arms. He would not let this babe walk a road he had before her, she would never know the pain he would save her from it while she was still young enough to forget. He picked her up and settled her on his hip, her small arms clinging to his neck where her face was buried in his neck sobbing.

"No more tears Tovi honey. You're safe now." Cris whispered into her hair, tears in his own eyes as he held her. Val folded them both into his arms, his husband and his daughter.

Beau was using Eran's scarf as a makeshift handkerchief as he wiped his eyes. "Softy. Someday that will be us, I hope." Eran whispered, his own eyes rather moist even if he'd never admit it to anyone other than the three men around him currently. He and Beau had talked about adopting their own children before; several times in fact, they wanted children too. Eran had always taken in stray children over the years, but never any he'd made his children and only Cris had he ever adopted outright. Now that he had his husband back, being a father was the next step for them both.

It would be difficult, and heartbreaking to watch them grow old and die eventually, but they could make a difference in a life that needed them, it was worth the loss to gain and give the love. This time however, Eran would resist being the one to reach out to a child who needed help and let Cris follow in his footsteps, Cris needed her as much as she needed him. This was cathartic for Cris, he could bury his ghosts from Mirastor, he could change a life, as his had been changed once before.

Love came in many shapes and sizes, and always suddenly, without warning and came when you least expected it.

"Come on, it's cold out here. Cris, Beau, Why don't you take her back and get her something warm to eat. Give her a check-up and I'll need her D.N.A scans and fingerprints. Val and I will go get her some clothes and I'll contact the Mirastor adoption registry, you've got to adopt her legally before you can take her off planet. It takes twenty-four hours to register, or at least it did when I adopted you." Eran winked at Cris who smiled back at his brother, love and gratitude in his eyes.

"Val?" Cris turned to his husband. "I don't want to be her brother. Please, make her ours?"

"Absolutely. I want her too." Val smiled at them both as he and Eran headed out to take care of business and Beau and Cris took Tovi back to the "Infinity".

Cris smiled even if his entire insides were knotted up with fear, he was saying every prayer he knew internally while he held Tovi's hand as Beau ran the diagnostic scan of her body where she sat swinging her legs over the edge of the table.

"Put my fears to rest Beau."

"Clean. Everything is in tact as it should be for a four year old. She's just hungry and undernourished, you do not have to worry Dad." Beau said flipping off the medi-scan and sending her information blueprint to Eran's communicator.

"Thank the Gods." Cris wanted to cry for joy, he'd gotten to her before she'd set foot down a path that left far too many scars. "Well then, let's see about some lunch for my girl." Cris said helping her down from the table and taking her hand, the other still held the teddy bear she'd not let go of since Cris had given it to her.

"Lunch and then bath time with bubbles!" Beau grinned, she was positively filthy, but she needed food first and foremost.

Tovi skipped in-between Beau and Cris down the corridor to the galley. Cris piled some books on a chair at the table for her to sit on while Beau, the only decent cook on board, made Tovi some tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch.

Val's communicator went off as he left the registry building with Eran. "Cris?"

"She's a child's size four dress, and a size three shoe. And get her a booster chair too while you're at it, she's tiny."

Val chuckled, making notes on his palm recorder. "Anything else?"

"Whatever you see that you like and I'll of course call you back if I think of something. She's just eaten, and Beau and I are giving her a bubble bath. She's making a mess in our bathroom but Ah god Val she's so CUTE! Wait until you see her she looks like night and day!"

Val chuckled "I can't wait. Eran and I are going to get her bed linens while were out, we'll make the spare cabin next to ours hers. She'll have to grow into the bunk, but I'll get a bed rail for it for now so she doesn't roll out."

"I am so happy." Cris cried on the phone and Val smiled.

"So am I baby, so am I. We'll be back soon, we just put in the adoption petition at the registry, we'll know by tomorrow after they run her scans and D.N.A through the database." Val said and Cris grinned over the vid line then turned the monitor to show him Tovi in the tub, soaking Beau as they played with a rubber duck.

"Where did Beau get a rubber duck?"

"I've no clue. But is that not the cutest thing you've ever seen?"

Eran leaning over Val's shoulder laughed. "Adorable. We're off shopping, we'll be back by dinner."

Cris nodded and cut the connection going off to help "clean" a toddler. He just wanted to play with a rubber ducky himself.

Val couldn't wait to get back to the "Infinity", he prayed their petition went through.

Eran and Val came back with crates worth of items. Tovi greeted them with Cris and Beau dressed in one of Beau's shirts. He was the smallest and even his shirt hung to the floor on her tiny frame. She was positively stunning all cleaned up. Cris had her long wavy hair braided in two braids that hung over her shoulders and two white ribbons tied the ends. She looked angelic on Cris' hip as they walked into the shuttle bay, she still carried her teddy bear, and full of bright smiles for them all. Val reached out to take her from Cris and settled her on his own hip.

"Hello princess. Did you have fun?"

"Uh huh! We played ducky in bubbles! Unca Beau is funny and Daddy made my hair pretty, and he told me a story and everything." Tovi gushed like an exuberant four year old, her fear evaporated like it had never existed and Val's insides turned to jelly. He'd heard her call Cris Daddy and he melted.

"Well then, shall Papa show you what he and Uncle Eran brought back for you Princess?" She nodded and Val carried her around to the boxes and bags that Eran was unloading from the shuttle.

Her little eyes went wide. "Is all that for me?"

"It sure is Princess. Want to help put it away in your room?"

"Oh papa! I get my own room too?"

The word Papa was like seeing stars and Val just hugged her, he was totally enamored with her, his little angel. "Absolutely."

Everyone helped decorate Tovi's room. Eran and Val installed the bed rails. They could be lifted up while she was sleeping to keep her from falling out of bed, and then they folded away for ease of making up her bed when they weren't needed.

There were stuffed toys, blocks, dolls, and a ball or two piled in one corner, the built in bookshelf along the lower wall was now full of every child's book they could find in the city, the whole closet was crammed full of new clothes and new shoes, Val had bought everything in her size he could find in every color of the rainbow. The room was rounded out with pristine white with pale pink heart shaped poke-a-dot bed linens, and a huge down comforter in the same pale pink with white daisies printed all over it, the bed linens came complete with matching curtains to frame in her portal window. It looked like a little princess' bedroom indeed by the time they got finished turning the cabin that had used to be Enjoe's into Tovi's little frilly sanctuary on board the "Infinity".

Everyone was seated around the galley table, Tovi in her booster seat in between Val and Cris, where Val was cutting up her meat into tiny bite sized tidbits while Cris stirred in a chocolate flavored vitamin powder into her milk, she needed the nutrients desperately, but there was no sense in making it taste foul in the process. Eran and Beau smiled into their own meals as they watched Val and Cris turn into instant fathers, and good ones at that.

"I must say this is going to be quite fun for us all." Beau mused passing the vegetables to Val to add to Tovi's plate. "I certainly will no longer be bored while you three work." Beau added and all three looked to him in query.

"Hello? who else will be her teacher? She's got to learn to read and write and all sorts of other projects. I will at last feel useful." Beau grinned leaning over to smile at Tovi. "And of course what lesson plan is complete without messy finger painting and music?"

Val laughed. "Very true, I don't think her learning will be an issue between the four of us." Val stated as he set her plate in front of her and handed her a fork. "There you are Princess, eat as much as you can."

Tovi tore into her meal with gusto and Cris grinned as he watched her occasionally peering over her head to Val. "I am so over the moon right now."

"Me too."

"me three!" Beau added and Eran chuckled.

"Me four I suppose. Rules however need to be established. Let's keep her out of the cockpit until she's older. Dangerous up there."

"Agreed. The same goes for the engine room for now. As much as I'd love her in there with me while I'm working, it's not a child friendly environment."

"Very true. Don't worry, Tovi can stay with me during working hours, I'm always in the living areas anyway, staying out of everyone's way. I could use the company and she can help me." Beau said and Tovi rather oblivious to the adults' conversation was concentrating on her food.

Just then Val's communicator buzzed and he flipped open the vid view. "Chief Engineer Vitale. We've got the data back from her background check."

It was the registry and everyone held their breath waiting for the news.

"D.N.A. Analysis shows Birth mother was a Shandria Mulvoxia, deceased six months ago of Dartax Wasting Disease. Birth Father is of unknown origins. Mother's occupation: Prostitute, Ruby Casino, prior to her death. Child was never registered, sadly typical of her mother's profession. This is cut and dry, there are no claims on the child, no living relatives. We've registered her as per your request as "Tovi Lyn Callum-Vitale", congratulations she's yours, Adoption request completed. Thank you from the Mirastor Adoption Registry, we wish there were more people out there like you to take these poor children who need homes."

The cheers were deafening as Val disconnected the communication and he threw his arms around Cris and Tovi. "She's ours! Did you hear that Princess? You're ours!"

"Oh Val! I love what you picked for her middle name! I always forget you Pirotainians have to have two names. Tovi Lyn is perfect!"

Eran chuckled and took out a cigarette then put it back, he'd have to watch that, smoking didn't affect his health, but it would hers, it was no big deal to smoke in a room she wasn't occupying. He'd curb his bad habits and keep them in his own cabin until she was no longer a child in danger of second hand smoke. Beau smiled at him, Eran really was considerate to others around

him, even if his consideration went unannounced as per her want to do. He was a good man, Beau was in love with him more today than he had been when they married. Tovi could not be in a better environment, she'd have two fathers and two uncles to protect and raise her. Beau pitted any future suitors, they were going to have one hell of a time.

Val and Cris released their new daughter to allow her to finish her dinner and actually eat theirs for that matter and Val smiled as he cut into his steak. "I didn't expect them to call so quickly."

"In cases like hers it's simple really. If there are no warrants or claims it's just a few hours. I'll give Mirastor one credit, they at least try to make it easy for these poor kids. It really is a problem here what with legalized prostitution and the huge drug market. There are just far too many children. The only reason I had to wait the full twenty-four hours for Cris was I had to get his birth father to sign him over and take care of the warrants on him." Eran said and Cris dropped his fork.

"You never told me that. You know who my father is?!"

Eran nodded and shrugged. "Biological sperm donor in your case, your D.N.A. scan revealed him at the registry. He had no idea you even existed and was rather quick to sever all ties. You really do not want to meet him Cris. Real scumbag, he was your mother's drug pusher. I never told you for obvious reasons. You were well rid of this place. And your warrants were easy enough to pay restitution on, they really don't hold it over kids heads here, they know you guys don't have much choice but to steal to survive in this shithole. Thank goodness the registry is here, they make it a lot easier to help the kids."

"I had no intention of going to find him, I just didn't know you knew who he was. I always just wondered whom I resembled. Ya know the stupid stuff. Whose nose do I have? Whose eyes? That sort of thing." Cris said resuming his meal. Eran pulled over the galley tabletop computer console and tapped out a search. He turned the monitor around for Cris to see, two side-by-side images one of his mother, one of his father. Cris made a face.

"I think it's safe to say you don't look anything like your father." Val grimaced at the man's face too. Cris' mother on the other hand was beautiful, the picture was probably taken years before she'd lost her beauty to drugs and prostitution. "Anais Tinskerin, she was pretty. Easy to see how you made up Tinks from that."

Cris nodded "I don't remember her much, at least not how she looked. Who knows what happened to her to make her the way she was, but I know whatever she did I can blame on drugs. I look like her though, wow, just a male version, but the resemblance is remarkable I cannot deny that is my mother."

"She's pretty. Daddy is pretty too." Tovi said finishing her milk looking at the monitor with Cris.

Cris turned to his daughter and smiled and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "I think Tovi is even prettier."

"But she's right. Daddy is pretty. I'm a lucky man. Pretty husband, Pretty little girl, I'll need a particle blaster." Val grinned and Cris winked at him.

"You're supposed to be biased Papa and I think we have a little time before you need to start shooting boys away." Cris laughed and Tovi just grinned having no clue at all what they were referring to. She was just happy and content sipping away at the straw in her milk.

"Ya know, we should be glad our private lives don't show up outside of this ship. Our image would be shot. The "Infinity" crew, rough and tough efficient traders, if they new how domestic we really were we'd never get business." Eran chuckled as Beau leaned against him on the bench they shared against the wall at the table.

"That is so true. I swear I walk into a shop and they part in waves. It's nice to be respected, but I've no idea how they get it in their heads I'm dangerous. Do I look dangerous?" Beau laughed and Cris sniggered.

"You don't but they know you're married to Eran. Eran has a reputation leagues long. I certainly would not want to mess with his man." Val said with humor as he finished his meal and took his plate and Tovi's to the dishwasher.

"What about me, I don't particularly look mean, and you saw today. How did I get his rep?" Cris asked handing his plate to Val standing behind him.

"You do through a mean punch." Val quipped taking the plate. "That was a nice right hook earlier by the way. That laid that ass out flat, I was impressed."

"He deserved to be laid out. It felt good, I know how scared she was, those sorts of men who pick on kids piss me off. I've been in her shoes, it felt good to finally be big enough to fight back. I'm just glad I was there for her when she needed me." Cris said taking her empty glass and passing it back to Val, then taking Beau and Eran's from where he sat and passing those back too.

"I told Phineas not to take his stuff. He never listens." Tovi said and everyone turned to her, they'd forgotten she knew the boy responsible.

"Who is Phineas? Is he your brother?" Eran asked and Tovi shook her head.

"No. He's a grown-up, he's a teenager. He sometimes gave me food and he let me sleep on his blanket when I was cold. He was nice to me, he made sure "dirty men" would stay away from me."

"God... That kid, we can thank him for..." Cris breathed, Phineas was a good kid, he'd made sure no one hurt Tovi, he must be out of his mind looking for her about now. He remembered kids like him, he'd been a kid like him. A teenager was hardly a grown up, but to Tovi he had certainly acted like one.

"I'm already looking for him. You coming Beau?" Eran said grabbing his coat.

"Absolutely." Beau grabbed his coat and turned to Tovi. "What does he look like sweetie?"

"Like Papa. Only his hair is like an orange. But he has freckles too."

"Curse of the Redhead." Val chuckled. "We'll hold down the fort go find him, we have some thanks to pay that kid."

"We'll be back!" Beau waved over his shoulder as he and Eran headed out back into the port city near where they'd found Tovi.

Phineas wasn't hard to find when you knew the right people to ask. Eran stopped a few thuggish looking youths and after a few bribes of cigarettes their leader was ratted out. He and Beau headed down an alley toward an old abandoned store. It was rat infested and filthy but warm, the fire in an old oil drum warmed the room and a single occupant sat there looking angry at the world. He shoved up from his chair the minute Eran walked in. He was skinny and his hands and feet were still too big for his frame, he'd be a very tall kid when he grew into his extremities.

His wild red gold hair stuck up in a million places and his blue eyes were a fire with rage. "You're the bastards that took Tovi. Bring her back you filthy Pirates."

"Whoa, slow down kid. Sit back down." Eran said lighting his cigarette and looking around the room.

"I will not, I know pig pirates like you. She's just a baby!"

"I said sit the fuck down kid. Don't get your panties twisted, Tovi is fine." Eran said sitting at the table and grabbing Phineas' shirt and hauling him back into his chair.

Beau made his way into the room, and opted to stand, he did not want to touch any of the surfaces in this room, it was a disgusting. No wonder Tovi had been so dirty.

"She'd better be."

"She is. My brother adopted her, she's going to be fine." Eran said and Phineas looked a little skeptical, but sat to listen.

"I don't believe you, but I'll listen. What do you want?"

"Tovi told us you helped her."

"Yeah, so? She's a baby man, no one else would help her. The adults here give a shit. I should know."

"So does her new father. He grew up on these streets too, he knows."

Phineas scoffed "Look there's only one kid that lived these streets that got out. He's famous man, worked the Diamond Casino since he was eight, ruled the underground and fed the other kids until he disappeared with a trader. So unless you tell me your brother is Crispin Tinks you can think up another lie."

Eran chuckled. "See Beau, I told you when I picked up Cris he was a notorious little shit. He left a legacy of hope for these kids and he's still clueless about his fame."

Phineas looked dumbstruck. "Wait a minute, none of you are old enough. You're bullshitting me."

"Seeing is believing Eran." Beau said and Eran nodded.

"Come with us kid."

"Not a hope in hell."

"Do you want to see Tovi or not? Damn you're as mistrustful as Cris was. I'm not lying to you come or not it's up to you."

Phineas stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Don't try anything funny."

"Of course not." Beau said as they walked back to the "Infinity" leading Phineas to follow in their wake.

Phineas stood jaw agape at the scene in front of him, he'd followed Beau and Eran into the "Infinity" and his mind was envisioning all sorts of scenarios, none of them what he was greeted with.

There was a handsome young man, with very long hair sitting on the floor, Tovi was there with a brush and in the man's hair was a riot of bows and ribbons clipped in, he turned an embarrassed face to the rest. "Don't ask." Was all he said as Tovi turned to smile.

"I made Daddy PRETTY!"

Val was red faced on the couch in the living area, his eyes watering with mirth. "You sure did princess."

Cris just rolled his eyes and let her pull his hair, she was hardly more than a baby after all, she'd wanted to make him pretty like he'd made her hair. He looked a complete idiot.

Eran burst out laughing and Beau smirked and turned to Phineas. "See we told you, she's fine."

"Hi Phineas! I got a Daddy and a Papa!" She looked absolutely adorable in her new little dress and ribbons Phineas was afraid to touch her she was so clean, but he knelt down and smiled at her.

"Do you like it here?" He asked and she smiled brightly.

"Yeah! Come see my room!" She took his hand and pulled him toward the door off the circular living area. All the cabins opened out into this large main space, the galley off to the side and five other identical separate cabins opened into this area. Down the aft corridor off this space were more living cabins for transporting human cargo and hosting temporary guests and various personal storage rooms, the medical unit and science center room was down this corridor as well as the computer mainframe and weaponry relay center. Then at the end of that corridor lay the shuttle bay, the larger shipping bays and the engine rooms. To the stern of the ship and down another corridor was the flight deck and cockpit. The "Infinity" was a very comfortable ship, it was a top of the line Cruiser Freighter. It was built for crew creature comforts for long hauls in deep space. It was a home for its crew as much as it was highly functional for business purposes.

Phineas stood there gaping at the frilly pink and white nightmare of a room. It was every little girl's sugar coated dream. He didn't realize he was crying until Cris walked over and handed him a tissue. The bows out of his hair he stood there next to Phineas in the door as Tovi showed him all her new toys one by one.

"Thanks." Phineas grunted wiping his eyes.

"Don't sweat it man. I want to thank you."

"For what?"

"For protecting her. She'll be able to forget this shit hole." Cris sighed and Phineas turned to look at the young man beside him.

"You talk like you know."

"Trust me, I do. I grew up just like you man. I know what sorts of pigs troll these streets, you saved her from them. I wish I'd have had someone like you for me when I was her age."

"Me too." Phineas sighed. "Why'd ya think I did it?"

Cris nodded "The best thing that happened to me was getting off this rock when I had the chance."

The penny dropped and Phineas turned to stare at Cris. "You really are Crispin Tinks aren't you?"

"I used to be. Eran adopted me to get me off this planet, the name is Crispin Callum now, but yeah, you're looking at the Former Tinks of Diamond Underground."

"Shouldn't you be like thirty or something by now?" Phineas asked looking a little skeptical of the youth beside him.

Cris laughed nervously. "Twenty-eight, lets just say I look fabulous for my age."

"Eran too?"

"Eran looks REALLY fabulous for his age." Cris chuckled as Tovi carried over the octopus Beau had been looking at earlier.

"Ah god that's... Val! Why did you buy that ugly thing?" Cris grimaced and turned to his husband.

"It's purple, I like purple."

"You have no taste. God that's a hideous toy."

Phineas just stood there trying to absorb the shock. Eran appeared and jerked his head for Phineas to follow. They sat down at the game table in the main room and Eran leaned back in his chair.

"Are you satisfied she's fine?" Eran asked and Phineas nodded.

"Just who are you guys?"

"The answer will depend on yours. I like loyal people, I like trustworthy people. I like you, you didn't have to take care of her, but you did. That's a good man, good men are hard to find. How old are you?"

"Fifteen? Sixteen? I dunno, somewhere there I guess."

"Good, makes this easy, you're old enough to accept employment. You want a job kid?"

Phineas looked up in shock. "Seriously?"

"I'm never not serious. You'll learn that. We can use an extra hand now and again, it's just the four of us, and Val could use an assistant. You want the job?"

"Dude! Yes, I'll work hard honest."

"Save it kid, I'm pretty good at spotting good eggs. Despite the package they come in. I spotted Cris, you're a lot like him. Now, this job I offer comes with a stipulation. We have secrets, secrets you're sworn to keep if you take the job." Eran said handing over a contract.

"I'll tell you who we are and you have to sign this and swear to keep your yap shut."

"I don't rat out my friends."

"Good, sign that and welcome aboard the "Infinity". Phineas Kale."

"How did you know my name?"

"I have eyes and ears everywhere."

Phineas signed his name and Eran took the paper and handed it to Beau. "Right, now Tovi is still too young to comprehend all of this, but you are. You already noticed. Our ages are a bit deceptive in appearance."

"No shit, you should be a lot older if you adopted Cris, and Cris don't look no twenty-eight. Who are you guys?"

"My name is Eran Callum, I am one-hundred and eighty-seven years old. A very long story short the four of us cannot die and we will never age. That's why we look as we do. None of us will tell you how we came to be the way we are, it was an accident that thankfully will never be repeated. We took care of those nasty loose ends. But being immortal is a bitch and too many people ask too many questions. We like our lives as they are and we'd like to keep them this way. You don't ever tell anyone about us, I'd rather not become a target to people who like to try and kill me, it fucking hurts and is pointless."

"Immortal? That's a bit hard to swallow."

Eran leaned over and cut his finger and Phineas watched dumbstruck as the finger healed right in front of his eyes.

"Believer now?"

Phineas nodded.

"We are a team, we are a family. Welcome to the family business. We're not pirates by the way. Just smugglers. We take the jobs to fund our adventures. We like to have fun, plain and simple and that takes money."

"God Eran you make it sound so BORING." Beau moaned from his chair. "You'll get used to him, he's really not so mean."

Phineas laughed, almost hysterical. He was still in shock.

"Well it's best he know right off the bat if he's coming with us. A lot less easier than trying to hide it from him." Eran grumbled tossing Phineas a credit disk.

"Your first job. Go get yourself some decent warm clothes, collect whatever you want to bring with you and be back here in three hours, I'm locking down for the night at midnight local time. In the morning we're leaving for Pirotaine, it's fucking cold there this time of year so make sure your clothes are warm. Got that?"

"Yes sir."

"And don't call me sir. It's Eran, we do not use titles on board the ship. Get, your time is ticking."

"I'll be back! Thank you! Thank you all!"

Phineas cheered as he ran down the gangplank he wanted to be back as soon as possible. He'd been praying his whole life for this chance, he was not going to lose it.

Eran did always have a good eye for spotting people with impeccable character, the one exception being Enjoe and even then he'd gone against his better judgment in hopes that his influence would have helped straighten him out. Enjoe could not be blamed, his brain had not been firing right his whole life thanks to his augmentation.

While Phineas was out, Eran made a few calls and cleared his warrants for him. It really helped that Eran had contacts in high positions all over the galaxy. Within twenty minutes, all charges were dropped and Phineas was cleared for departure from the planet.

Being fifteen or older on Mirastor meant he didn't need adoption, he was of legal age to accept employment, only just, but fifteen was fifteen and the Mirastornian law said he was of legal age to apprenticeship. Val's name was on the apprenticeship application, he'd teach Phineas the finer points of engineering, and he really could use the help doing maintenance if just for someone to pass him tools as he lay suspended in awkward positions.

Val was reading Tovi a bedtime story as Cris tucked her in when Phineas returned, just a couple of bags in tow. "See its habit to be frugal." Cris whispered as Tovi dropped off to sleep.

"We'll cure that." Val whispered back as he set the book down and a sleeping Tovi got a kiss from both her father's as they tiptoed out of the room.

"Welcome back Phinny." Cris grinned and Phineas grimaced he hated that nickname.

"Don't mind Cris or Beau, they like to tease." Val said smiling and holding out his hand. "We didn't get to meet properly. I'm Val and you'll be working with me as my apprentice."

"I really cannot thank you guys enough."

"You can thank us by bathing and burning those clothes you're currently in." Beau said taking a look at the clothes Phineas bought and rolling his eyes. "He's worse than you were." Beau continued carrying the bags into one of the remaining two vacant cabins off the main room.

"This one is yours. I made up your bunk and you've a chest there and a closet there I'll help you fill once we get to Pirotaine. This is your bathroom." Beau said going through the room flipping

on the lights. "Strip and give me those." Beau commanded and Phineas stepped into the bathroom and then stuck a hand out to turn over his tatty and smelly clothes to Beau.

"Good, get cleaned up, and I'll have something for you to eat before you turn in, you look hungry. Welcome aboard Phinny."

"I really hate that name."

"Well get used to it." Beau laughed as Phineas peered through the crack in the door.

"Will you all leave the kid alone to shower in peace? You're all fucking mother hens, I swear." Eran poked his head in the door and everyone vacated leaving Phineas time to clean up.

The hot water felt incredible, he'd not had a shower he could remember in years. He watched the dirt swirl down the drain, years worth of it, years worth of misery, years worth of wondering where his next meal would be found, years worth of survival. His tears meshed with the water and he wept thankful tears of release, it was a miracle, his prayers had finally been answered.

He used the entire cake of soap and must have washed his hair a dozen times just for the sheer joy of it before he stepped out of the shower and dried off.

He dug out of a drawer his new thermal pants and a clean overly large t-shirt and wandered into the main room with a towel still wrapped around his head.

Everyone else was seated at the large card table, also dressed comfortably for the night. Beau smiled as Phineas joined them. "There's a sandwich and a protein shake on the counter for you in the galley. Not a lot, but it's late." Phineas nodded, grateful for any morsel and went to go grab his meal.

He came back out, food in hand and was going to sit off to the side when Eran motioned for him to join them at the table. "You're a part of this crew, you're always welcome to join us." Phineas moved to sit at the table and devoured his sandwich in a few minutes. His shake took a little longer, protein shakes weren't the best tasting but they certainly filled you up with much needed nutrients.

As he ate Beau reached over and took the towel away. "Cris can I borrow some of your detangler and comb?" Cris nodded and went to grab his detangler spray and a comb. "This must be tamed."

Beau set about combing out Phineas' shaggy mane of orange hair, the same shade as stray tabby cats. "Such a nice looking kid really under all that dirt. What do you guys think? I think he needs it really short, it will suit him best."

"Don't ask us, you're always the one with the eye for that crap." Eran grunted lighting up a much needed cigarette, he'd made sure Tovi was in bed before he lit up inside.

Val got up and brought back a pair of scissors. "I think so too. He's all hard angles, God, I remember being fifteen, I was all gangly like him too." Val said and Phineas could not imagine such a large man being a skinny teenager.

Phineas just sat in silence and let Beau cut his hair, he'd always just cut off the bits when it started to hang into his eyes, he'd not had a proper haircut in his entire life, let a lone a mirror to cut it himself.

He watched his hair fall into the towel he held up, wondering if he'd have any hair left by the time Beau got done. "There, that is so much better." Beau finally stopped snipping and carefully took the towel to shake it out outside. He came back with a mirror. "See, nice looking kid under all that."

Phineas just stared, that certainly was not him staring back. He looked like night and day.

Val chuckled. "I think he's still in shock."

"That can't be me."

Cris laughed. "God I remember feeling like that after Mandy got me cleaned up too. That's you kiddo. Feels good don't it?"

Phineas smiled. "It sure does." Just then a door opened and a sleepy-eyed Tovi wandered out, her teddy in hand. She walked over and crawled up into Val's lap.

"What's the matter Princess?"

She didn't say anything, she was half asleep, she just curled up on Val's lap and went back to sleep.

"She usually sleeps with me. She doesn't sleep well alone, she gets scared." Phineas said smiling at her. Val nodded and let her stay curled up on his lap for comfort. He just dealt the cards around her, she'd adjust and they'd put her back in bed when they decided to turn in for the evening.

Cris just smiled fondly at Val and Tovi. It was precious, he was the perfect father figure, and large enough for Cris to curl up on, it must be heaven for Tovi, all that warm comfort wrapped around her. "I want a picture of that you make a perfect Papa."

Cris wandered off and brought back a digital recorder and just recorded the moment. "She's gonna hate me for all this when she's a teenager." Cris laughed as he put the recorder away again.

"She'll live." Val chuckled as he shuffled the cards and dealt everyone, including Phineas, a hand.

"Ante up. Five card stud, jacks are wild." Val called and the game lasted until about midnight.

Eran secured the ship, Val tucked Tovi back in bed, and everyone called it a night.

Phineas sank into his new bed with a sigh, for the first time in his life he wasn't afraid to go to sleep.

He didn't awake until morning when Tovi bounded in still in her nightgown to wake him up for breakfast.

He'd found home at last.

Phineas followed Tovi into the main room, everyone was gathering around the table for breakfast, like a family. Phineas just stood there a moment, drinking it in. Beau was dressed in a terry cloth robe and slippers setting out a bowl of scrambled eggs, Eran was deep into a cup of coffee that smelled incredible, also dressed in just a robe and slippers and he was reading something on the monitor on the table, taking a moment to kiss Beau's cheek as he leaned over the table. Val was still half asleep, his hair sticking up all over the place but he was awash with warm, brilliant smiles as Tovi scrambled up into his lap. He was bare-chested, his plaid robe open and he wore matching thick plaid flannel pajama bottoms, and thick woolen socks. Cris had just wandered out of the galley, he too still in his sleep attire, fleece pants and a huge t-shirt and a just a pair of socks. He came out with a plate of bacon and he kissed Val and Tovi on the cheek as he set the plate down on the table and returned to the galley bringing out a small cup of orange juice for Tovi.

"We don't stand on ceremony in the morning Kid. Come on and Dig in. Coffee is in the galley all ready if you're a coffee man." Cris grinned as he set up Tovi's booster seat and set her in it while Val stirred in some brown sugar into her oatmeal.

"You really mean it, you are family." Phineas could not wrap his brain around the concept.

"We are. Beau is my husband, Cris is my brother, Val's my brother-in-law, and we've got Tovi as my niece, then we've got you kid. Like I said, we're different, we like it like this." Eran smiled as he drank from his mug.

"No one would ever believe this, hell I'm looking at it and I don't believe it."

Cris laughed. "I know. We gotta a reputation a light-year long and it couldn't be further from the truth. Don't go blowing our secrets now." Cris waggled a finger as he handed Tovi a spoon and sat in his own seat for breakfast.

Phineas just shook his head and pulled up a seat at the table "Trust me, I ain't breathin' a word. Not a bloody word."

Val passed him the plate of bacon. "Smart kid. Eat up, there's always plenty."

Eran got up for his third cup of coffee. "Word of warning though, you take the last cup of coffee you make more."

Beau chuckled. "Eran lives on caffeine and cigarettes, if he could walk around with coffee tapped into his veins he would. Never take his last cup, he pouts."

"I heard that Beau!" Eran hollered from inside the galley.

"You were meant to!" Beau singsong voiced back, pouring Phineas a large glass of juice. "Now then, my job technically on-board is to take care of all of you. I'm hopeless at flying, couldn't fix anything if it broke and I can barely navigate a computer. I am however well versed in all things medicinal; I've a lot of experience in my time. So until I say otherwise, please follow the diet I'm going to put you on. You need to eat, and lots of vitamins and protein for you right now. I made a lot of bacon, eat up, and drink this juice, and then before Val steals you, I want to run a mediscan, I want to make sure you don't need anything that isn't obvious. We'll get you healthy if you listen to me, and don't follow my example. I eat horribly, but then it doesn't affect me like you." Beau grinned piling bacon on Phineas' plate.

"Whoa too much, I'll puke." Phineas eyes widened at the pile of food on his plate.

"I want you to stuff yourself silly for the next few weeks, you're dreadfully underweight. And that will be easy to do once we get to Pirotaine and Mandy's cooking." Beau smiled adding eggs to Phineas' plate as Eran wandered back in with another full mug of coffee.

"I hear Pirotaine is all farmland."

"Pretty much" Eran said around a sip. "It's a wonderful planet, Beau, Val and I were all born there. We're heading there for Winterfest."

"What's that?" Phineas asked around a bite.

"Gluttony and frivolity like you've never seen. It's fabulous." Beau sparkled.

"You've come on board just in time, we're on holiday. You'll learn we only run on a schedule when we've jobs that require it. We piss about a lot, we are never in a hurry unless we have to be." Cris chimed in as he poured more juice for Tovi.

"Sounds like you guys have a lot of fun."

"We do. We're planning to winter on Pirotaine, and you and I can spend some quality time doing some much needed maintenance schedules on the "Infinity". Her last good overhaul was about five years ago, she's a great ship and could use a little break and tweaking." Val said and Phineas beamed.

"I can't wait. I really want to learn."

"We'll have Farin too, he was the Chief Engineer for this baby for Twenty-years before me. There's a lot you can learn from him too." Val winked leaning over to wipe off Tovi's chin where she dribbled her oatmeal.

"I'm full." Tovi whined and fidgeted in her seat. Val just chuckled as Cris got up to help her out her seat.

"Go grab me your brush Princess, Daddy will comb your hair." Cris shoed her off to her room and Tovi came back brush and ribbons in hand.

Phineas smiled "I'm thrilled to see her so happy. Her mom really tried hard to be good. She was just so sick and the last year she was really bad, She died about six months ago, I promised her I'd look out for Tovi."

Beau looked terrified, "Wait a minute, she died of Dartax, how often were you in contact with her?"

"I don't have it. I don't think so at least. Tovi don't either. We made sure we didn't get too close near the end there."

"Good, but I'm testing you for it anyway, it can lay dormant for years. Catch it dormant and you can cure it. I'll test you both here after breakfast. Better safe than sorry." Beau remarked making notes on the tests he wanted to run on both new members of the "Infinity" family.

Cris sat on the built in sofa and had Tovi standing in front of him as he first changed her out of her nightgown and into a warm little blue sweater with a snowflake pattern across the chest on it and a pair of denim bib overalls. He next put on thick white socks and a new pair of white suede shoes. Before he started combing her hair out, once again giving her twin braids to hang over petite shoulders. She looked absolutely adorable by the time he finished his handiwork.

"I could watch you do that forever." Val grinned at the table finishing his coffee.

"You did a good job picking out her clothes. Everything in there is cuter than shi---- poop." Cris censored his language; he'd have to watch his mouth now that little ears were around.

Val barked once with laughter. "Nice save."

"Thank you. Okay Princess, you're done. Go show Papa how pretty you are." Cris said patting her behind with her brush as he went to go put it away. "I'm gonna get ready myself, Papa's on duty."

Tovi was already up on Val's lap; it was obviously one of her favorite places to be, since they'd gotten up that morning, she'd been making Val's lap her territory. Not that he minded in the slightest. He was bouncing her on his knee as Cris disappeared to go change.

"I should get ready too, since I'm official nanny. I'll relieve you shortly to go get ready yourself, be back in a tick. Phineas EAT, you are on no set schedule today. Eat and take your time, I don't plan on letting Val have you until lunchtime." Beau said going off to get dressed. Eran closed his monitor, took his empty cup into the galley and patted Phineas shoulder as he passed to follow Beau into their cabin.

"Just relax, you'll be fine."

"I'm more than fine." Phineas replied as he finished his breakfast and chatted with Val and Tovi until Beau reappeared to take over watching Tovi as Val went to go get ready for the day himself.

"You listen to Uncle Beau now Tovi. Daddy and I have to go to work here for a while. Be Good." Val patted her head and she beamed.

"I Pwomise!"

"Good girl." Val had a light step as his door shut behind him.

"They are great guys, Tovi you're a lucky girl!" Phineas smiled at her and she nodded.

"And you too! We get to stay together!" She came over to crawl up into his lap.

"We sure do. Isn't it great?"

"YEAH!" Tovi bounced and Phineas hugged her then set her down.

"I'll just get dressed, I'll be right back." He said to Beau who smiled and had Tovi help him clear the table. They made it a game and the dishes were stacked away in the dishwasher in no time at all.

"You're my new official helper." Beau grinned at her and Tovi nodded.

"I helped good?"

"You sure did." Beau winked at her as Cris came out to help clear to notice everything was done.

"Wow, what a team. You didn't leave me any clean up." Cris chuckled squatting by Tovi to kiss her cheek. "I gotta go to work now Princess, give Daddy a kiss and I'll see you at lunch time."

Tovi kissed his cheek and Cris skipped off down the stern corridor toward the flight deck.

The scene was repeated when Val came out and sauntered off down the aft corridor.

Eran's voice sounded on the ship speaker system. "We're ready. Everyone secure?"

Beau pressed the com. "Not yet, give us five minutes."

Phineas came out "What was that?" He asked as Beau was fastening Tovi to the couch.

"Take off. Buckle-in over there on that end of couch, breaking atmosphere can be a little bumpy." Beau said buckling in beside Tovi and Phineas took the last seat on the couch.

"We're ready." Beau called into the cockpit.

"Getting clearance now."

There was just a slight feeling of motion and just a few little jiggles before Eran's voice once again came over the system. "All clear, the captain is turning off the seat-belt sign you are free to move about the cabin."

"He's really in a good mood today." Beau laughed as he undid Tovi's seat belt

"That's it?" Phineas asked thinking it was going to be a lot longer.

"That's it. Cris and Eran know this ship inside and out, they don't mess about. The "Infinity" is fast. She can clear planetary gravitation in under a minute."

"Wow."

Beau winked. "Yeah wow, come on you two, let's get you both checked properly." Beau said leading them toward the Medi-room and science office.

Phineas and Tovi sat on two separate examination tables in the Medi-room. Beau drew some blood from them both and set the vials into the computer analysis monitor. Thankfully, he knew how to use medical equipment, his years in the intern camp he'd learned how to care for the infirm and then years spent studying the mites, he was thankful for these skills, they came in handy now.

Tovi was clean, a little iron deficient but other than that healthy. Phineas however Beau sighed, "I won't lie to you, you've got the dormant virus. You're not contagious, you're just first stage dormancy. As soon as we get to Pirotaine, I'm going to have Mandy confirm my tests and we'll

get you the medication you'll need to get rid of it. You also have Diabetes, do you get the shakes?"

"Is that what that is?"

"Yes, I'm putting you on a very strict diet for now. We'll get you some medication for that too. The course of treatment is six months, but it will repair your pancreas. Then there is your piss-poor circulation and eyesight you've damaged to your eyes and circulatory system from your diabetes. Everything a little fuzzy around the edges?"

Phineas nodded.

"We'll take you to a Doctor on Pirotaine, nothing a little surgery won't fix for your eyes. And once we repair the damage to your Pancreas your circulation should drastically improve. Thankfully everything you have is fixable."

"I can't thank you enough."

"Don't be silly. You're one of us, and we take care of our own. I'm also not letting you work until we get you medicated. You're on rest until we get you a little healthier. I don't like your fat levels, you have no body fat at all, you've been working too hard just to survive, and your body needs a rest, badly. You're tough, but take a break, you deserve and need it." Beau said shutting off his monitors.

"Isn't there something I can do?"

"Eventually, don't worry about resting, no one here will think anything of it. Your health comes first, we know that, if you want to help, help me make lunch." Beau said helping Tovi off her table and leading everyone back to the living space. They set Tovi up in front of the movie monitor on the couch; Phineas was just as awestruck as Tovi as the large screen dropped down out of the ceiling.

"You have one of these in your cabin too." Beau showed Phineas his control panel. "Cris and I are movie junkies, you can access the files with the menu button."

Beau demonstrated the menu on the main screen, selecting an old cartoon for Tovi to watch.

"Now I'll warn you now. Unless you get some of your own and unless you're swinging the same way we do, the um, adult stuff is rather, ah - how do I put this? Shocking to young eyes and well, we're all gay here."

"Gotcha, I sorta figured that one out already. I won't be raiding your stashes." Phineas laughed. "I'm the odd man out, I like girls."

"You'll definitely need your own stash then." Beau winked as Tovi sat enthralled watching Martoovian Bunnies sing children's tunes as they scampered through animated forests.

Phineas helped Beau fix sandwiches and iced tea, just as everyone wandered back for lunch.

Once Beau gave them the low down of his findings, everyone was adamant Phineas take care of his health and he was officially banned from work until Beau gave the all clear.

By dinner, the "Infinity" was getting clearance and setting down in the middle of nowhere. A large house built against a catacomb of caves and a snow covered field was the backdrop and two adults and three children came bursting out of the house to greet them.

"Cris, we are walking all of fifty feet, I can't even see her anymore under that coat." Val chuckled as they all grabbed their coats

"It's ten degrees outside, I don't want her cold." Cris said fastening a fluffy red coat with a white fur rimmed hood onto Tovi.

"We must buy her more red. It's her color." Beau commented handing Cris her mittens.

"Will you two stop fussing already?" Eran rolled his eyes; poor Tovi was buried under her winter garments. He was punching open the gangplank just as the last mitten was pulled on and Cris scooped her up onto his hip.

"Ready Princess?" He asked as the cold air from outside rushed in to greet them. Tovi nodded and Eran and Beau led the way down the gangplank followed by an amused Phineas and Cris and Val brought up the rear.

"WELCOME HOME!" Mandy cried, her youngest on her hip, also bundled up warm as she rushed over to greet them as they walked down into thick drifts of snow.

"UNCLE ERAN! UNCLE BEAU!" A girl Tovi's age, just under five came rushing forward and Eran held open arms and lifted her skyward as she crashed into him.

"God, who is this lady? You were just a baby yesterday! Have you been good?" Eran asked his namesake, her dark chocolate skin, golden eyes and white hair crisp and clean under her green hooded coat.

"Yes! I got your letters and I can read them now all by myself!" She grinned and Beau reached over to take her.

"Such a smart girl. Do you have any kisses for Uncle Beau?" Beau got covered in kisses, sheer bliss.

Eran was hugging Mandy and cooing at the Baby as Farin and Bo made it to the group, and the scene was repeated with Eran moving to fawn over his husband's namesake. All three girls had the most glorious combination of exotic beauty from both parents. Mandy was always a beautiful woman, still was and all her daughters had her perfect completion and their skin was just a few shades lighter due to their father's influence.

They all had Farin's sharp slanted eyes, feline in color. Erin's a bright yellow gold; Bo's a light pale green, and little Valeria's were a brilliant amber color. They all had Mandy's pristine white hair, but only Erin's had that tight coarse texture curl. Bo and Valeria had the white color, but Farin's silky, bone straight flaxen texture.

It was then Mandy noticed Val and Cris. "OH my GOD! What? Who?" Mandy, empty handed since Bo had taken Valeria rushed over.

"Tovi honey, this is your Auntie Mandy. Mandy, meet our daughter Tovi." Cris grinned and Mandy squealed and threw her arms out.

"Oh my goodness! Hello beautiful! Dear heavens me, come give Auntie Mandy sugars you sweet angel!" Mandy gushed and Tovi, swept into the moment let Mandy sweep her away from Cris in a twirl of a hug.

"Farin! Look what I have!" Mandy called and Farin turned and stopped stunned.

"Since when did? Oh my God, we sure are growing." Farin smiled brightly as Mandy carried Tovi over for introductions.

Phineas was standing off to the side out of the way and Val walked over and slung an arm over his shoulders. "Family reunions, we tend to gush a lot. Come on, don't be shy." Val led Phineas over to the group slowly making their way out of the cold into the house.

Everyone was laughing in absolute chaos as they fell into the house stamping snow off boots. Cris was taking off Tovi's coat as she was introduced to her "cousin" Erin and in no time both little girls were off across the room to where Erin had her dolls spread out on the living room floor in front of the roaring fire and being both almost exactly the same age, it was instant friendship and they were off playing in their own little world.

Valeria was put back into her playpen, and Bo was being bounced on Beau's hip as the room filled and the door shut.

"It's so good to have you all home." Mandy cheered shutting the door turning to Cris. "When did you adopt her?"

"Yesterday." Cris smiled hanging Tovi's coat on a hook by the door.

"Dear God, she's beautiful she could almost be yours, she looks like you a lot." Mandy chuckled hanging up Erin's coat on the same hook.

"I thought the same." Val added walking up to hang up his coat and Phineas'. It was then Mandy spotted the newcomer.

"Oh dear! Where did you come from, I missed somebody in the chaos!" Mandy cried just up and hugging the stranger behind her who looked a little shy and daunted.

"This is Phineas, Phineas, meet Mandy, we failed to mention she's quite..."

"Watch it Val." Mandy playfully threatened standing back to get a good look at the boy. "Such a handsome lad too."

"Thank you Ma'am." Phineas' blushed.

"Ma'am? Oh no, no, no. Mandy is just fine sweet-cheeks. We're family, none of this Ma'am stuff around here, I'll box your ears." Mandy winked as Beau walked over.

"I see you already met our new little brother here. We need to talk and I need to know if you have any Isulatium meds for him?"

"Oh my, Diabetic?" Mandy asked going into her medical mode and taking Phineas' pulse.

"Badly neglected. Before you feed him like the goddess you are in the kitchen, we've got to get his levels stable. Every meal he spikes." Beau said concerned, wanting to get Phineas help immediately.

"Goodness gracious. Yes, I have a few patients I'm treating, I have some, hang on." Mandy went just to the next room, it looked as if Mandy had opened up a small health clinic as Beau and Phineas followed into the small addition off the "Homestead".

"Once a doctor, always a doctor Mandy?" Beau smiled as he checked out the facility.

"It's a free clinic. They needed one in Rael. I tend the sniffles really. Rael may seem small, but we've half a million people. Some of them can't afford a lot, so since this community gave me so much, I give back what I can. Come here kiddo." Mandy said patting her examination table. "Hop up here." Phineas did as told and Mandy took a small drop of blood from his finger and tested it.

"Fifty-five. When did he last eat?" Mandy asked slapping a piece of candy in his hand. "Eat that, NOW."

"Jesus, three hours. I tested him after lunch and he was three-fifty."

"Way out of control." Mandy went to her cabinet and took out a bottle and stuck a syringe in it and came back over to Phineas. "I'm going to give you a shot of this every day. This is Isulatium, it will repair your pancreas." Mandy said tenderly jabbing his arm and administering the drug.

"There's more Mandy." Beau said shutting the door.

"I do not like the look on your face Beau."

"I need you to double check my tests. Dormant Stage One Dartax."

"Mercy me. I have Phortanitum-diturbide on hand. A Three week course should knock out Stage One." Mandy said sitting at her desk and tapping at her Monitor. "Is the access code to the "Infinity" Medi-comp still 'poppycock'?" Mandy asked and Beau nodded and she accessed the records on the Ship and Beau's tests.

Phineas just sat there, not understanding a word, but knowing they were talking about him. "Beau did you run a level four diagnostic on red blood count?"

"I did, low levels all across the board."

Mandy hummed in thought and sat back to scratch her chin while she read the screen. "You're right, I don't know why you question your findings, you've got more experience than me."

"I'm a field trained medic due to necessity. I'm a musician damn it not a doctor."

"You're both." Mandy grinned and turned to Phineas. "I am in shock you're standing. You're one tough boy. Cris was just like you when Eran brought him to me, but don't worry, you've nothing we can't cure. Beau, test his sugar again please now that the candy has had time to work. I'll get what else he needs here. I have the PD injectibles, twice a day for three weeks and Dartax be gone."

"I feel like a pin cushion." Phineas said as he received another shot and the fifth finger prick that day.

"You will for a while yet. Damn it, one hundred and fifty, he's spiking too bad. We've really upset his system with food he's not used to." Beau grumbled and Mandy nodded.

"Give the Isulatium time to take affect. He won't be spiking in a few hours. Daily doses he'll be able to eat anything he wants to in forty-eight hours and in six months he won't even need the drug anymore. That's miracle stuff." Mandy said putting away her gear.

"And cheap. It pisses me off places like Mirastor can't deal it out for free." Beau frowned and Mandy sighed.

"Mirastor is a shithole. You are well rid of that place." Mandy replied in kind and Phineas nodded.

"Believe me, I'm glad to be out. If I died tomorrow, I'd die happy."

Mandy just smiled and came over to hug him. "Ah dear heart, you just keep up that attitude, you'll be fine. Now then, we are here to celebrate a family reunion, both the old and the new members. Come on, I'll make you hot chocolate."

"Mandy, hello SUGAR?"

"Hon, I have three daughters, do you think I make it with Sugar? They're hyper enough thanks. They love it and they've no idea it's good for them. They drink it by the gallon, I make it with substitutes, no harm to anyone." Mandy led them back out of her office and Phineas just floated behind them, lost in a dream world he'd never before dreamed he could be a part of before.

Mandy passed out mugs to everyone and they all sat around the living room laughing. Tovi and Erin sitting at Farin's feet while he entertained them with a story, Bo and Valeria were asleep in the playpen, Phineas sat close to the fire, trying to regain some warmth in his eternally frozen toes, he was daydreaming, drinking his drink and staring into the fire lazily. He felt almost faint.

Mandy laid a hand to his shoulder. "Hon, you're looking a little flushed. I know your toes are cold, but you're too warm. Trust me, the meds will start working soon, back up a little bit before you pass out from the heat."

He nodded and moved a few feet away and not a minute later he was passed out on the floor. Beau and Mandy immediately by his side "We've shocked his system. I half expected this." Mandy said as Val came over to pick him up.

"Let's get him in a bed to sleep this off." Mandy said leading them all up the stairs to a guest room. "He can stay in here. Poor dear." Mandy said turning back the covers for Val to lay him down.

"He's a mess." Val sighed and both Mandy and Beau nodded.

"I really hate Mirastor. I've yet to meet anyone from there healthy." Mandy complained pulling the covers up and checking Phineas' temperature with her hand.

"It's a miracle he's walking around at all." Beau said and Val turned to Beau.

"That bad?"

"Yes. I tried to make it sound light for his sake. But he didn't make it out a moment too soon. In his current state without medication I'd have given him three months tops." Beau said sitting in a chair.

"He's nothing but a walking skeleton. Please tell me you'll all stay long enough for him to get healthy again. If he ever was to start with." Mandy said as Eran walked into the room.

"We'll stay as long as it takes. He's a good kid, he deserves a chance." Eran said leaning against the doorframe.

"You see how healthy Tovi is in comparison? That's all his doing. He probably went without more often than not to take care of her." Cris' voice sounded coming into the room behind Eran.

"Boy he reminds me of you." Mandy said to Cris who nodded.

"Yeah, he is a lot like me, I wish I couldn't say that."

"Is Phineas Okay?" Tovi's voice came from behind Cris' legs and Cris squatted down beside her.

"He's sick honey, but he'll be okay if we take care of him."

"I got sick once, and Phineas made me better. He made me drink nasty medicine."

"Well I'm glad he did." Cris said hugging her close. Thanking Phineas again silently for being there when she needed him. They'd be there for him in return; everyone made a mental vow as they stood there at his bedside.

They left Phineas to sleep off his reaction to his medication, he wasn't in danger and while he slept it gave the medicine time to get into his system. Everyone popped in occasionally to check on him while they went about bringing in their items from the "Infinity".

They set Tovi up in Erin's room, both girls were getting along like long lost sisters and it was just plain adorable watching them play together, it was like one big sleep over for them and they were currently down for a nap in Erin's bed, both of them curled up together snuggling the same oversized teddy bear. "Oh now that is just precious." Cris said taking more pictures.

"I want copies of those." Mandy whispered as they left the door ajar and all went back downstairs.

Beau and Eran were established in their old room and Val and Cris in theirs, Mandy was making Dinner when the door opened and a pretty young girl, around fourteen and bundled in large coat, hat and scarf came in shaking off snow. "I'm home!"

Everyone just stared. Not having a clue who this girl was.

"Mary Alice, I was beginning to worry." Mandy said taking her coat and hanging it up and exchanging it for hot chocolate.

"Class ran late."

"Um, Mandy?" Cris broke the silence.

"Oh god, I forgot. Mary Alice is staying with us, Her parents moved to the Capitol and she wanted to stay, so she moved in with us, I'm teaching her to help me in the clinic." Mandy began and Mary turned to smile at the others.

"I'm so excited to meet you."

"I guess we were all full of surprises." Val chuckled as introductions ensued and Mary gave everyone a hug and was hugged in return. She was a lovely girl, dark brown hair fell in waves down her back, her ivory skin was flawless and her large dark brown eyes twinkled with kindness.

"And before any of you wonders, yes she knows, I prepared her, and you can trust her implicitly." Mandy winked and Eran rolled his eyes.

"I don't know why we bother trying to hide it, everyone knows eventually." Eran moaned and Beau laughed.

"It really doesn't matter here." Beau laughed as Mandy handed Mary a tray with soup and hot tea on it.

"Mary, we have a sick lad upstairs. Be a dear and take him that please and check his vitals for me." Mary nodded and went upstairs.

"She's a pretty girl." Cris grinned as Mary disappeared.

"Pretty inside and out. She's a real help to me especially in the clinic. She'll be a good doctor, she's got the perfect disposition for it."

"This family got huge. Thank god we made this house big." Val laughed as he stretched and pulled up a chair at the table.

"Amen to that. It's so nice to have it full again. I missed you." Farin said, as he sat at the table.

"Time just flew." Eran added as the table filled up quickly with everyone pulling up a chair.

"It sure did. I can't believe in just two weeks it will be our fifth anniversary, I just met you yesterday didn't I?" Cris asked Val who smiled and leaned over to kiss him.

"I sure feels like it, wow. Five years and a new daughter, I couldn't ask for more. We need to go shopping. She needs Winterfest presents and so does Phineas."

"I am so buying him new clothes, I get dibs!" Beau said and Cris laughed.

"Naturally." Everyone laughed as they talked and caught up with each other's lives.

A warm hand against his wrist woke Phineas and he blinked open his eyes confused. He didn't remember being in a bed and a total stranger was beside him smiling. "What? Who are you?"

"Mary Alice." She said in a friendly voice as she held a small monitor to his arm checking his blood pressure and vital signs.

"What am I doing here?" He asked still disorientated and confused.

"Sick in bed and staying put. Don't argue with Mandy you'll lose." Mary said putting the monitor away in her pocket and then turning back to the patient. "I have some dinner for you, press that little button on the wall by you please?"

Phineas found a small button on the wall and pressed it, a small table came out of the wall and he sat up out of the way. "Whoa that's cool."

"Only way to eat in bed without a mess." Mary giggled setting the tray of soup and tea on the bed table.

"That smells incredible."

"Mandy is the best cook in Rael." Mary said handing Phineas a spoon.

"That's what the other's told me." Phineas smiled at the girl by his bed, she was just about his age and just about the prettiest girl he'd ever seen.

"They'd be right. When she's not teaching me about medicine, I'm learning her kitchen secrets." Mary grinned pulling up a chair to keep Phineas Company while he ate.

"Are you her apprentice?" Phineas asked as he blew on his spoon to cool the soup before he tasted it.

"Sort of, not officially or anything. My parents moved to the Capitol and I wanted to stay here with my friends and finish school here. Mandy and Farin let me move in with them and since I wanted to be a doctor anyway, Mandy said she'd teach me and I can help her in the clinic."

"I never went to school. There aren't any on Mirastor."

"No schools?"

Phineas swallowed his bite and shook his head. "Only the rich kids go, and even then they get sent to one of the moon boarding schools. There's nothing on planet but the mines and the casinos."

"How horrible. How do you learn?"

"It's different for everybody. Like me, Tovi's mom taught me how to write my name. Can't read it, I just learned to copy what she wrote down."

"You can't read?" Mary asked shocked. Phineas just shrugged.

"No. I never learned. I never had time."

"How sad." Mary looked concerned and Phineas just shrugged.

"Don't matter none. I did all right and Thanks to Eran he gave me a job and I got out. I'm a lucky one. I'm gonna work hard, I ain't losin' this chance, they gave me a whole lot to be thankful for, I'm no dummy I sure won't blow this." Phineas smiled and finished his soup.

Beau who had come up to check on him, stood outside the door and listened to their conversation, Phineas broke his heart, he'd had no childhood at all, he was getting a glimpse of what Cris' life had been like.

Sure, Cris had told him, but Beau hadn't met him until after he had learned to read and write, and he had an advantage, his IQ was off the charts, he learned quickly. Actually seeing someone come off those streets made it painfully evident that Phineas was starting from scratch with nothing to his name but pride and will power.

"I don't think you will. Welcome to the "Homestead". I've gotta go help Mandy with supper, you should rest some more. What's your name by the way, I forgot to ask." Mary asked taking away his empty tray.

"Phineas Kale. Nice to meet you Mary Alice."

"Likewise." Mary smiled and before Beau could be busted for eavesdropping he headed back downstairs deep in thought.

"What's eating you?" Eran asked his abnormally pensive husband who was sitting in their old room on the couch by the fire.

"Phineas."

"His vitals were excellent, he's taking to the drugs fine. Mandy said by tomorrow he should be out of bed." Eran said going to sit by Beau on the couch.

"No, not that. I heard him and Mary talking, did you know he can't even read?"

"That doesn't surprise me. Cris couldn't either, we'll teach him."

"I think what he needs most is stability, a childhood. He's just going from working to survive to working for us. That's no life."

"Cris never complained."

"Ask Cris what's the one thing he wishes he had growing up." Beau turned to Eran "I asked him, you know what he said?"

Eran shook his head no.

"Time to play. No work, no worries, no responsibilities, just time to be a kid."

Eran pulled out a cigarette and closed his eyes.

"Even you had that luxury. I cannot imagine someone not having that. God I was always running amuck as a kid, my poor mother. Bless her."

"So what do you propose then? Because I know you, you're thinking of something, you always go quiet when you've a lot on your mind."

"I want to talk to Mandy first. I doubt she'll have any objections, to let him stay here. Tovi will have a wonderful childhood with us, but Phineas is older, he'll feel like he HAS to work all the time just to earn his keep. He needs a chance to learn, to go have fun with others his age, just be a typical teenager. Not something he can do with us. Not to mention he is a teenager, he'll be lonely with only the four of us for company. Tovi is young, right now Val and Cris are her world. Everything revolves around your parents at her age. Not the same for him. He'll be miserable before long with just us. That's not taking into consideration his hormones either which are exploding everywhere. He needs more."

Eran exhaled slowly remembering Cris when he hit puberty and how crazy he was for release and only Enjoe to project his needs onto. "You're right. You're absolutely right. Let's go talk to Mandy and the others." Eran stood and he and Beau gathered the others for a private conversation in their room.

Farin was the first to speak out "I am so glad you brought this up. I was going to broach the subject myself actually. I wholeheartedly agree here, that lad needs to stay here. He reminds me so much of Cris it makes it difficult to even look at him without remembering all the mistakes we made trying to help Cris."

"Just for the record guys, I was happy. I mean I understand your point looking at it from this side of the fence now, but I really was happy." Cris interjected and Mandy came over to hug him.

"We know, but looking back there are a few things we could have done differently to help you."

"All water under the bridge. I think I turned out okay." Cris smiled and Val pulled him close.

"I think so too baby. But parents will always question things later, the what ifs never end."

"Exactly, and now that we have more options, we can make better choices." Farin said leaning his arms on the table in thought. "I for one would love for him to stay. If not just for the fact I am outnumbered by women five-to-one." Farin laughed and Mandy swatted his arm.

"If you want a son, you'd better grab him because I am so DONE having babies." Mandy added and Farin nodded.

"I would not let you put your body through that anymore, Valeria was certainly the last, you had a hard time with her."

"He's already proven to be a great big brother, look at Tovi." Cris grinned and Mandy smiled.

"That's just a bonus. I can't deny the thought of keeping him here has me as giddy as I was when I was pregnant with Erin. I get him already potty trained and self-sufficient and no labor pains. That's the way to have children!" Mandy laughed as she flopped onto Farin's lap.

"SO it's decided then. I am more than relieved." Beau sighed, he'd really taken a shine to Phineas, and he wanted him to have the best chance possible to succeed in life, this was it.

"Shall we wait to tell him until morning?" Val asked looking at the clock on the wall, it was almost midnight and all the children had been long abed.

"Let him sleep, we'll drop the news at breakfast and hope he doesn't pass out again." Farin chuckled as everyone called it a night and found their way to their beds.

Mandy was already under the covers as Farin joined her. "You're all smiles."

"Mandy my love, I wouldn't trade our girls for the world, it's nice to think we'll have a son too. I can teach him a lot, he can help me in the store and while he's helping me I can have him study and teach him to read. It'll be like teaching Cris again, but I have more time now to devote to him."

"You could use the help too I always hate you're there alone all day. I worry about you."

"You'll just worry about two instead of one. I know you woman."

"Can't help it. Goodnight love." Mandy rolled over to kiss her husband goodnight.

"Goodnight sexy mama."

"Go to sleep Farin." Mandy chuckled rolling over and pulling the cover up over her.

Farin chuckled and switched off the light and settled into bed, his wife's cold feet pressed against his legs. Bloody woman had blocks of ice for feet, and every night she used him as a bed warmer.

Life couldn't be grander.

Having slept a good portion of the evening and all night Phineas was up and awake quite early. He lay in bed, warm and content watching the sunrise through his frost covered window looking out over the field and craggy pine covered foothills. The warm orange glow reflecting off the snow and the serenity of the scene was something he'd never thought he'd ever see. He'd never dreamed he'd ever see a tree, let alone the natural majesty of this world beyond his window.

The floor creaked and he turned his gaze to the door, wiping the remnants of tears from his cheeks. He hadn't even realized he was crying. Mandy and Farin were at his door and Mandy poked her head in quietly. "You're awake. Good morning, how do you feel this morning?" Mandy asked, her voice lowered, the house was painfully quiet this early.

"Wonderful. God it's beautiful out there."

"It is and cold, I came too see if you're warm enough." Mandy said still dressed in her robe she laid a cool hand to his forehead. "Perfect." She smiled sitting on the end of his bed while Farin pulled up the chair.

"We'd like to talk to you." Farin began and Phineas' stomach sank, nothing good ever came from conversations that began like this, he knew it, they were going to send him back, he was useless.

"Now son, don't look so scared." Farin began reaching out to pat him on the shoulder smiling warmly, his large frame barely contained in a huge dark blue terry cloth robe.

"Sorry." Phineas replied, trying to remain calm and failing miserably. Mandy moved closer and took his hand.

"Don't be sorry. We were talking last night about you and Farin and I would like it very much if you stayed here with us."

Phineas couldn't believe his ears. "What?"

"You heard right love. You're so young and we feel the best way we can help you learn and grow is if you stay here with us. We can't have any more children, and we really did want a son. Would you please consider staying with us as our son? The choice is yours, you don't have to if you'd rather leave with Eran and the others, but we all just felt this was what you needed most and Farin and I would love it if you chose to be ours."

"Are you serious? Me? You want me? Why?" Phineas was in shock.

"Why? Several reasons. You need us, we want to, we love what potential we see in you, you took such good care of Tovi my girls couldn't ask for a better big brother, need I continue with your list of good qualities?"

"But... I mean, I'm too old, you can't adopt me or anything, I'm just a..."

"Just a lad who needs a family. We want to be your family if you'll have us." Farin interrupted taking Phineas' hand. "I'd like to be your father if you'd let me."

Phineas was shaking, his tears were falling again and Mandy reached out and he clung to her sobbing into her shoulder. She stroked his back and rocked him, a mother's comfort was something he had never once experienced, it broke through the years of solitude and the years worth of being strong for others, years worth of wishing and longing, all of his harsh and bitter life he'd only ever wanted what every child wanted. Love. He had given up hope long ago and had become an adult years before he should have.

Now, in the space of a day he'd been given his hope back, he was given a second chance, he was being offered everything he'd ever wanted with none of them asking anything in return. He was lost and confused, wanting to accept but afraid to. Mandy just held him close and let him purge his confusion into her breast. "I know love, let it out. Let it all out." She comforted, her voice soft and warm in his ear.

Farin moved to sit beside them on the bed, adding his own comfort with a hand to Phineas' back. "Believe it or not. We all came from the streets like you. We know how hard this is to understand. I grew up on Tiburian, I lost my parents when I was ten, I had no other relatives and I ended up in their horrible foster system. I bounced from one family to another. No one wanted me, I ended up running away at thirteen and I was nothing more than a petty thug. Eran picked me up when I was your age while I was trying to steal his hopper. I was pretty good at hot-wiring engines." Here Farin chuckled and Phineas sat up wiping his eyes to listen.

"Eran apprenticed me to an old man named Rugger Thom, he was Eran's Chief Engineer back then and had been about fifty years. He taught me everything he knew; he became a father to me. He died when I was eighteen and I took over his place. We had so little time and I'd give anything to go back and tell Rugger thank you." Farin told Phineas his tale helping him to understand that they really did know exactly what he was feeling.

"I grew up on Aergus. My Mother died when I was six. My father shot her right in front of me. I was so scared I ran and just kept running. I ate out of garbage cans and stole everything I could get my hands on to survive. I holed up in the basement of the University building; my home was behind musty books and discarded texts. I read every book in that basement; I used to use the heating ducts to sneak into the kitchens to eat. I'd bribe students for money until they caught me

and threw me out of my home. I was twelve." Mandy sighed lacing her fingers through Phineas' rubbing her thumb against the back of his palm as she told him her story.

"The next five years I spent being a prostitute, any warm bed was a good bed. Some of them even let me use their computers. I taught myself everything I know. I had a drug problem, I found ways to keep it fed, oh the horrible things I used to do to my body to forget the emptiness of my life." Mandy wiped a tear from her eye.

"I ran into Eran, I actually tried to pick him up. I was seventeen then and I have no idea what he saw in me, but he took me in, gave me a job, I got off the drugs, I studied, I married Farin and then the rest is history, here we are. So believe me Phineas when I tell you, all of us understand what you are going through. We CHOOSE happiness over grief. We Choose you, just like we were chosen before you. Do you understand?"

"I do." Phineas nodded, the light coming on for him like a door opening to heaven.

"Eran really is the Patriarch of this family, even if he'll never admit to it. He brought us all together one by one, for reasons only he knows, we stay together because nothing, absolutely nothing feels as good as belonging somewhere. Family is so important and so many people close their eyes to the happiness that can be found when you share a life with another. It's not money, it's not power, it's not fame, it's love pure and simple. Love is really the key to happiness." Mandy smiled holding Phineas' hand in hers tightly.

"We were given love, we want to give it to you. Love comes with no conditions, we just want you to be happy, as our son." Farin said squeezing Phineas' shoulder.

"I feel like a dream. I'm so afraid I'm gonna open my eyes and it's gonna be gone."

"Will you stay?" Mandy asked and Phineas turned to hug her he just nodded in tears again.

"That settles it!" Farin grinned gripping Phineas' shoulder. "Now, then. It's time for breakfast I need some coffee, it's bloody early damn it. You feel up to helping me warm up the living room while your mother makes us all food?"

Phineas smiled wiping his eyes. "Yeah." He said in a daze standing on shaky legs. He had parents, something he'd never known and could barely comprehend, but it felt so good he was high as a kite. Mandy took his hand, he was already her height in no time he would be taller.

"Before you do anything, we first go check your sugar levels." Mandy said leading the way and not relinquishing his hand.

Farin smiled as he followed in their wake. The day had only just begun and it was going to be a wonderful day indeed.

"Ninety. Perfect!" Mandy grinned as the test after a night of fasting gave a normal blood sugar level. She put away the test and gave Phineas another round of his medications. "Now you are free to go help your father."

Phineas grinned and hopped off the table "Thanks... mom." He said a little shyly tasting the new word and liking it. Mandy smiled at him.

"Go on handsome." She swatted him out and Phineas went into the other room pulling on his coat and going to help Farin carry in more firewood for the dying fire in the living room hearth.

As they returned, the smell of coffee was rich in the room and they were stamping snow off their boots and laughing. Eran, ever one to follow his nose to coffee was the first to wander out of bed, dressed in thick fleece pants, two pairs of mismatched socks, a t-shirt and a sweatshirt over it. Obviously cold after falling out of a warm bed, he hurried over to the coffee and hovered over the pot as it brewed. He shifted foot to foot impatiently.

"God Eran you never change. Good morning to you too. You're such an anti-social bear in the morning." Mandy teased and Eran scowled at her as he poured his coffee and drank it black. He turned to see Phineas and Farin adding wood to the fire.

"He looks better. Good color in his face." Eran remarked sitting down at the table.

"And his levels were perfect. He's tough and is springing back well." Mandy stated with a smile as she grabbed a basket from the counter. "It's my turn to beg a helper. I shall teach you the finer points of stealing eggs from chickens."

Phineas followed Mandy out to the chicken coop and came back covered in feathers and a terrified look on his face. Eran laughed. "Little known fact, chickens are foul beasts."

"That was a horrible pun." Beau's sleepy voice groaned as he wandered out from the back room. Also dressed in layers of baggy clothes.

"But we have fresh eggs!" Mandy chirruped holding up the basket as she took off her coat and Phineas hung it up for her on the hooks by the door.

"Can I help?" He asked and Mandy just shook her head.

"Not needed. Just relax, breakfast will be shortly." Mandy winked and Phineas sat next to Farin at the table as Val and Cris stumbled in from the side room. Val heading straight for the coffee and Cris falling into a chair at the table next to Phineas as three small girls came tearing down the stairs making enough noise to wake the dead.

And a baby, who began crying right on cue and Farin shoved up from his chair, morning peace over, as he went to get the baby and change her diaper.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Tovi crashed into Cris. "Erin says we can make a snowman, can we? CAN WE?"

Cris laughed as he set Tovi on his lap. "After breakfast. Sure."

"YAY!"

Val just smiled into his coffee where he was leaning on the counter in the kitchen.

Mary wandered downstairs, looking unkempt from sleep but bright eyed. She had on a long flannel night gown in white with a thick red robe and red slippers, she looked lovely in her night clothes "Morning everyone!" She smiled going into the kitchen to help Mandy.

Phineas stared a little too long and Beau elbowed him and whispered under his breath. "Lesson number one, don't make it obvious you're staring."

"Huh?" Phineas snapped out of his daze and Eran laughed at him.

"God am I glad I am no longer a teenager."

"You did that at twenty-two and still do, don't be picking on him." Beau teased and Phineas was clueless.

"Okay I'm lost now, but I've been lost since you picked me up."

"Staring at pretty girls."

"Was I?"

"YES." Cris, Beau and Eran said in unison. Phineas blushed he hadn't even realized he was doing it.

Farin reappeared with Valeria in tow, looking changed and happy as he set her down to toddle across the floor to play with Bo and the disarray of stuffed toys all over the living room floor.

As he sat at the table Erin crawled up on his lap and when Val joined them at the table Tovi switched from Cris to Val. "Papa, did you hear? Daddy said we can make snowmen!"

"Which means I need to bundle up." Val chuckled knowing full well he would be the one rolling around heavy snow after breakfast. He hadn't made a snowman in years; Tovi was worth the frozen toes and backbreaking labor.

"I forgot how cold it is here in winter. Thank god for environmental controls and fireplaces." Eran said getting up for another cup of coffee.

"Amen to that, and thank god for my living furnace. I swear I was wearing three pairs of socks and still trying to crawl under Val in my sleep for warmth."

"What do you mean TRYING? You practically knocked me out of bed last night." Val chuckled sipping from his mug and bouncing Tovi on his knee.

"But you're so WARM." Cris grinned and Tovi giggled at the face he made.

"Are you warm Papa?" Tovi asked and Val squeezed her.

"I guess so. What do you think?"

Tovi laughed, "Papa's big."

"He sure is sweetie." Cris winked and Val choked.

"No Double entendre's you." Val scolded and Cris just grinned wickedly.

Eran almost snorted coffee out of his nose, Beau was lost in a fit of stifled giggles, Phineas looked shocked, Farin shook his head and thankfully Mandy and Mary were out of ear shot.

"Welcome to the insanity." Val said to Phineas just rolling his eyes.

"Don't worry Son, your mother and I are far more tame." Farin grinned and all laughter ground to a halt and four eyes turned to Phineas and Farin.

"Oh tell me you're staying!" Beau cried and Phineas nodded.

"I am. We had a long talk this morning, I'll have to get used to it, but having parents is like a dream come true."

"Phineas you got a mommy and Daddy?!" Tovi squealed with joy and Phineas nodded at her.

"Mandy and Farin are my parents now. Yeah."

"YAY!" Tovi clapped.

"I got a big brother?" Erin asked Farin and he nodded.

"YAY!" Erin scrambled off Farin's lap and onto Phineas'.

"Will you play with me sometimes?" She asked and Phineas smiled.

"Of course I will." Phineas smiled at his new little sister.

Erin smiled but as all very young children, lost interest quickly as Mandy and Mary came over with plates full of food. She got into her own chair at the table, Mary brought over Valeria and Bo and got them in their high chairs as everyone settled around the large table for breakfast.

Mandy, handed Phineas a rather full plate, but mostly eggs and a few strips of bacon, with a biscuit to the side and covered in bacon milk gravy. "Eat all of that. No seconds because you'll need to eat another small meal in a couple of hours. Until you're absolutely stable, you eat six times a day in moderate portions. Space it out and you won't spike."

"SIX?" Phineas gaped, the meal before him for breakfast was more than he usually ate in a week. There was no way he could eat six meals a day this size.

"Yes, six. You need to gain weight too. Don't argue and eat." Mandy winked and Phineas gulped audibly.

"Yes mom."

"Good boy."

Phineas gave a valiant effort, but was stuffed full about halfway through his meal and begged off for fear of losing the contents already in his bloated stomach. "So long as you eat what you can, that's good."

Mary smiled and cleared her plate and Phineas' where she sat next to him. "I have to go get ready for school." Mary dashed up the stairs in a blur of red and white flannel.

"Can we make snowmen now?" Tovi asked and Cris smiled.

"We gotta get dressed first." Cris said helping her off her chair and leading her up the stairs to the room she was sharing with Erin to go get her dressed and ready for the day.

"I'm off to bundle up too." Val said setting his plate and mug in the sink.

"We all should. This will be fun." Beau said as he and Eran went back to get dressed themselves.

"You can watch, PLEASE don't exert yourself." Mandy said and Phineas nodded.

"I don't know how to make one anyway."

"Hard work. Let the strong one roll around that crap." Farin chuckled.

"I heard that Farin!" Val hollered from his room.

"You were supposed to boy!"

Mandy just rolled her eyes and sipped her coffee before taking the girls upstairs to get ready.

Mary was back down the stairs and a blur out the door as she headed to school for the day.

Phineas just wandered back upstairs to dress warm and let everything sink in slowly.

Mandy watched from the window opting to stay warm inside and keeping the little ones out of the cold. Bo and Valeria were still too young and were quite content to nap on the floor in the living room lost in their toys.

Val was the only one working up a sweat in the bitter cold as he rolled a massive snowball in the field to form the base of the snowman. "BIGGER PAPA!"

"Bigger she says, I'm gonna have a heart attack." Val groaned but continued to add snow to the rather large ball he could barely move as is. Finally when he couldn't budge it a step further he helped set to work rolling the middle.

Cris was filming and laughing.

"You could HELP!" Val glowered and Cris grinned, the camera still held up.

"I COULD. Am I going to? Now that's another matter entirely. Roll papa, roll."

"Bastard."

"I love you too."

Eran was enlisted to help lift the second section on top of the first. "Holy mother of all that's heavy."

"Tell me about it." Val huffed as he helped Tovi roll the head in the snow.

He lifted that and set and packed it in place. He held Tovi up so she could place rocks in for eyes, a radish for a nose and small buttons Mandy brought out for a mouth. She cheered as she finished and then turned to Erin. "Let's make you one now."

Val looked faint. "Another?" his voice shook.

"Pwease Papa?"

Val caved and went to start again. Cris was trying not to laugh at his husband and failing. Val made a rather rude hand gesture he'd have to edit out later, but it was worth it to catch this all on record.

Phineas sat on a snow covered fallen log with Farin watching everyone make snowmen, well, watching Val make snowmen while the other's heckled him from the sidelines.

While Val did the heavy labor, Beau was with the girls making snow angels and Cris, apparently was through recording was doing something that looked highly suspicious behind a rock.

The next thing Phineas saw was a small ball of snow hurdle across the field to smack Eran firmly and precisely on the back of his head.

"You are so... DEAD." Eran went chasing after Cris who held an armful of snowballs he kept throwing at Eran as he ran.

"Can't kill me! HA! HA!" Cris taunted as everyone stopped to watch the snowball fight in hysterics.

"I'll find a WAY! GET BACK HERE You LITTLE SHIT!" Eran pelted after Cris who was now out of ammunition.

A flying tackle and they both disappeared into a huge drift, snow went flying and Eran came out looking a mess and Cris far worse. He had snow shoved down his shirt, his pants, his hair was covered in it and he was laughing about it.

"Face it Eran, I nailed you good."

Eran was covered in snow and lighting up a bent cigarette. "Fucker."

"Why thank you for that assessment." Cris chuckled digging snow out of his shirt.

Val was wiping his eyes from laughter. "Man Eran you should have seen your face. WHAM!"

"Cris, I swear you are the ONLY one who can catch him off guard." Beau wept with hysterics holding up the vid camera. "And I got it all!"

"YES!" Cris chortled and Eran turned to his husband.

"You'd better record over that or else..."

"Or else what grumpy?" Beau stuck out his tongue.

"I'll make you lick a cold pole with that tongue."

Beau's tongue went back in his mouth. "Only one pole I lick with this tongue and you'd better be good or it's never getting licked again."

Eran, defeated, went off to pout; Phineas was once again stunned at the very rude commentary that went over little heads. He however knew precisely what these men were talking about. "Are they always like this?"

"Pretty much son. Pretty much." Farin chuckled as Val went back to finish making snowmen, Cris went in to change out of his soaking wet clothes and Eran continued to chain smoke and glower at them all.

After lunch everyone was once again bundled up and piled into the shuttle and heading into Rael for a Winterfest shopping excursion. They landed in front of "Corcoran Salvage" and before they set off Farin took Phineas inside. "We can thank Val for this, he used to own this place."

"Whoa it's ORGANIZED in here. How long did that take you?" Val asked looking around and hardly recognizing the place.

"Years."

"My father left it like a bomb went off in here, I was too daunted by the task to straighten it out. Nice job." Val chuckled as Farin led Phineas into the office.

"See that empty desk there son? That's yours now. While we're out remind me to pick up some books for you."

"Um, Dad. I can't read."

"I know lad. I want to get you books that will help you learn. Trust me, this shop is dead during the afternoon. Most business happens bright and early. You and I will have lots of time to study in-between customers."

"You can teach me?" Phineas looked hopeful.

"I taught Cris." Farin grinned pulling out a box from a locked cabinet and pulling out a blank credit disk. He walked over to his computer and punched in the code on the back and while Phineas was checking out the store Farin came back and handed him the disk.

"What's this?"

"That's your allowance. Just because you're my son, does not mean I'll put you to work for free. I'll pay you one hundred credits a week. I just gave you your first week and a Winterfest bonus. There are three hundred credits on there. I don't care how you spend it, it's yours."

Phineas handed it back. "I can't take that, you've already given me so much."

Farin just smiled and refused to take it back. "Like you haven't given me anything? You can't put a price on a son. Come on, we've got shopping to do." Farin said and Phineas just held the credit disk and noticed something on the digital display just above the numeric counter. He recognized the first two words as "Phineas Kale" but the third word had him confused.

"Dad? What's this say?"

Farin turned and smiled at him. "Your name son. Phineas Kale Corcoran."

Phineas clutched the disk and fought crying again. "I'll earn this, I swear."

"You're a good boy, I have no doubt you will. Don't lose that, that's a permi-disk I can refill it from any credit-center." Farin patted his hand and urged him to put his disk in his pocket.

The others were waiting outside for them and Erin took Phineas' hand while Bo and Valeria sat in a tandem stroller. Tovi was in-between both her parents as the group set off down the street.

"Where to first?" Eran asked as he shoved his hands into his pockets to ward off the cold.

"Fontesque Bakery!"

"BEAU!" The group groaned en masse.

"Hey, I've not had a real honest-to-goodness mocha in five years sue me."

"What's a mocha?" Phineas asked and Erin grinned by his side.

"It's grown-up hot chocolate." She supplied the answer making a face of distaste.

"Oh" Phineas said still not having a clue but would follow along and go with the flow.

As they walked the few blocks toward the town center, Phineas took in the surroundings. Even in the machinery district the streets were amazingly clean. Not a speck of trash or litter to be found, the buildings were all painted bright vibrant colors and all the windows washed. He let Erin swing his hand as they walked, lost in the color and the cheerful setting.

They came to a four-way intersection of cobbled streets and there on the corner was a large building that had massive display windows and every confection under the sun was displayed in all its sugary glory. Phineas just stared and stared and stared some more. "I have never in my life seen anything like this. You eat that? It's too... pretty."

Mandy smiled as she sidled up beside him. "And sweet. Beau and Cris are quite the sugar fiends. I'm afraid however love I have to be a party pooper and say no today. In a few days you can have that, you don't have enough meds down you yet."

"I don't mind, really. I'm so full anyway I'd puke. I just thought this was nice to look at. Bakeries on Mirastor don't have stuff like this. Yeah they have sweets, but only vowing bread looks like that."

"Here they call those Binding-cakes and those are layers and layers of sinful treats. Val and Cris' cake was massive, we must have ate on it for days and days."

"Oh god it was good." Val grinned as Cris went inside with Beau to grab coffee for them both and hot chocolate for Tovi. "It's tradition here that you freeze one layer from your Binding-Cake and eat it on your first anniversary. That wasn't so nice." Val chuckled. "But we did it anyway, it's good luck or supposed to be at least." Val winked and Phineas smiled, still lost in looking in the window.

"Beau and I never got to eat ours, but no loss our cake sucked. His sister made it and well, Bonnie was not the best cook. It was pretty, but tasted like cardboard." Eran chuckled at the memory. "I lied through my teeth that day. 'Yeah Bonnie, the best cake I ever had, honest.' Even Beau couldn't eat it and he's a glutton."

Beau chose that moment to come back outside and passed a steaming cup of coffee to Eran. "Bonnie's cake? Oh god that was horrible. It was this pink nightmare; I've no clue what flavor it was supposed to have been. It tasted like laundry lint." Beau chuckled into his cup.

Phineas laughed. "Seeing as I've never tasted cardboard, laundry lint or cake I'll take everyone's word for it."

"You've never had cake?" Erin asked her dark little hand in Phineas' very fair one clutched tightly. He smiled down at her.

"No, but it's okay don't look so upset, I'm fine." Phineas reassured squatting to her level and pointing out a cake in the window. "When Mom says it's okay for me, you and I can share one to celebrate. How's that? You show me which one we should have, whichever is your favorite, I'll try that one first."

Erin smiled "Mommy makes the best. She made me a strawberry one for my birthday, when's your birthday?"

"I don't know. Summer I think."

"You don't have a birthday?"

"I do, I just don't know when it is exactly."

"We can share my birthday too then. I was born in summer too."

"Erin's birthday is special, you don't have to share it with me. But thank you sweetheart." Phineas was enamored with his big-hearted little sister. He wasn't about to take anything away from her special day.

Once more every heart broke for Phineas. He lacked so many simple things that they all took for granted and yet he bore the sadness stoically. It was hard to miss things that you'd never had. Mandy ran her fingers through his fine short hair where he still knelt next to Erin. He looked up into her sad face in query. "You are such a marvelous boy. I am so very lucky to call you my son. I'll find out when your birthday and we'll make you the biggest cake you've ever seen to celebrate. We'll make up for all those lost birthdays." She smiled and Phineas returned her smile.

"It's not important. You've given me so much already I can't be any happier than I am right now."

Mandy let a choked sound and knelt down to gather him in her arms. "Just you wait baby. Just you wait and see."

Phineas just hugged her back as Farin came out of the bakery with a tray of four cups. "Mandy let the boy breathe already. Erin, Daddy has hot chocolate for you, come here and sit with Tovi. Mandy what part of 'let the boy go' do you fail to comprehend?" Farin teased as Mandy wiped her eyes and Erin went to collect her mug of cocoa from her father.

Farin came over with the remaining three steaming cups, one for Mandy, himself, and he pressed one into Phineas' hand. "What's this?" He asked smelling something that was like coffee and chocolate and what he suspected to be mint.

"Peppermint Mocha. Mandy don't moan this little cup won't kill him."

"No, that little bit shouldn't hurt. Drink up."

Phineas sniffed the fragrant brew and tentatively took a taste. It was strong and he wasn't too sure if he liked it all that much. It was something very alien to his taste buds. "This is certainly different. What's in it?"

"Espresso, steamed milk, chocolate and peppermint." Beau purred halfway through his already.

"Espresso? Is that some sort of coffee? It smells like coffee."

Beau nodded "Sort of. Very strong."

"I noticed."

"Don't like it?" Beau asked and Phineas looked into his cup.

"I don't know yet. I'm still debating."

Farin chuckled. "It is one of those tastes that have to grow on you. If you don't like it, you won't hurt anyone's feelings if you don't drink it. What do you like to drink?"

Phineas shrugged. "I really liked the hot chocolate mom made yesterday, that was a first for me too. I had a bottle of some fizzy red pop once a few years ago I really liked, I don't know what it was called, but it had like a picture of a strawberry on the label. Mostly I just drink water, you could get that free in public fountains so pretty much everything is new."

Cris' face from where he was listening to the conversation twisted and he silently slipped around the corner to the bakeries toilet. Eran nodded to Val who followed leaving Tovi in Eran's hands.

"Cris?" Val could hear the telltale snuffle of someone trying to cry in private.

"Just give me a minute Val."

"He's breaking all our hearts."

"I know. God I remember everything he feels. I know he's gonna be fine, I just hate knowing that someone else grew up exactly like me. It's not fair. No one deserves that bullshit. I want to strangle somebody for letting this happen to kids, KIDS!" Val heard Cris punch the wall in the stall.

"Ouch."

"Don't hit innocent stall walls." Val pushed open the door and Cris came out to walk into his arms for comfort. "Changing a society doesn't happen overnight."

"Because not enough people realize the severity problem."

"So open eyes. You know better than anyone having lived it yourself."

"How?"

"Document proof, record it, seeing is believing, I know half a dozen or more people here who'd have dropped everything to adopt a child in need. Pirotaine isn't the only planet with a stable economy and good people."

Cris' sighed. "It's not like there aren't a million documentaries out there already about the problem. It's different on the vid screen, you're detached, it's not seeing is believing so much as it's FEELING. It's the empathy factor, being able to put yourself in another's shoes. Sympathy isn't enough, you have to be able to connect and not a lot of people can do that."

"You have enough empathy for us all. You always were the kindest most beautiful soul I ever met. We can just change one life at a time and encourage others to do the same. Look how happy he is, look at Tovi. We made a difference in their lives; we'll do it again. Others will too, life isn't always fair to those who deserve it most, but things are changing, slowly, but they are changing. We'll at least be able to see them change in our lifetime."

"There is that." Cris smiled at his husband and wiped his eyes.

"You okay now?"

"Yeah. I love you Val."

"I love you too baby. Come on before your mocha becomes a Popsicle."

Both men returned a few minutes later, to see Phineas full of smiles and Beau drinking his mocha. Phineas had decided after a few more valiant efforts to adjust to the taste that he didn't like it after all. Beau was making sure it didn't go to waste, the little glutton. The mood was light again as everyone sat in the cold with warm drinks and even warmer spirits.

Phineas was currently entertaining Tovi and Erin with some fascinating slight of hand with a small pebble. It was magic to them, he'd make it "vanish" only to reappear from their ears or his nose, even the adults began watching trying to see how he shifted the stone, even Cris who was a slight of hand expert himself couldn't see the illusion.

"See I told you Phineas did magic!" Tovi said to Erin who clapped amazed.

"What else can you do?" Erin asked and Phineas tossed the stone back into the gutter and smiled.

"When we get home, I'll show you some magic with cards. That's all I can do though." Phineas said, he'd just learned these little slight of hand tricks being bored and living in a casino district cards were a handy source of entertainment to cure boredom.

They were just finishing their drinks when a group of teenagers came around the corner. "Mary Alice!" Mandy called and Mary hurried over from her friends.

"Are you done with classes for the day?" Mandy asked and Mary smiled.

"Yes, afternoon classes got cancelled. Mrs. Tunis went into labor. We just got dismissed."

"Wonderful. Do you want to shop with us or do you have plans with your friends?" Mandy asked as a tall boy walked over to stand next to Mary.

"We thought we'd do our own shopping and then go ice skating." Mary said with a smile and Mandy nodded.

"Would you do me a favor then?" Mandy asked and Mary nodded. "Would you take Phineas with you? Introduce him to your friends. He'll probably enjoy that much more than trailing after us today. Besides, it's hard to buy for him when he's with us."

"Sure. How are his levels? Do I need to watch?" Mary asked and Mandy shook her head.

"He's fine for now. He knows not to eat sugar for a few days. If he starts getting flushed from the meds, just contact me, we'll be near and we'll come get him."

The boy beside Mary never said a word and just looked irritated. "Okay. I'll go ask him if he wants to join us." Mary cheerfully walked over to Phineas, the boy in tow. Phineas smiled up at her as she reached where he sat.

"You look much better." Mary said as she sat beside Phineas at the small outdoor table.

"I feel great, thanks Mary." Phineas replied in kind as the boy hovered over Mary's shoulder.

"Phineas, this is my boyfriend Jack, Jack this is Phineas, I told you about him today."

"Nice to meet you Jack." Phineas stood and held out his hand to shake, Jack nodded and grunted, pointedly not taking Phineas' hand.

"Look Mary, are we going or not?" He turned back to his girlfriend and Phineas lowered his hand. Apparently Rael had assholes too.

"Yes, goodness gracious you're in a rush. Phineas, the bunch of us are going Winterfest shopping for our parents and stuff, then going skating. You wanna come with us? Mandy said it's okay."

Phineas really didn't want to, Jack made him uncomfortable, he always did have a keen sixth sense about people; Jack did not want him around. He looked over at Mandy who smiled, nodded and encouraged him to go with a wave of her hand. Reluctantly, he agreed. "I guess so. I won't be any trouble."

"Of course you won't silly." Mary blissfully dense about her boyfriend's body language rushed inside to grab drinks with her girlfriends already standing in line at the counter. Phineas turned to Jack, his whole demeanor changing, he looked hard and proud and it was evident he had been in charge of and around people much more terrifying than Jack. Phineas was not a pushover or one to be bullied easily. Jack noticed and actually took an unconscious step backward.

"Look, you can stop glaring at me okay."

"I've been to Mirastor with my Dad. The thought of a street trash punk living with my girlfriend pisses me off. You'd better keep your hands off her."

Cris sighed, he was within earshot of the conversation, this was a bad idea, it was too soon to cut Phineas loose. He walked over "Christ, chill dude. If anyone is being trashy here in attitude it certainly isn't Phineas. I hate snobs who think money makes a person's worth."

"I'm just sayin'..." Jack began and Cris held up a hand.

"I heard enough. Come on Phineas, hang with us dude, you so do not have to deal with that little prick." Cris grunted, turning his back and steering Phineas back into the fold of their protective group. Mary had just walked back outside and Cris laid a hand to her arm where she carried a tray full of cups. "Pick a better boyfriend sweetness. He's a real ass."

"What?" She asked looking at Phineas for explanation.

"Sorry Mary Alice, thank you for the offer, I appreciate it. Go have fun with your friends; Jack made it pretty clear I'm not wanted. It's okay though, I can see his point, don't worry, I'm fine."

"What point? What happened?" She asked and Phineas just smiled at her.

"It's nothing I ain't seen or heard a million times before. See you later." Phineas let Cris lead him away.

"You don't need to put up with that shit. Nor sell yourself short like that." Cris was angry.

"I know. Not worth fighting over either. I really don't care what he thinks about me. I'm fine just as I am. I know he's worried I'm gonna be bonin' his girl at night. Let him stay worried, that's much more entertaining than a fight." Phineas grinned wickedly and Cris started laughing and just couldn't stop.

"What?" Val asked and Cris just wiped his eyes.

"Phineas has a fabulous wicked streak, we should have adopted him, he's my long lost little brother. He thinks exactly like I do." Cris gasped finally catching his breath.

"It's true though. A fight is a fight, mind games are so much more fun." Phineas grinned as Mary and the others left, Mary appearing to be giving Jack a cold shoulder.

"Well we should get going. Phineas, you're with us." Val indicated Beau, Eran, Cris and Himself. "The girls are going with Mandy and Farin. We're having a boy's shopping trip, and we can't have Tovi with us while we buy her presents." Val grinned as Farin held both Erin and Tovi's hands.

"And we can't have you with us while we shop for our son either." Mandy winked.

"Meet up at six for dinner at the Wayfarer Restaurant on the Wharf!" Beau said checking his watch. Everyone nodded and the group split off into two and went in separate directions to shop until they all dropped.

As they walked and gawked in festive bedecked windows Beau and Val educated Phineas on the finer points of Winterfest. What was expected, what wasn't, what to look forward to and most of all what it truly meant, the meaning behind the season, it's earthly roots from what was called Christmas on the home planet. It just so happened the settlers from Earth landed on Pirotaine during the Christmas Season from their calendar, and how an even more ancient tradition of

twelfth night became the Thanksgiving celebration on Pirotaine over the centuries since the planet had been settled. Phineas was dizzy with stories of Winterfest past and present. He learned that Val and Cris has married on the first day of Winterfest five years before and that Beau and Eran had been parted just before a Winterfest festival during the Tsionic Wars. He was listening with rapt attention as they passed the music store and all conversation halted as Beau bolted inside.

"Music store. Beau will never pass one without heading inside. My lovely little music geek." Eran chuckled as the rest followed Beau inside.

Beau was already placing himself in front of a large Piano Forte, something he'd never manage to actually own but could never resist playing when he had the opportunity. He was playing a merry tune. "This song is ancient. Probably three thousand or more years old, it's from Earth. We actually spent Winterfest there four years ago. There, like we said, it's called Christmas, it's a religious holiday there and oh God the music for Christmas is FABULOUS." Beau swooned as Cris settled on the bench beside him.

"I think Beau and I bought every Christmas disk we could get our hands on. Play that one Val sings so well. "White Christmas", sing for me gorgeous." Cris purred and Val, never one to be able to tell Cris 'no' complied and sang the song Beau played on the Piano. Eran and Phineas were leaning on the large instrument, resting their elbows and listening to the impromptu concert. Val's rich bass warmed you from the inside out when he sang, he could see why Cris had asked him to sing, Val made you smile whether you wanted to or not. The tone of his voice just brought out cheer from within the soul without even trying, he was full of natural good will and it came across in his voice.

Beau segued into "The Christmas Song" and Cris took the melody swaying in his seat beside Beau who supplied a higher harmony line during the chorus. Phineas was in awe he'd never heard anything like this in his life, and during the instrumental section of the song, Beau made the keys sing on the piano in a way that brought chills, the very best kind. Eran smiled, his eyes were closed, he was into the music.

A small crowd was beginning to form with the alien but cheerful music coming from the piano.

The next thing Phineas knew, even Eran was singing. He and Val took half the song and Cris and Beau sang the other half in a stirring rendition of "Good King Wenceslas". Val and Eran sang the part of the song written for the King and Cris and Beau sang the parts of the King's page.

The cheers were deafening as they finished and a lovely young woman with blonde hair piled in a bun on top of her head and very pregnant came walking over. "Beau, Val, Cris and Eran. You have not changed at all."

"Serine?" Val asked hardly recognizing her.

"The one and only." She smiled getting a hug and a tummy rub from Val.

"When are you due?" He asked cheerful.

"New year, one more month to go yet. When did you guys get back and why are you not singing out there where everyone can hear you? Our choir could use you." Serine winked and hinted blatantly.

"I think we're on holiday this time around." Val said turning to Beau who nodded.

"Not this time, we're just back for the season." Beau said still playing softly in the background.

"What a shame. God you all look fabulous, it's been what? Five years now?" Serine asked and Eran nodded.

"Exactly." Cris grinned

"You still have hair I'd kill for you bastard." Serine teased and Cris chuckled. "Well I'm ruining your concert with my interruption. Please carry on, what on earth are you singing though? I never heard any of those."

"Earth Winterfest songs. They call it Christmas there. You take my seat before you pop and listen." Cris said vacating his seat for the extremely pregnant Serine as they carried on singing. Sometimes as a male choir, other times one or two, sometimes just Beau on the piano, Phineas was sitting on another Piano bench off to the side his eyes closed and enjoying every note.

He truly felt like he was floating on air, time stopped and just music mattered. All four men had voices that were otherworldly to Phineas. Val's Bass, Eran's Baritone, Cris and Beau took turns which one sang first or second tenor, they had the same rather large range so sometimes Beau took the higher, sometime Cris, it depended on the song. Beau had a clear tenor that was perfect like a bell and Cris had a harsher, dirtier grungy sound. Both brilliant and pleasing and they blended wonderfully. Phineas mused that Val and Beau sounded to him like the classical highbrow stuff they played in the Platinum Casino and Cris and Eran were like the rock rage stuff they played in the Diamond Casino. Both were great styles, but different in very unique ways. They'd probably laugh at him and his weak comparisons, but it was all he had to judge the sound by, he liked both and he wasn't about to remind them about the time, he was enjoying this far too much.

Beau began playing traditional Pirotaine Winterfest tunes and soon the entire shop was singing, packed full of people elbow to elbow and overflowing with spirit. A young girl Phineas' age was sharing his bench with him singing along with the others. She had a remarkable alto, powerful and she sounded much older than she looked. Her voice for her age was incredibly mature. She was as pretty as her voice. She looked a lot like Farin. She had a small frame and her jet-black hair was bone straight and hung down her back to almost her knees. It shone almost blue in the light of the window. Her eyes were upturned and almond shaped and the shade was remarkable. Ice blue with a ring of dark blue around the iris edge. Her skin was porcelain white and flawless.

Beau paused and singled her out. "You my dear are fantastic. Do you know "Oh Fair the Skies?" He asked and she nodded shyly.

"Please sing it, I must hear you sing it." Beau said going into the song and she sang the verses as everyone joined her in the chorus. Phineas was enthralled.

As the song ended Beau stood and gave her a standing ovation. "If you tell me you are going to be anything other than a musician when you get out of school I'll weep."

She smiled demurely and nodded. "I want to sing."

"You had better, that's a god given gift you have share it with the world. What's your name?"

"Romi Nguyen". I'm from Earth; I couldn't believe I heard you singing all my favorites. My father is from Earth and Mama is from here. I was just a little girl when we moved here, but I have all

those songs on disk from when I was little. You made me very happy, thank you." She smiled and Beau immediately went into another Christmas carol.

"With your alto, tell me you know this one." Beau began playing "What Child is This?" and Romi smiled.

"Which version? The Christmas one or the original "Greensleeves" that the carol was based on?" Romi asked and Beau grinned.

"Oh dear heart you must sing me both since I didn't know there were two versions."

Romi laughed and sang both. Beau had a new favorite singer by the end of the both versions. "I desperately want you to come visit, I must make a recording of your voice before we leave, you are a real gem my dear. I'll make sure you have copies to give to your parents for Winterfest, you are marvelous." Beau fawned giving her his communicator number. "Call me the minute you have a day to spend with me. I'm serious, I am going to just die if you don't humor me."

"He's serious." Eran chuckled. "He is insatiable when it comes to unique singers. You've just made his whole year."

"I'm honored. I was thinking the same thing when I walked in here, can I sing a few with all of you? Papa would love some Christmas songs."

"It's a deal dear." Beau handed her his number and Romi pocketed it.

"I have to go now, but I'm off school I can come tomorrow, I'll call you with a time okay?"

Beau nodded and Romi scampered off.

"God, look at the time, we have only two hours left, we blew a lot of time in here, we should head out too or we'll never get shopping done." Beau said going over to the counter to buy guitar strings, which was what he came in for in the first place.

"Son, you are excellent for business. Come back ANYTIME." The shop owner said handing Beau his strings.

"I will. This is my favorite store in town." Beau said with a wink as the crowd broke up and the group was once more on their way.

Phineas was having the best day he'd ever had in his whole life. He couldn't ask for anything more.

The next stop was the toy store Val and Cris went crazy buying toys for Tovi. Phineas christened his credit disk buying presents for his sisters and Tovi with Beau and Cris helping him and counting his credits for him since he was on a budget and he couldn't add or subtract numbers yet. To him he knew three hundred to be a good amount but he didn't know how much the smaller numbers took away from his balance. He knew he'd learn eventually, he wasn't stupid and he was grateful for the discreet help.

The next store he purchased a beautiful scarf, hat and gloves for Mandy, he thought the bright red would look wonderful against her hair and skin, he thought his knew mother was one of the

most beautiful women he'd ever seen, he was used to women who had seen hard times and were so strung out on drugs that Pirotaine seemed to hold one gorgeous woman after another in comparison.

For Farin he bought a new robe and slippers. He would have to ask Mandy or Farin to bring him out shopping so he could buy for the rest.

As they were leaving to head back to the Restaurant they passed a stationary shop that had art supplies in the window. Here Phineas paused and looked into the window like he'd suddenly seen Nirvana. Cris nudged Beau and they both walked over to flank him.

"What's caught your eye?" Cris asked and Phineas smiled.

"All of it. How much is paper?"

"What sort of paper." Cris asked and Phineas shrugged.

"There are different kinds?" Phineas asked staring in the window.

Cris and Beau took his elbows and dragged him inside and down the paper aisle.

"Oh. My. God." Phineas gasped, all the colors of the rainbow, all different textures and weights. He walked over to a rack of sketchbooks; even those came in all different sizes. He picked up a small book of plain white paper.

"How much is this?"

"Just this small one?" Beau asked turning it over to look at the price. "Two credits."

Phineas smiled that he knew was not a lot. He could count to ten on his own. "Dare I ask about a pencil?"

Beau and Cris just laughed and took him down an aisle of pencils, again in every shade of the rainbow. "I've died and gone to heaven. But I've never used any of these before." Phineas walked up and down the aisle until he spied a cup of plain pencils he was used to and selected one.

He spent all of two and a half credits on himself and he walked out with just a small pad and two pencils in case he broke one.

"Dare we ask what you are up to?" Beau asked as they walked the wharf.

"I like to draw. I'm not very good, but I used to steal the paper placemats from the Diamond Bar and use those. Paper like this I never got to use I want to draw on real paper for a change and not on the back of a cheap placemat."

"What do you like to draw?" Cris asked as the Restaurant came into view.

"People, buildings, whatever. I never got a lot of time to do it, but I like it." Phineas shrugged.

Eran and Val who had gone to drop off the bags at the shuttle met up with them at the Restaurant and found Mandy, Farin, Mary and the girls already had a table and waved them over as they entered.

They hadn't expected Mary, but it appeared she'd gotten fed up with Jack and called Mandy and met the rest for dinner instead of going skating.

The menus got handed out and Phineas turned to Mandy with a plea on his face, there were no pictures and even if he could read, he'd have no idea what any of it was. "Mom? What should I have?"

"Do you like fish?"

"Never had it. I'll eat whatever, I'm not picky I've liked everything you gave me so far, except the mocha thing earlier."

Mandy chuckled. "No mocha here, no worries. I think you'd do well with some grilled white fish steak with drawn butter and rice pilaf. The protein is good for you and the starch in the rice will help your sugar level. You're just a tad low, but then you've not eaten in a while and you've been walking about all afternoon." Mandy said and Phineas nodded.

Erin and Tovi were sitting beside him and he noticed they had crayons and were coloring the pictures on the child placemats and he grinned and watched them color Tovi looked up and handed Phineas the blue crayon. "You color my flower? I like how you color." Phineas nodded and took the crayon and leaned over her shoulder and colored the flower, taking up the purple to give it a variegated texture then the brown and green came next for the foliage and shading. With just a few blunt crayons he made the flower pop off her placemat then handed her the crayon back.

"Me too! Me too!" Erin said shoving her placemat at Phineas. "I wanna red one!"

Phineas chuckled and colored hers like a sunset in Red, yellow and orange.

"Wow, that's really good for just crappy crayons." Cris said watching Phineas color.

"The Emerald Casino used to toss out all their blunt crayons from their restaurant, I used to bring them back for Tovi. She liked 'em."

"Phineas used to draw me pictures and I'd color them. He colors better but he let me."

"I wanna color a picture, will you draw me one?" Erin asked and Phineas smiled and took out his new pad of paper as they waited for their meal.

"What do you want me to draw?" he asked taking out his pencil.

"A kitty!"

"Okay." Phineas chuckled, thankfully he'd drawn cats a lot, there were a lot in the alleys near where he and Tovi had lived. He drew a simple tabby washing her face with her paw. A simple quick sketch and then tore it out of his book and handed it to Erin.

"That was lovely and it took you like a minute. What can you do when you really try?" Mary asked leaning over Erin's shoulder to look at the picture. Phineas shrugged.

"Can you draw me something?" Mandy asked and Phineas smiled.

"What do you like?"

"Surprise me. I'd love a picture you put thought into, those are priceless."

Phineas nodded and set down his book and pencil as dinner arrived. He'd think of something and make it one of her Winterfest presents.

Cris and Beau exchanged devious looks, they knew which store they were heading back to before Winterfest. Phineas had a hidden and under-nurtured talent after all, they were going to encourage it with enough art supplies to make the budding artist pass out in ecstasy.

It was their first glimpse of the inner Phineas, the part of himself that he kept guarded. Everyone had something they liked to do. Beau had his music, Cris had his music and computers, Val had his antiques and tinkering with gadgets, Eran loved to read, Mandy liked to cook, Farin liked old movies, it appeared Phineas liked art. They would give him the means to take his joy and build upon it.

The meal had several adults pondering gift ideas, Phineas was relishing his meal, he'd never had fish before and this was something he really enjoyed. He even had a glass of that red pop he'd said he'd liked and the waitress kept refilling it. He was in heaven, he'd never eaten in a restaurant, his new experiences kept filling his day, and he never ever wanted it to end.

After dinner everyone once more piled into the shuttle and headed home. It was hard keeping Tovi and Erin out of the bags in the back, but it was only a short commute back home. Phineas was about to head upstairs to hide his gifts when Mandy halted him. "I want to change your room. I just put you in the first room last night because it was closest. Come, follow me." Mandy said leading the way up the stairs to the second floor and down the hallway.

"This first room is just a guest room. The next is the room Mary is using. Across the hall is Erin's and this one is Bo's. She and Erin share a bathroom. The shared Bathroom off Mary's room will be Valeria's when she's old enough." She lead Phineas right down to the end of the hall and opened it into a much larger room than the one he has used the night before. It had a private bath, but it was small, always intended for use as a temporary guest room. The new room was twice the size as the first and it too had a private bathroom, much larger than the first.

This room took up the entire end of the second floor. The part of the room facing the front of the house had a nice table and two chairs in front of a large window facing east. There was another bank of six windows all along the wall from floor to ceiling allowing wonderful natural light during the day and an incredible view of Mother Nature at her finest at night and facing south. The large double bed was against the inner wall facing the southern exposure. It had two nightstands on both sides of the bed and a large dresser next to the door to the rear of the room where it met the cave face. That back door lead into the room's private bathroom, complete with a tub, dual vanity sinks and separate shower and a full walk in closet. All in beautiful grayish blue slate and marble. It was a suite on the second floor.

"I can't stay in here, it's too nice!"

"You need your own private sanctuary Love. You're older, you're not going to want to spend all your time with your father and I or the girls. This door locks." Mandy chuckled as Phineas walked around gawking.

"Mary should have this. She was here first."

"Mary's room is quite large and she is not my child, you are. She chose her room when she moved in, she in fact suggested this for you before you got to the restaurant." Mandy said as Phineas set his bags down on the bed and just tried to let it all sink in. "This floor alone has seven bedrooms and five bathrooms. There's plenty of room for Mary to have two rooms if she wanted." Mandy laughed, they had gone crazy building the "Homestead"; it had more than enough room for everyone.

"Mom... I... Thank you." Phineas smiled, this day was just one non-stop ride in a state of euphoria for him.

"You're welcome dear." Mandy said patting his cheek as she headed back out. "Make yourself at home, because you are home baby."

With that Mandy shut the door behind her and Phineas just wandered the room, the views from every window were breathtaking. He had the field and Forest foothills to the East and to the South was more of the same with a huge view of the sky and in the distance the lights of Rael were a dotted along the horizon and the stars were bright in the dark sky and the dual three-quarter almost full moons made the snow glow and shimmer on the field.

"Paradise." Phineas sighed turning off the lights to get a better view out his windows. He put his gifts in the dresser then lay down propped up on pillows, just looking out his windows into the night, totally content and flying high.

He fell asleep still fully clothed and semi-propped up. Mandy popped in long enough to check on him, carefully administer his medication and check his levels, which were perfect, before pulling a cover over him before leaving him to sleep. He'd had a long day and it had finally caught up with him, he never stirred once and he was smiling contentedly as Mandy shut the door behind her.

Once more Phineas awoke with the dawn and he lay in bed awash in the first rays of sunlight. His whole room, full of windows held a sunrise vista that was utterly amazing. If anyone even mentioned hanging up curtains to block the view from his window he's think they were insane. Not even the most beautiful painting he'd ever seen hanging inside the Platinum Casino could compare to the bountiful unspoiled nature outside his bedroom windows.

He pulled the thick down comforter from his bed around his shoulders and sank into his pillows, watching the sky turn from purple to orange to magenta and then into brilliant blue. His door opened with little voices trying to be quiet.

"I'm awake, you can come in." Phineas chuckled as two four year olds, just out of bed themselves and still dressed in flannel nightgowns came in and climbed into bed with him giggling. They crawled under the warm covers with him and he had one tiny girl on either side.

"No one is up yet." Erin whispered as she snuggled up.

"I know, it's early and you two shouldn't be up yet either." Phineas chuckled as Tovi finally settled herself beside him.

"We got cold." Tovi said curled up against him for warmth like she'd always done when they'd lived on the streets in that old abandoned store. Phineas hooked his arms around the girls for warmth.

"Tovi said you're warm and you are." Erin sighed, her voice sleepy.

"Well let's just be quiet then and you can sleep here I'll keep you both warm." Phineas said softly kissing both girls on their foreheads.

"I told Erin you'd take care of her like you did me. Cause you're her big brother now and I told her how even though you're not my brother you took care of me good. I wish you were my brother too." Tovi said and Phineas' heart melted and he squeezed her shoulders.

"Tovi, sweetheart. You'll always be like my little sister in my heart. I love you kiddo. I'm so happy for you." Phineas said then turned to Erin. "I love you too. I have the best sisters in the world."

"You love Bo too?" Erin asked and Phineas nodded

"And Valeria?"

"And Valeria too." Phineas chuckled; nothing was as pure as a small child's view of the world. "Now girls, go back to sleep, it's too early to be up yet." Phineas held a finger to his lips for quiet time and all three wriggled into the pillows and blankets and went back to sleep.

Mandy and Val stood in Phineas doorway and smiled. Phineas had Erin's elbow in his eye and Tovi's arm was resting on his head. He was buried under two little bed hogs. "Poor sod." Val chuckled going to retrieve his daughter and Mandy hers.

"He's patient and indulgent I'll give him that credit." Mandy whispered picking up the dead weight of a sleeping four year old daughter.

Phineas awoke, as he was relieved of the weight pressing on him. "They were cold." He yawned and Mandy chuckled.

"You're a push over. They had pushed the blanket off behind the bed. Next time tell them to get their blanket off the floor and they won't be cold."

"I don't mind." Phineas smiled throwing his legs out of bed.

"No, you probably don't. Dear boy." Mandy followed Val into Erin's room to put the girls back in their own bed until they decided to get up and terrorize them all with boundless young energy.

Phineas staggered into his bathroom and took a lovely hot shower; he'd never get sick of hot running water -- ever. It felt glorious and refreshing to be under that spray as he woke up and decided that being clean, totally clean for the first time in his life was almost as wonderful as his new family.

The adults were all around the large dining table in the main room as Phineas joined them. The smell of bacon frying made his mouth water; the whole room was permeated with the scent of Mandy's cooking and coffee brewing. He was thirsty and while he adored the smell of coffee, he never cared for the taste so he walked up behind Mandy, draped his arms around her shoulders from behind, kissed her cheek, grinned and patted huge blue eyes at her. "Good morning!"

"Well, goodness. Good morning bright eyes, and I know that look. What do you want?"

"Anything other than coffee to drink please."

Mandy laughed. "I never did show you where things are in here did I? Glasses are in that cupboard. That cooling unit holds drinks. Help yourself love, this is your home, you never have to ask for anything in here. If you want it, just take it, that's what it's in here for. There's milk, orange juice, apple juice, I bought you some strawberry soda yesterday since you said you liked it. You can have anything you wish, you are officially off your diet. I want you to have whatever you fancy."

"Mom, you're the greatest. Thanks!" Phineas cheered kissing her cheek again and going to grab a glass from the cabinet. He opted for Milk and sat with a large glass of it and cherishing every drop. Milk was rare on Mirastor, even for the wealthy and this wasn't the powdered kind either, this was the real thing and it was fabulous as he drained his glass in several long gulps.

Breakfast was once more a grand affair, noisy girls finally awake were running around the living room playing with toys, the adults were laughing and making just as much noise with chatter around the table and dishes clinking. The scene was bright and loving chaos dressed in nightgowns, pajamas and bathrobes.

After breakfast Beau vanished into the infinity with Cris to set up a place to record some music. Romi had called during breakfast and was going to come by around mid-day so Cris and Beau were off to set up their recording equipment. Cris was quite an electronic guru and having lived with Beau over the past few years he'd picked up a lot of recording equipment so they could record their own music. They had one of the spare rooms turned into a small studio and they were off to make it ready to use.

Val was pulling the girls around on a sled outside, Farin was rocking a fussy Valeria while he watched some sort of sporting game on the living room vid display. Mandy and Mary were cleaning up the kitchen. Eran was reading something on a handheld small display, having a cigarette and still drinking his ever present coffee, Phineas counted, Eran was on cup number five so far and the day was quite young. Phineas went out to bring in more wood for the fire and stacked it in the metal wood basket next to the hearth before taking the bags of trash Mandy set by the door to place in the collection recycling unit outside and beside the house. Phineas was fascinated by it and the technology behind the machine. It was no wonder Pirotaine was so clean. The unit turned the trash into compost and mulch fibers, simulating thousands of years worth of natural decomposition in just a few minutes. After it ran through its cycle, it neatly molded the trash into compost cubes that would be picked up once a week and taken out to the local farms to be used on the fields for fertilizer, any excess was dumped into the sea where the native marine life thrived on it as an additional food supply. It was a win-win situation. The eco system of Pirotaine was as pure as it had been when it was colonized. The original settlers had taken great pains not to make the same resource mistakes that had been made on the home planet Earth. Their efforts were obvious and appreciated by the planet and it's inhabitants.

"You didn't have to take those out, but thank you." Mandy said not even noticing he took out the trash for her.

"I still had my coat on." Phineas grinned glad he was able to help and feel at least partially useful.

He was hanging up said coat on one of the coat pegs on the wall when a knock came to the door and he went to answer it. Jack was there outside gawking at the "Infinity" when Phineas

answered the door. "Mary." He grunted and Phineas, feeling particularly ornery left him standing in the cold to go get Mary from the kitchen. He sat on a stool by the counter and let her finish stacking the plates on the shelf before he interrupted her.

"I do believe your boyfriend is sniffing at the door Mary." Phineas said and Mary rolled her eyes.

Mary went over to the door and let him in; Jack glowered at Phineas who just smirked where he sat. Eran, seeing the exchange from the table smirked himself into his cup. Jack deserved that after yesterday.

"Dude is that your ship?" Jack asked Eran who nodded, not bothering even looking at the youth directly.

"That's so cool. Can I see it?"

"Look out the window, it's right there." Eran sighed; he was not in the mood for being a tour guide to a sixteen-year-old twit.

"I mean like inside."

"No."

"Aw, why not?"

Eran laid his display down and finally deigned to look at the boy. "Because I said No. I'm not a bloody tour guide and my ship is not a tourist attraction. It's not a toy; it's an inter-galaxy, hyper-drive Class one military issue cruiser freighter. Its decks are off limits to Civilians."

"Military issue? How did a trader get military issue?"

"Captain Eran Callum, Pirotaine Defense League Navy. Commander Callum, Rogue Augment Collector, alpha unit, sector alpha leader of the United Federation of Galaxies Collection Bureau and Captain Callum, First Class, interplanetary bounty Mercenary Corps, Squadron Zeta leader. I have license to shoot you on a hundred planets. Don't tempt me."

That effectively ended Jack's whining and he just sat there staring at the young man sitting at the table. He didn't dare call him a liar, just in case what he said was true. Phineas knew it was true, but actually hearing Eran's long list of military titles had him sitting there in a state of hero worship.

Just then Beau and Cris waltzed in laughing and Beau flopped on Eran's lap. "Did you miss me handsome?"

"What do you want Beau?"

"The shuttle key-lock and your credit disk oh dearest to my heart. We need a new voice microphone recorder. Ours is being wonky and I want to capture Romi's voice perfectly."

"Beau, you blow our money faster than we can earn it." Eran slapped the disk in Beau's hand.

"I do not." Beau planted a kiss on Eran before standing. "Thank you. I'll get you more cigarettes while I'm out, I noticed you've only got one pack left."

"You are forgiven. Go! Be gone with you my lovely." Eran grinned and Beau and Cris left to head into Rael and the music store before Romi got there.

Jack looked dumbfounded. "Word to the wise Mary Alice. Never bond yourself to a flighty musician, no matter how sinfully gorgeous they are, they make fabulous lovers and are easy on the heart-strings, but oh so hard on your credit accounts." Eran winked at Mary who laughed and Jack still sat there trying to fathom just what the hell was going on.

Mandy tossed a rag at him. "You lying sack of shit. You love it. You spoil him rotten."

"I do, I do. I'm such a sucker." Eran chuckled getting up from the table to head back into his rooms for a while to read in peace.

"Mary? Who are these guys?" Jack asked as Eran disappeared into his room.

"I told you, Mandy and Farin's family. They all used to work together on that ship." Mary replied like everything was absolutely normal.

"Yeah, but what was that all about?"

"What do you mean?"

"That!"

"You're going to have to be a little more specific Jack, I have no clue what you're talking about."

"That blond guy and all that stuff."

"The blond guy is Beau, Eran's husband. The Man with the long hair is Cris, he's Val's husband, and Val is the one outside with Erin and His and Cris' daughter Tovi. It's really pretty simple Jack." Mary was rapidly losing patience explaining the obvious.

"What was all that about Romi? Romi Nguyen?"

"The same. She's coming over later; Beau invited her over to record some festival music. Really Jack why do you care?"

"How come she gets to go on the ship?"

"Oh god Jack is that what this is about? Beau and Cris have their recording equipment on the ship, she can't very well sing outside now can she?"

"What sort of military ship has a recording studio in it?"

"Oh for heaven's sake Jack. You sound like a spoiled five-year-old. Obviously a ship that is also their home and Beau is a musician after all. Of course he's gonna have his stuff on the ship he lives on. God if you're going to be like this you can go home."

"Well God Mary I mean how many times does a ship like that come to Rael? And those guys are like really young and stuff and it just does not make sense, it's all weird and you're acting like it's nothing."

"Because it is nothing. These are Mandy's family and they're all really wonderful nice people. You are the one acting weird."

"Whatever Mary. Can we go out now? Before Romi gets here."

"What's wrong with Romi?" Mary was flabbergasted.

"She's strange, you know, she walks around looking like a freak show half the time, she never talks to anyone and just sits around singing to herself."

"Jack, I swear I never knew you were so mean. Romi is different, she's fun, she certainly does not care what anyone thinks about her and maybe she doesn't have a lot of friends because people like you treat her like a freak. She's just unique. Most artsy people are. Have you ever listened to her sing? She's wonderful!"

"She creeps me out."

"You're creeping me out you pecker." Phineas said, being privy to the conversation and rapidly getting angry.

"You stay out of this, I'm not talking to you reject."

Phineas walked over, grabbed Jack by the back of his jacket at the neck, dragged him bodily out of his chair to the door and flung him outside. "Until you learn how to respect people in my parent's home you can stay out there. Don't make me teach you manners. I may have come from the streets, but you earn respect no matter where you come from."

Mandy and Farin also witness to the exchange just stood there watching, letting Phineas handle the situation. He was doing fine and making them rather proud of his moral fiber.

"Mary!" Jack hollered at her and she just walked up beside Phineas and crossed her arms over her breast.

"He's right Jack. I don't know what you're thinking, but you've a lot of nerve trashing people you don't even know. I'm not going anywhere with you, we're over! I'm so ashamed I ever dated a boy as mean as you." With that she walked away and Phineas smirked at Jack sitting in the snow stunned.

"Bye-bye Jack." Phineas shut the door.

Eran, who had seen the exchange since Phineas threw him out the door, burst out laughing.

"That was a perfect ten Phineas. Ah Christ I almost wet myself trying to hold that in. Let him cool off in the snow."

"He did deserve that." Mandy said going over to look out the window. "He's still sitting there, silly boy."

"God, I'm such a dope. What did I ever see in him?" Mary sighed and Phineas smiled at her.

"He was probably on good behavior. I knew a lot of guys like him, all really sweet to the girls until they get 'em then their true colors show. Nice girl like you I'm sure there's already a line of nice guys waitin' on ya. Just be picky, you deserve better than that." Phineas reassured and Mary smiled at him.

"You're really sweet. Thanks Phineas." Mary hugged him and he hugged her back.

"Not a problem, if he bothers ya let me know I'll make sure he don't hassle ya."

"Looks like I got a big brother too when you arrived." Mary laughed and Phineas winked.

"I'm good like that, I may not have much book learnin' but I got practice in dealing with idiots."

"That you do. God look at the time I told Maevis I'd meet her in town to shop! I gotta get everyone's presents yet! I'm gonna be late." Mary switched gears and Farin turned to Phineas.

"Can you fly a hopper?"

"Yeah, I hot wired a few here and there." Phineas winked at Farin who chuckled.

"Well I'll give you the key-card. No hot-wiring the family hopper. Will you drop Mary off in town, I don't want her walking when the little turd is still out there."

"Good idea. I'll take her."

Farin tossed Phineas the key to the small hopper outside. Within minutes both Phineas and Mary flew past a fuming Jack trudging back to town on foot through the snow. Both teens in the hopper laughing as they waved at him as they passed.

"He's gonna be pissed." Phineas laughed and Mary giggled.

"Yeah, but he's a dork."

"I'd have picked a different term of reference, but I'll watch my language."

"Thanks for driving me."

"No problem, do you mind if I ask a favor? I wanna get some presents for the guys but I was with 'em yesterday and I sorta need help counting my credits. I can't do math yet either."

"Sure I'll help you. I'll help you study too if you want. I know Farin's going to teach you after the holiday, I can help you too if you want. I'm good at math and language studies."

"Thanks. I appreciate it, I won't hang out too long with you, I'll let you mess about with your friends, I just wanna get them all something to say thanks. I promised Dad I'd help him go cut a tree later so I gotta get back too."

"Oh the Winterfest tree! Promise you all won't decorate till I get back I won't be long either and Maevis can bring me home."

"I'll tell 'em to wait on ya, here we are." Phineas always great with remembering directions landed in front of the Salvage yard and locked up the hopper. He and Mary headed down the streets where they met Mary's friends in front of the Bakery and she told them all how Phineas had dumped Jack out the door and how they had broken up.

"Whoa FINALLY!" Maevis cheered, she never had liked Jack either.

A handsome boy seemed to brighten. "You really broke up with him?"

Mary nodded.

"Please go to the Winterfest dance with me Mary. I never asked or anything because of Jack, but I've been dying to ask you out forever."

"See, I told you they were probably lined up already." Phineas chuckled and Mary laughed.

"I'd love to Leigh. Thank you."

Leigh cheered and he shook Phineas' hand. "Dude, thank you man. She deserved better than him."

"Well treat her right so I don't throw YOU out into the snow okay?"

"Deal man! DEAL!"

Maevis, already on the arm of another young man turned to Phineas. "Are you going to the dance too?"

"Me? Oh no. I can't dance, besides I don't know anyone. It's okay though; I'd not know what to do at a dance anyway. I'm still learning what Winterfest even is, we don't have holidays like this on Mirastor."

"Whoa, Mirastor. That's like hard core I heard." The boy on Maevis' arm looked awestruck with Phineas. He just shrugged it off.

"I just wanna forget about that place. This is my home now."

"Right on man, you can hang out with us anytime, we'll show you around. I'm Simon, that's Leigh and we're really sorry about Jack yesterday."

"It's no big deal. Thanks." Phineas felt at ease, Mary's friends were all as nice as she was; only Jack it appeared was the cancer in that group. Phineas had removed that element and for the first time had new friends his own age.

They all understood as they helped him shop and count his credits. No one teased him, no one made him feel stupid and Leigh jotted down numbers on the back of Phineas' disk. Since Phineas knew how to count to ten, Leigh jotted down descending numbers from ten to one so when Phineas counter hit ten, he'd know he had just a few numbers left to go.

"That will help, those I know. Thanks."

"No prob man. We'll all help ya study and catch up, it ain't hard." Leigh grinned as Phineas picked up a few gifts for Eran and the others with the help of Simon and Leigh in a local men's gift shop.

"Listen, I gotta get back and help my Dad. I'll see you all around and thanks again."

"Anytime Phineas! Don't worry we'll get Mary home!" Leigh said holding her hand as they waved Phineas off.

As he disappeared around the corner Maevis squealed. "He's so nice and CUTE. He has the best eyes ever! Oh my god Mary we have to find him a girlfriend."

"I think they'll find him once he's out and about more. He just got here Mae; give him time to settle in first. No playing matchmaker. That's my job!" Mary grinned.

"Spoil sport. Did he really just pick up Jack?"

"Like he weighed nothing."

"He's from Mirastor, I saw a show once about the kids that live there on the streets, I certainly don't ever wanna piss Phineas off, I'm sure he can kick my ass without even trying. Especially if he can take on Jack without even trying, no way I'm staying on his good side." Simon laughed as they continued shopping for their parents.

"I wanna get him a gift. He draws really well. We were at the Wayfarer last night, and he drew Erin a picture to color. It took him like a minute and I could spend fifty years and not sketch something as nice. I wanna go get him a nice pad and something a little nicer than just a cheap pencil." Mary said as they passed the stationary store, just as Cris and Beau came out loaded with bags.

"Hey Mary!" Cris grinned.

"Oh don't tell me you already bought Phineas stuff!"

"We did, I see you had the same idea." Beau laughed.

"What did you buy so I don't duplicate?"

"One of everything they had practically. What were you planning on getting him?"

"A bigger pad and some colored pencils?"

"We got them, we'll set them aside and let you give him those then." Beau said and Mary smiled.

"Thanks! How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it sweetie, it's minimal." Beau winked.

"Thanks!" Mary hugged them both as they hurried off; they were running out of time.

"Are those the guys staying with you that you told us about?" Maevis asked swooning.

"Yeah, the blond is Beau and the other one Cris."

"Wow. I'm so jealous, you're in a house full of hot guys."

"Yeah, but four of them are gay and married. But I can certainly look."

"Hey!" Leigh pretended to pout.

"Yeah, ouch." Simon countered and Maevis kissed his cheek.

"You're hot too and I love you." Maevis laughed and Simon looked appeased.

Phineas piloted the hopper out of town and as he flew home in bright spirits he noticed Romi walking up the road and slowed down to hover and opened the passenger side door. "Romi right?"

"Yeah. Hey you're the boy from the music store yesterday." Romi said recognizing the bright orange hair.

"Wanna ride? I'm heading back home no sense in walking since were going to the same house."

Romi climbed in grateful not having to walk in the cold. "Thanks! You came along just in time. My toes are frozen."

"I hear ya, I haven't felt my toes since I got here." Phineas chuckled as he closed the door and continued to fly home.

"We do get cold here. What's your name by the way?"

"Oh sorry, Phineas."

"Hiya Phineas, thanks for the ride."

"No problem." Phineas smiled as the house came into view and he landed the hopper in the bay beside the house and escorted Romi inside.

Cris and Beau's shuttle landed just a few minutes later and in no time they had Romi whisked away on-board the "Infinity" to record.

Phineas, Val and Farin accompanied by Erin and Tovi, who opted to ride on the large sled Val was dragging by a rope headed toward the line of fresh pines that covered the foothills across the field. Farin had an old fashioned axe over his shoulder and Phineas had his hands shoved in his pockets, a length of rope coiled over his shoulder.

"Papa, why are we cutting down a tree?"

"Cause, we decorate it for Winterfest. It's so pretty." Erin answered and Val chuckled.

"She's right Princess. When I was a little boy your age my favorite part of Winterfest was decorating the tree with my mama." Val said as they hunted for the perfect tree for the living room. There were thousands to choose from, it wasn't going to be difficult.

"Mommy is making popcorn that we get to put on strings to hang on it too." Erin clapped, it was the first year she wasn't too little to help and she was excited.

"And I have paper to make chains out of later girls. That was my favorite thing to make as a boy." Val stated, he'd bought already cut strips of colored paper and glue; he was probably looking forward to making them with Tovi more than Tovi was looking forward to making them. He loved being a father more than he ever thought he would have. Tovi and Cris were the best things in his life and this Winterfest was going to be one to remember for him indeed.

Once they were in the clearing Val sent the girls off with baskets to gather ivy and pinecones in while Farin began chopping down a nice full and tall pine.

"That's not gonna clear the ceiling." Val mused and Farin snorted.

"It'll fit."

"I doubt it, I bet you fifty credits were gonna have to trim off the bottom of this tree to make it fit."

"You're on Lad. It'll be perfect."

Phineas just laughed as the tree fell and he helped fasten it to the sled with the rope he carried.

The girls toted their baskets and held Phineas' hands as they walked back, both Val and Farin tugging the sled back home behind them.

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"I told you it was too tall." Val chuckled as they lugged the tree back out of the living room to shave off a good eight inches from the bottom.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Smart ass." Farin grumbled as he sawed off the bottom of the tree.

Phineas just laughed as he sat with the girls at the kitchen table setting out craft items. There was paint and glue and glitter, ribbons and silk flowers and cotton all sorts of festive trappings covered the table.

Phineas having seen enough shop windows to have a fair idea of what Winterfest decorations should look like, picked out some pine branches, a few pinecones, and some wire and began putting together something that looked festive. He painted fake snow on the pinecones, tied on festive red ribbons, painted a few pinecones in gold and by the time he was finished it looked beautiful. He had no idea what to do with it, but it was pretty. Mandy gasped as she turned from the oven where she was baking cookies. "Phineas! That's GORGEOUS!"

"You think so?"

"Oh honey that's wonderful! That will look wonderful as a centerpiece for the table. You really do have an artist's eye I couldn't have bought something that beautiful."

"Really? I mean I just stuck bits together."

"The art is in the sticking." Mandy grinned taking a closer look. Then retrieving from a kitchen drawer some tall taper candles in gold and red and stuck them into the centerpiece, it was perfect for holding table candles. "Wow. Make something for the hearth? Please?" Mandy asked laying out more candles for Phineas.

"Sure." Phineas smiled, he really had enjoyed making the simple craft it was nice to know he was good at something other than stealing. He set to work making something to place atop the hearth mantle.

He was digging through supplies, while Val and Farin got the tree secured in the base and set it up in the living room. Eran wandered out of the back sniffing the air. "It smells heavenly in here."

The front door opened and Cris, Beau and Romi walked in. "GOD, it smells great in here." Beau caroled and Erin smirked.

"There's an echo in here." He chuckled raiding the popcorn bowl the girls were working out of and stealing a handful.

"HEY! Mama! Unca Eran is eating the popcorn!" Erin tattled on him and Mandy chuckled.

"Bad Unca Eran." She winked setting out another bowl. "Don't worry girls, there's plenty."

Beau was already hovering over the cookies cooling on a rack on the counter. "Beau do not raid the cookies yet, they're too hot."

"Too late." He said around a hot bite juggling a hot cookie in his fingers.

Romi laughed as Cris handed her a drink. They were taking a break and Romi sat next to Phineas at the table. Her long black hair was tied back at the sides in a unique circular braided loop. She was dressed haphazardly in a warm sweater, denim pants and large fluffy boots. She wore no make up like girls her age liked to paint on their faces like Mary. She didn't need it in Phineas' opinion. She was rosy cheeked from the cold and her skin was too perfect to paint. She was all natural beauty, how this creature could creep out Jack was beyond Phineas' comprehension. He thought she was beautiful.

"Wow, did you make that?" Romi asked looking at the centerpiece Phineas nodded almost shyly and he was never shy.

"That's really pretty."

"Thanks. I never made any of this before, this is my first Winterfest."

"You've never made this stuff before? You could have fooled me." Romi grinned leaning over Phineas' current project to examine.

"I like pretty things I suppose. I used to sneak into the casinos all the time to look at the paintings and stuff inside."

"You like art?"

"Yeah."

"We have a gallery in Rael, I go there a lot I like to look at art too. I can't draw or anything I'm hopeless. I'd glue my own fingers together." Romi laughed and Phineas smiled at her.

"I've already glued my own fingers together here a few times, I think it comes with the territory when working with glue."

"So messy, but so pretty when it's done. Do you paint too?"

"I dunno, I never tried. Never had paint or anything, I can do okay with a pencil I suppose. I just doodle."

"Doodle he says, don't let him fool you Romi. He's good." Beau winked sitting down to take a look at the crafts himself. "Wow, these are fabulous. You gotta make a wreath for the door too."

"I'll need more pine then, I've used up all the girls picked up."

"There's a pile of it outside from where Val and Farin trimmed the tree." Cris said sitting next to Romi. "Hey, you're a lefty aren't you?"

"A what?"

"You're using your left hand as the dominant. That's rare." Cris said noticing as Phineas painted a cone, the small brush was in his left hand.

"Really? I can use either. I just have glue on my right hand."

"Ambidextrous? That's really rare."

"Ambi-what?"

"Ambidextrous, it means you can use both hands equally. Maybe one percent of the population can do that. I'm right handed, I can't do fuck-all with my left." Cris grinned and Beau nodded.

"He's correct. I'm right handed too, so is Val. Eran is a lefty though. He's just the opposite."

"I'm left handed too." Romi grinned, "It is rare, the desks in school suck for left hand users. You've gotta twist all funny to use them to write. Be glad you can use both Phineas."

"I never knew it was so rare, I never noticed." Phineas said setting down his pinecone to dry before he twisted it into his mess of pine branches and ribbons.

"Daddy, which hand do I use?" Tovi asked as she threaded popcorn on a blunt needle and thread.

"You're right-handed like Daddy." Cris grinned pointing to Tovi's hand. "That one is your right, that one is your left."

"They're so cute. Winterfest really is the best time when you're little." Romi sighed remembering her youth.

"And for grown ups when you live through their eyes." Beau smiled fondly.

"Well, we should get back to work. We've only just laid down the music tracks, we've the vocals yet to work on, we're losing day here. It's early afternoon already, I'm sure your parents want you home at a decent hour." Cris said finishing his drink.

"There's no rush, my parents aren't here." Romi said almost sadly and Beau, ever observant quirked an eyebrow to the subtle tone in her voice.

"They in the Capitol?" He asked trying to wheedle out information.

"No, my Grandma is ill. Mom and Dad are on Earth, we couldn't afford for me to go too, so I'm on my own for Winterfest this year. It's okay though, I'd rather them be with Grandma this will be her last Christmas, she wanted Dad there, I can understand."

"You're all by yourself? Honey how long have they been gone?" Beau asked, not liking the thought of a girl her age being all alone for such a long time, he knew just getting to Earth one way took three months and that was going full tilt on the "Infinity". A passenger transport would take almost five.

"About six months now. They aren't scheduled to be back until late summer."

"Dear heaven's me, you mean they left you to fend for yourself for over a year?" Mandy was livid with shock.

"It's okay, I've got a little set aside for food and rent until next month. I'm looking for a job for after school but no one is hiring. Don't worry about me, I'm okay, really."

"You will do no such thing young lady. School is far too important to divide your learning into trying to survive. You do not need that sort of stress at your age. What in heaven's name were your parent's thinking?" Mandy was fuming and so was Beau.

"I knew when they left it'd be hard, I'm looking for a smaller place. The apartment the three of us had is too expensive. They knew I'd probably have to move out of it. They took all their stuff with them so I'd not have to move it."

"I don't like the sound of that at all." Mandy leveled a look at Beau.

"Me either. Too – convenient, taking all their belongings?" Beau frowned.

"I know how it looks, they didn't abandon me, they'll be back." Romi's voice was desperate; she was trying to believe her own words. She had always been close to her father; surely he'd never leave her, even if they had fallen on hard times in recent years.

"Well dear, until they do I won't take no for an answer. You're staying here, I have plenty of room, no child should be left alone, especially this time of year. School is far too important, your future is too important to waste it on just trying to survive. Believe me honey I know." Mandy said her arms akimbo.

"So do I Romi. Living alone is hard; take it from me I've lived alone my whole life. I never had time to learn anything I was too busy trying to find food and some place dry and warm to sleep. I can't read, I can't write, I can't do much other than pick people's pockets and steal things. You don't want that, I was angry at the whole galaxy, I never even had time to smile really life was too depressing, they saved me from that kind of life with their kindness. This place is full of love and hope you'll be fine if you listen to my mom." Phineas stated and ended with a wink up at Mandy.

"You great big soft lout." Mandy ruffled his hair.

"But he's right. I came from Mirastor too, I lived a life just like him, Romi sweetheart, don't walk our road, even if just for a year, it sucks. Stay here, the "Homestead" is our home, and we built it big for a reason. We love family and the more the merrier." Cris winked and Beau nodded also smiling at Romi.

"I can't stay here for free, that's crazy."

"We are all a bit crazy." Eran said leaning over the table to steal more of the girl's popcorn. "We like it like that, it's much more fun."

"Besides, Eran's loaded aren't you my love?" Beau grinned and Eran winked.

"That too, never fear Romi, you're not breaking our bank. Mandy's right, join the party."

"You're all serious?"

"We are dear." Mandy said turning to the men seated at the table. "Will you take her home to help her get her things? I'm getting ready to make dinner."

"Absolutely." Beau said shoving up from the table, Cris and Phineas right behind him. The three escorted a bewildered Romi to the shuttle. "Just think, all that extra time to play like the music geeks we are." He added as Cris piloted them into Rael.

Romi smiled in a daze and Phineas leaned over. "Don't worry, I'm still in a daze myself, it's best to let them have their fun, it's worth the ride."

"I'll take your word for it." Romi said still wondering just what had happened, her fears suddenly dropping off her shoulders like a massive boulder. She felt lighter than air and drunk on goodwill. Her hand was trembling and Phineas took it to hold while where they sat in the back of the shuttle.

"Hang in there, the shock does wear off little by little."

"If the shock is wearing off then we're not doing our jobs!" Beau laughed in the front as Cris set them down next to a row of run down apartments. Romi led them to a small, but clean little apartment, only her personal items in her room remained, there wasn't even furniture in the main living area. Just a rickety table, one chair, one plate, one glass, just one each of the necessities and nothing more, Cris and Beau exchanged looks, they knew, even if she was in denial, her parents had no intention of coming back. If they did, they'd be surprised.

They loaded Romi's meager possessions into the shuttle and flew back to the "Homestead"; Farin led them up the stairs. "Put her here next to Phineas. This one has a private bath; I doubt she'd ever get into the other if she were to share with Mary. That girl tends to rule a bathroom." Farin chuckled. This room was like a mirror of the first Room Phineas had slept in, slightly bigger, this was identical to Erin and Mary's rooms save that it didn't share a Jack and Jill bathroom, it had it's own. It was a small bathroom, but certainly private.

Everyone set down her belongings around the room. "Take your time getting settled dear. We're on no schedule to record now. Hot damn." Beau grinned excited.

"I can't thank everyone enough." Romi burst into tears and Farin pulled her into a fatherly embrace.

"We'd be horrible people indeed if we let you suffer when we had the means to help. Just take your time love, come downstairs whenever you're ready. Phineas is right next door to you and Mary Alice is two doors to your right, and hell there's a million more people in this house at the moment if you need anything." Farin laughed patting her back.

"You're all wonderful."

"We try." Cris winked heading out, trailed by the others. Phineas was the last one out.

"You'll be fine, you can come to me anytime you want something. See you downstairs." With that he shut the door leaving Romi to drop to her knees and say a prayer of thanks. She'd desperately needed help and was too proud to ask for it, these people had come when she needed them most. She couldn't ask for anything more for this Winterfest, she'd already been given the best of gifts. Hope.

"She's going to figure it out staying here, we might as well tell her and get it over with. Christ, we're all a bunch of bleeding hearts aren't we?" Eran said as they waited for Romi to come downstairs.

"One shock at a time I think. I think we traumatized her enough for one afternoon." Mandy replied as Mary Alice and a trio of teenagers burst through the door. The house was obscenely full of people, Eran made a mad dash to his room for peace and quiet until dinner.

Val was helping Tovi and Erin make paper chains on the living room floor, Phineas had placed his decorations on the hearth and Leigh and Simon were helping him clear off the mess from the table. Mary Alice and Maevis were lending a hand in the kitchen; Beau and Cris were entertaining the babies, Beau's guitar in hand as Romi came down the stairs.

Mary rushed over to her "I know we don't get a chance to talk much in school, but you're gonna love it here. Mandy and Farin are the best. Welcome to the "Homestead" I hope we get to be better friends."

"Thanks." Romi said shifting foot to foot. Mary Alice was the most popular girl in school, Romi was a semi-outcast and she felt intimidated until Phineas walked over smiling.

"It's weird huh?" He asked and Romi nodded.

"Slightly. I don't have any friends." Romi said and Phineas winked at her.

"I didn't either before, I know how you feel. All the kids my age we're either my enemies or my competition. It's nice not having to fight."

"I never seem to fit in anywhere. I'm not popular like Mary."

"People are mean Romi. You're unique, that's not a bad thing. And you got talent. People get jealous over that." Mary said emphatically.

"I suppose." Romi was still nervous but beginning to calm, Beau's guitar helped, music always made her feel at ease.

"Romi, come sing with me!" Beau called and Romi thankful for an escape joined him on the floor and sang along.

Phineas leaned against a support pillar that separated the dining room from the living room and closed his eyes to listen. Romi had a beautiful voice; it sent chills down his spine, and with Beau, Cris and Val singing along with her, he was lost.

Until a giggle and a kiss on his cheek snapped his eyes open. It was Mary, then Maevis, then Mandy, then Leigh. "HEY! Why is everyone kissing me? Leigh!"

They all broke into hysterical laughter. Beau and Cris were laughing so hard they were wiping tears from their eyes. Even Romi was laughing.

"What?" Phineas had no clue what was so funny and why all of a sudden he was the object of a kissing frenzy.

Val walked over and had him look up. "You're standing under mistletoe. If you stand under it, you get kissed during this time of year." He was amused himself as he clued Phineas into the Winterfest tradition.

Phineas leaped out from under it like he'd been burned. "And you guys were gonna tell me this when?"

"After you got smooched of course, what fun is letting you in on it before hand? Free kisses love, get 'em while they last." Mandy laughed highly amused at his shocked almost indignant expression before heading back into the kitchen.

Phineas made a point of avoiding that plant the rest of the evening. Maevis and the others went home before dinner, leaving the family to set the table. Eran finally wandered out of the back, pausing out of the way, Phineas noticing he was standing under the evil plant.

He didn't seem to mind when Beau planted a rather lengthy kiss on him. "I love mistletoe." Eran said once Beau deigned to let him up for air again.

"I know you do." Beau winked as the food was set on the table.

Phineas mused that perhaps it wasn't such a bad plant, if you had a partner. He could do without kisses from strangers.

After dinner, everyone pitched in decorating the tree, Romi was laughing as she helped Bo place tinsel on the tree. The Three-year-old was piling it on a single branch while Romi was discreetly moving it elsewhere so it all wasn't in one little clump, Mary helped put hooks on ornaments while Tovi and Erin with the help of their fathers lifting them up to the higher branches placed them on the tree. Everyone else pretty much just watched, too many people around the tree was difficult and it really was meant for the little ones most.

Beau strummed his guitar, Eran munched on the left over popcorn and Mandy was curled up on the couch with Valeria. Phineas sat off to the side on the floor, his chin on his pulled up knees watching lights twinkle, watching Cris get frustrated when he couldn't get a strand to work right, Val was twirling a paper chain around the tree with Tovi, reliving his childhood, and Farin lifted Erin up to place a beautiful white dove of peace, with real feathers and twinkling lights at the very top of the tree. It was beautiful and with his blurry vision the lights seemed diffused at the edges, all soft and beautiful as he squinted at the tree.

"Hon, we have to get you glasses until we can get you some surgery on your eyes. Don't squint like that." Mandy said noticing.

"They just get really blurry when I'm tired. Besides, I'm squinting on purpose. The lights are gorgeous when I squint." Phineas said with a smile and Romi looked at Phineas.

"I used to do that too as a kid. Screw up my eyes to look at the tree. It is really pretty like that."

"Well I won't worry then. I thought you were having more trouble."

"Nah, no more than normal. I'm okay."

"Good." Mandy said sipping her coffee as Valeria slept on her lap.

The rest of the evening was peaceful as everyone settled around the main room Vid screen to watch old movies and eat cookies. The girls were allowed to sleep on the floor with their toys. They'd finally passed out from a glorious full day, and Mandy just piled a thick fleece blanket over them, they'd carry them up the stairs later, they were peacefully passed out cold.

Mary was fussing over Romi's hair, braiding it while they watched the vid with the others. Phineas sat at the table, out of the main room. Romi had adapted quite well, but then again she'd grown up like this, she'd only been alone a few months. Phineas still found it difficult, too many things pulled at his attention. There was too much to look at he'd never seen, too much to experience he'd never felt. He was overwhelmed and he found calm watching it snow out the window. He silently excused himself and walked quietly up the stairs, he settled himself at his table in his room and sat with his sketchpad, capturing the nature outside his window with his pencil. His eyes were tired though and after a short time, they were watering so badly he had to stop. He turned off the lights and just let the moonlight fill his room as he sat with his elbows on the table and watched it snow.

"It's pretty isn't it?" Romi said from his open door.

"Yeah, I can't get over it. I'm used to a filthy city, this is Paradise to me."

"Is it really as bad as I've heard? I saw a show once on the vid about Mirastor."

"Yeah, it sucks." Phineas sighed turning back to look out his window. "This place will make it easier to forget though."

"I won't bother you, I just wanted to say Thanks."

Phineas turned back to her his eyebrow cocked "What for?"

"For the ride earlier, for being nice to me, just for being my friend."

"Anytime Romi. Thank you."

"Now it's my turn to say for what?"

"For also being my friend. It's nice to talk to someone my age for a change. I feel out of place here too."

Romi walked into the room and leaned over to hug his shoulders. "I can understand sort of. For me it was because I'm weird. I sing all the time, I wear clothes that none of the other girls do, I like boy's clothes, they're comfortable. My hair, I don't ever do it like this, Mary insisted. I don't wear make-up, I'd rather go walk the art gallery than go hang out with people and go shopping. Here, that's considered weird."

"I think you're just doing what you like, there's nothing wrong with that. I can't understand a lot of that really though, so I wouldn't know. For me you couldn't have friends. It was a matter of survival. I had underlings. If I could beat them up, they were afraid of me and did what I told them to. If they could beat me up, I had to find ways to out-smart them. You couldn't trust anyone. I feel like a huge weight is lifted off me. I don't care what anyone looks like, wears, eats, smokes or drinks. I'm just thrilled to have people around me I can trust. That's the world to me."

"You're quite an inspiration Phineas. You humble me."

"There's no need in that. We're all who we are, that's all."

"Well I still think you're one of the better ones. You have good moral character, and that doesn't recognize social status. Thanks for making me feel better." Romi leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Goodnight."

As she walked out Phineas held a hand to his cheek, it almost tingled. "Goodnight." He said back as the door shut, a stupid grin spreading across his face. Kisses weren't so bad after all when Romi gave them, hers were different, hers were genuine and even chaste and made as a gesture of friendship, they still felt like they burned where her lips had touched his skin.

Phineas was sure he was flushed a bright red, he was glad it was dark in his room and he was alone to blush in private.

Over the next two weeks things seemed to settle into a routine. Romi and Mary would head off to school together after breakfast; Leigh would pick them up in his hopper so they didn't have to walk. He and Mary were officially together as boyfriend and girlfriend and that pleased Mandy to no end. She had never liked Jack and after the incident where Phineas threw him out on his ear, he'd not been back.

During the workday week, Phineas went with Farin to the shop daily to help out until they shut down for a long four-week vacation during Winterfest into the New Year. He just couldn't justify shutting for six weeks; there was work that needed to be done. This gave Phineas and Farin a lot of quality time together and their relationship really had become as solid as Father and Son.

Phineas was quite handy where it came to helping Farin organize and even handier when a client needed something delivered or picked up. The regular clients were full of congratulatory wishes and then praise when they noticed how efficient and precise Phineas was in his duties assigned to him. He wanted to make Farin proud and he felt useful at last and like he was earning his keep. He worked hard at everything even his studies.

When he wasn't schlepping for the salvage yard, which now bore a sign that read "Corcoran and Son Salvage" he could be found at his desk, pouring over the workbooks Farin had bought. He knew the standardized federation alphabet that ninety-nine percent of the federated planets adopted as the official language for inter-galaxy trade and commerce and what almost all humans spoke away from the home planet. He knew other races had languages of their own, he'd seen more strange races in his life than any Pirotaine Native his own age had ever dreamed of. Mirastor was certainly a place to see the universe and all it's races at it's worst, but universal translators helped understand the various languages and even Eran with all his years and learning could only speak Standard and Tsion fluently without the aide of a translation box. He

did fine for himself and encouraged Phineas to stick with what he already knew then dabble in other languages after learning the basics of his own.

He was even able to sound out words if Farin wrote them down, which helped reading street signs when he was looking for a client for a drop off or pick up job. Math was getting better too, if he worked the numbers in sets of ten he could understand. He knew ten tens were in one hundred, he applied basic logic for higher numbers, but anything more than a thousand he had to figure out on paper he could not work the numbers in his head without getting confused and lost. He was doing just basic addition and subtraction but it was enough that he understood and was able to actually use his credit disk by himself without help. He'd save higher math until later, he'd take one step at a time and he felt proud that he'd mastered what he had in just two short weeks.

It also helped that his friends helped him too. After school let out Romi would go home to work on music with Beau, Cris and Val, then Leigh, Simon, Mary and Maevis would come by the salvage yard and they'd help him study while they did their own homework with him. They tended to explain things differently than Farin and if he'd had trouble with a concept, sometimes someone explaining the same thing in a different manner made the light come on for Phineas and he latched on and moved on. After they finished, they'd all go to the bakery for a treat before heading home. Phineas always remembered to bring Romi something since she was too busy to join them. She'd eat hers after dinner while she did her homework. She'd use the table in Phineas' room and while she did her homework Phineas would either work some more on his studies or work on the landscape picture he was drawing for Mandy for Winterfest.

They tended to sit in companionable silence most of the time, with soft music playing on Romi's small portable disk player. Romi was munching on the cookie Phineas bought for her while she worked on her history paper and Phineas finished Mandy's picture then set to work on a new picture. Romi had her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and had a wonderful half-irritated half-confused look of concentration on her face. She was always animated facially and she amused Phineas with her occasional indignant outbursts where she talked back to her book like it was an idiot and a liar.

This was one of those evenings, Romi detested history and was currently telling the war figures in her book that they were a bunch of minutely endowed men dick slapping each other over a chunk of ground and that, had they had the capacity to find a date and get laid to dislodge their inferiority complexes, she wouldn't have been stuck having to write a stupid report about them three thousand years later.

"Tell the world how you REALLY feel Romi." Phineas chuckled as he began his portrait.

"Well it's true. I can never see the point why people have to solve things by blowing each other up." She replied finishing her cookie as one of her favorite songs began to play and she changed gears almost faster than Beau and was happily singing along while she jotted notes.

Phineas just smiled and continued to draw the girl across from him at the table. He liked everything about her. Her laugh, her smile, her attitude, her vivaciousness, her talent, her slight figure buried under clothes much too large, her face, her hair, everything about her he was infatuated with she pressed every single one of his buttons by just breathing.

Some buttons he wished she didn't press, because she always managed to hit them at the most inopportune times. He was no stranger to the ways of the world, some things you learned earlier than most when you lived on the streets. The birds and the bees was one of those topics one

tended to learn quite early. Especially when your neighbors were prostitutes who took it upon themselves to educate him how to please a lady right.

Not that he'd complained much; puberty was an awkward thing for most boys his age. Living on the streets he'd had a slight advantage to this particular form of education and he had been shown the ropes the minute he'd discovered his penis was for more than taking a whiz behind a garbage can. When they'd discovered he'd been getting his first erections, at the ripe old age of twelve, he had been passed around the ladies in the alleys who thought he should know how not to do things. They hated men and hated lousy lovers even more, so they decided to teach Phineas how to be a good lover and how to properly see to his partner's pleasure. He was surprised he didn't have more diseases than he did, but then they always made sure they protected him and themselves, he'd worn condoms during all those liaisons.

Now however he was having desires for a certain raven-haired tomboy that he had to squash almost daily. He woke up having to take a cold shower, he'd listen to her sing in hers through the wall and he'd be right back in his own bathroom, taking care of matters. Just the thought of her in the nude and he was hopelessly aroused and he'd swear the air blue under his breath until matters were taken care of and he could face unlocking his door and greeting the world. He was thankful to go to work to take his mind off Romi for at least an hour or two before daydreaming about her at work.

His only quandary was determining just when and how to broach the subject. It was different with prostitutes, there were no courting rituals and they'd failed to teach him those little details that were so important in the real world. He watched Leigh and Mary and Maevis and Simon almost obsessively trying to learn without being obvious. He just didn't know how to go about asking her, what was he supposed to say? How was he supposed to say it? How long were you supposed to actually know each other first? Did he have to take her on a date first? There were so many questions and no easy way to ask any of them. So he would just bide his time and carry on as it was currently, they got along wonderfully, they laughed a lot together, he didn't want to blow the tenuous relationship they already had by rushing things.

No matter how badly he wanted to catch her under that mistletoe.

"What are you drawing?" Romi asked looking up from her book.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"What on earth for?"

"Because I want to."

"Draw Mary, she's so much prettier."

"No she's not."

"Please Phineas, you don't have to humor me."

"I'm not. I really hate the way you talk about yourself. I think you're beautiful, here look for yourself." Phineas said passing her his sketchpad.

"I don't look like that."

"Yes you do. Come here." Phineas took her hand and led her to the bathroom mirror and he made her face it then held his pad up next to her face. "I think I'm doing a poor job replicating that face. I wish you could see yourself the way others see you. The way I see you."

Romi gave him a look in the mirror that night on defied explanation, she looked stunned almost disbelieving that a boy would find her even remotely pretty. "You're serious."

"Of course I am." Phineas smiled at her in the mirror and winked reaching up to take out the band that bound her hair back and it fell down over her shoulders and he framed her face in his hands. "Just look at that, you don't need all that paint that the other girls put on their faces. You take it off Mary and she looks different. You don't need any of that crap to be beautiful, the Gods made you perfect as is, no accessories or paint required."

"Phineas... I." Romi blushed and hid her face in her hands. Phineas still behind her reached up and pulled her hands down, making her face herself in the mirror.

"Don't ever cover that up, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I know you didn't." Romi smiled at him in the mirror and he held up a finger and flipped the page in his pad and drew a quick sketch. He held the pad over her head, and smiled in hope and query. He'd drawn a sprig of mistletoe. Romi laughed and turned around to face him.

"God I thought you'd never ask." She sighed putting her arms around his neck. He set the pad down on the counter and pulled her slowly into his arms and leaned down, she was so much shorter than he, and he gave her a tender kiss to her lips. He leaned back and their eyes met in understanding.

"I didn't know how to ask you." Phineas chuckled as the ice cracked nicely under the warmth forming between them.

"I think you did a pretty good job there asking." Romi grinned, her arms still about his neck, craning her head up to look at him. "You're too damn tall."

"You're just short, I can bend." Phineas chuckled leaning over to kiss her again. She almost purred as he took his sweet time kissing her properly, it was enough to curl his own toes, and he was the in the lead. She certainly responded well, he was high as a kite.

"Wow, what a kisser, Holy Cow. Okay we need to stop or I'll never get my homework done. You sly devil." Romi grinned almost dancing out of the bathroom. Phineas followed amused, it had been easy to ask her after all, it was just the timing that was hard to get right.

"Romi, can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Romi replied sitting down again at the table.

"What's the Festival Carnival? The others keep mentioning it."

"It's dancing and games and stuff. It's sort of a kick off to Winterfest in Rael; it's the last day of school before a month long vacation. It's this weekend. Why?"

"Can I take you? I don't know much about it, but it sounds fun and I'd like to take you to it. The others are taking their girls. I mean if you want and if you don't mind being my girl."

"Stop Phineas, you're stumbling all over the place." Romi laughed, amused by his stammering.
 "Yes, I'll go with you, and I've been your girl since the second you laid that whopper kiss on me back there stud." Romi winked and Phineas laughed.

"You liked that huh?" He asked with a smirk.

"Oh yeah, you'd better have more of those in there hidden away somewhere. Just give them when I don't have homework I need to concentrate on, they're, uh, distracting."

"They're supposed to be, and there's more where that came from."

"Oh goody, now arrrgh shush a minute! I have to finish this damn thing demon spawn."

Phineas nodded and went back to drawing his new girlfriend and Romi went back to swearing at her History Book.

While Romi finished up her paper, Phineas went downstairs to grab them both strawberry sodas, they were her favorite flavor too and the adults were all around the table playing a hand of cards.

"What's with the stupid grin on your face?" Cris smirked as Phineas raided the cooling unit.

"I'm in a good mood."

"Any particular reason?" Beau drawled discarding a drawing another.

"Maybe." Phineas was not taking the bait.

"Like we're gonna let you leave this room without fessing up? You've got another thing coming boy-o." Cris added everyone turning to look at him.

"Did you ask her out?" Beau asked and Phineas sighed.

"How is it you always, ALWAYS know?"

"Because I'm old and I notice things. Like a girl who obsessively talks about you during recording sessions or a boy who lies in wait by the mistletoe waiting for her to stand under it. Like a boy who remembers to bring her treats daily and like a girl who's just your type right under your nose and you conveniently reacting to her like a teenager in heat. Duh. So did you ask her out?" Beau asked and Phineas smiled.

"Yeah."

"I presume she said yes to warrant that grin on your face?" Cris asked and Eran slapped his cards down.

"You're fucking old biddy gossips I swear. Leave the boy alone for goodness sakes!" Eran said rolling his eyes and turning to Phineas. "You don't have to put up with them ya know. You are allowed to tell them to fuck off."

Phineas laughed. "I don't mind. Yes, she said yes. But I'm in the shit, cause I certainly do not know how to dance. I'm screwed."

"You can keep time, you can dance. You just sway to the music." Cris said and Beau laughed.

"And grab her ass during the slow numbers." Beau waggled his eyebrows and Mandy slapped him in the arm.

"You do not Phineas! Don't listen to Beau. God do you want Romi to clock him one for being cheeky? That girl certainly has spunk I wouldn't put it past her. I love a girl not afraid to be herself. Mom approves." Mandy winked and Phineas chuckled.

"Great. We're just finishing up our work, we're on a pop break is all."

"Go on Phineas, we won't keep you from it." Farin waved him off laying his hand down with a victorious "GIN!"

"You bastard." Eran cursed, one jack of hearts away from Gin himself.

"Why thank you. Not to change gears here, call it a Dad thing, but did anyone else notice the difference between Phineas and the others?"

"What are you getting at?" Mandy asked collecting the cards for a shuffle.

"I think he's older or he's just big for his age. Look at Leigh and Simon next to him, they're both fifteen, and Phineas is a good head taller than them both. Romi is sixteen, but she's short anyway, Mary is almost fifteen and she's average. And I swear I'm seeing peach fuzz on that lad's chin. I'd say he's at least a year older if not two."

"He may just be bigger naturally. Some boys do hit their spurts early. I did. I was all skinny and short then wham! From age fifteen to seventeen I shot up seven inches and filled out everywhere." Val said picking up his hand as Mandy dealt the cards out.

"It's also hard to know how old you are if you've no birth record. I had one, Phineas doesn't." Cris said grimacing at the lousy cards he was being dealt.

"Hang on a minute, that's really easy to figure out. I have his blood sample and bone scans on file. Hold on." Mandy said getting up to go in the next room to run a scan. She came back just a few minutes later.

"Farin has a good eye. I just did a bone density, chronological analysis. I don't know why I didn't think of that earlier. According to the reading, chronological estimate of age is sixteen years, seven months and fifteen days. He was close, he is a late spring baby, but off by a year. He's almost seventeen not almost sixteen."

"I thought so, he looked it in comparison to others his age." Farin said as the game resumed when Mandy returned to her chair.

"So both he and Romi are legal then. Watch out Mandy." Val grinned and Mandy just shrugged.

"If they do, they do. If they don't, they don't. If you try to stop them, they just find horrible places to do it anyway. I'd rather them just be comfortable where I can provide them a safe environment and precautionary devices. I already have Mary on Birth Control drugs, I have plenty and condoms. Legal consenting ages or not those kids will finish school damn it at least."

"Can we get back to the game here? Please?" Eran whined. Hormonal teenagers were just that, he gave a rat's ass if they screwed each other or not. Phineas was a good kid, with a lot of street smarts; he'd know what to do if they left him alone to do it. He doubted very seriously Phineas would lay a hand on Romi without a condom already in his pocket.

Homework finished, both teens were curled up on Phineas' bed watching vids on the bedroom display that dropped out of the ceiling like it did on the "Infinity". Romi was tucked under Phineas' arm where he leaned against the headboard and she against his side. They'd settled on watching a documentary on Mirastor, they were flipping through the menu and Romi asked to watch it.

"Christ, that's my part of the city! Oh my god, pause!" The vid stopped and Phineas leaned closer, there was a small boy in the background, orange hair all wild and missing two front teeth.

"Oh my god, Phineas, is that?"

"That's me! God I must have been about five or six. I lost my teeth that year."

"This said it was documented twelve years ago, that would make you seventeen not fifteen. Are you sure that's you?"

"I'm positive. That tart there, that's Regina Flax. She died when her trick shot her. Not long after this was filmed probably. That shop there, it's a liquor store that sells Phantasm Poppies out the back. Down that alley is the abandoned store room Tovi and I lived in, god what a shit hole." Phineas said dashing out the door to the top of the stairs. "Mom! Dad! You gotta come see this!" He called down racing back to his room where Romi's eyes were still glued to the screen.

"What?" Mandy asked entering the room Farin and the others right behind them.

"Look! That's me!" Phineas said pointing to the freeze frame. He was standing there, looking filthy and shifty. Bare feet wrapped in spare bits of discarded shoes and held to his soles by strips of fabric. His coat, twelve sizes too large was torn in a myriad of places and a large scarf was tied around his middle to hold it on.

"Dear God, that is you. You couldn't have been more than five!" Mandy gasped loosing the support in her knees as she dropped to the bed beside Romi, her hand to her lips in shock.

"I know... I had no front teeth." Phineas grinned not realizing the effect this was having on Mandy and Romi. He was just fascinated he was on film; he had no idea what his appearance in that horrid state was doing to them. He took it off pause to see what he'd do; he was only in the background, when suddenly the camera zoomed in.

... As you can see, the conditions in the lower districts of Emerald City are Anything but the fabled City it's named after. Here in under town, drug trafficking and Prostitution are the mainstay. Hardly a place for children, yet here we see

A young boy wandering alone. At the age where the Wizard of Oz should be his Bedtime story he's forced to dream of his next meal and bed rather than Yellow Brick Roads and the only rubies here come from mines. His life Will be one of two things, he'll either become a criminal or eventually end up, if he Survives at all, working twelve hour days deep underground digging Up precious jewels for the more fortunate to adorn their fingers. Even as we film this, there are hundreds more just like him...

As the camera filmed, Phineas watched his smaller self shiver from cold as he carefully relieved a drunk of his wallet.

"Turn it off." Romi's voice was haunted. "TURN IT OFF!" She dashed out of the Room in tears.

"Romi! Romi!" Phineas followed her into her room "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? I just watched you in a living hell! What's wrong? How did you expect me to react seeing that?"

"I dunno, I told you that place sucked."

"I'd choose a little stronger word than SUCKED! How on earth can you be so ...detached?"

"Numb to it I guess. You learn to shut it out after a while I suppose. Please don't cry." Phineas walked over and she shuddered as he embraced her and she cried into his chest.

Mandy walked in and placed her arms around them both. "Romi if everyone reacted to seeing that the way you just did, there wouldn't be a problem in the first place sweetheart."

"Amen to that." Cris said in the doorway. "The only trouble is, you can turn it off and forget about it. Kids like Phineas and me didn't have that luxury. It was live and on every minute. You do get numb after a while. You have to grow numb or it kills you."

"Cris!" Mandy said as Romi cried harder.

"Truth hurts Mandy. Things won't ever change there if people just turn it off when they see it. If every kid had to see that all the way through without turning it off when it got intense maybe just maybe it would stay with them and they'd go out and make a difference later. They wouldn't feed the problem or turn a blind eye to it. To cure the disease you got to acknowledge it exists first. That's the whole problem right there in a nutshell."

"You're preaching to the Choir Cris." Eran said beside him.

"Yeah, I know."

"I'm sorry I made you cry." Phineas said softly and backed up letting her go. "I didn't mean to." Phineas turned to go and Mandy's hand shot out to grab his arm.

"Where are you going?" She asked and Phineas gave her a sad look that showed devastation in his eyes.

"Just out before I cause anymore damage."

"This is NOT your fault."

"No, I know that. I should have been a little more sensitive. I just thought - I'd never seen myself on the Vid before. I didn't think, I'm sorry." Phineas felt like a cad, he'd been all excited seeing himself he had no idea Romi would take it so hard, he managed to blow that quickly enough and before anyone else could stop him he ran downstairs, grabbed his coat off the hook and vanished outside into the dark.

"Romi, we know you got upset there. If you really want to help a boy from those streets, you'll go after him. He needs the comfort more than you, even if he'll never admit it. He's fragile right now, he's just learning what the real world is like, his happiness is broken easily. Especially when I can tell you right now exactly what's going through his head. He's feeling like a right bastard, feeling unworthy of anything, especially you. Every step he takes is hard, right now he's kicking himself thinking he's destroyed something he desperately wants." Cris said pushing her toward the door.

"He's right love. When I met Cris he was just like Phineas. The moods are wild highs and devastating lows. He has no balance yet and is teetering on emotions he doesn't understand. We all have to help him. You especially, he loves you most of all."

Romi nodded, feeling horrible herself for over-reacting and heading down the stairs after Phineas.

Phineas would have run had the snow not been fresh and the road slick but as it was his quick long strides carried him down the road toward Rael. He'd made a right mess of things; he'd made everyone upset and Romi cry and all because he didn't stop to think of their feelings. He'd only thought it was fascinating his youth had been caught on film. He supposed he did look pretty awful but it was still the only image he'd ever seen that had captured him as a child. He was confused and didn't know which way was up anymore. He was not used to the rules, he had no idea how he was supposed to act around real people, he tried, but it was painfully obvious things he found interesting were either commonplace or taboo subjects.

Phineas scrubbed his eyes, he hated feeling this gutted and no one made him feel like this. Back on Mirastor he'd have pulverized the person who made him feel bad. In this case he had no one to blame but himself and it wasn't like he could kick his own ass. He felt pulled in a million directions, he was thankful and was trying so hard to please everyone and the one person he really wanted to impress the most he'd just made cry. He would never fit in unless he learned to just stop being himself and just stay quiet. When he was just listening to others and staying in the background no one got upset with him. When he tried to assert his own opinions or his own passions they either looked at him strangely or like tonight they recoiled and he could shatter a good mood within seconds.

"I'm such a fucking loser. You should have left me behind, at least on Mirastor I felt like I could do something. I wasn't a loser there!" Phineas shouted at nothing in frustration then taking out his anger on a snowdrift, that wasn't a drift all the way through and one solid kick and he felt a toe crack and pain shoot through his entire leg. "FUCK!" He cried out falling to the ground and grabbing his little toe. He'd certainly broken it being an idiot and if he hadn't he'd have one hell of a bruise in the morning.

"Phineas! Are you okay?" Romi asked in concern as she raced toward him, she'd heard his outbursts and then saw him kick the rock.

"I'm fine!" Phineas barked, pointedly not looking at her.

"Lying sack of shit. Gimme your foot." Romi shot right back kneeling at his side and going to take off his boot.

"Ow! Damn it! Let go. Why do you give a shit anyway? Just let the loser go, I deserved that."

"Phineas Kale Corcoran do not talk to me like that I'll kick you in your balls so hard my toes will stick out your nose! You hate when I talk about my looks? I positively LOATHE the way you keep calling yourself a loser! You can knock that shit off right now. You are not and have never been a loser. Had you been a loser you'd never have survived at all. Yes, you don't have a lot of learning out of books, but you drop anyone of us in a city with nothing to our names but the shirts on our backs and not one of us pampered country bumpkins your age would survive a week! Now give me your foot!" Romi demanding seizing his boot and yanking the laces free. Phineas hissed.

"Not so hard!" He cried out and Romi gently pulled the boot off.

"Sorry. Oh dear you crunched this good." Romi grimaced, digging in her pocket for her communicator. "Mandy, we need help. I think Phineas broke his foot. We're down the road toward Rael..." Romi hung up and looked at Phineas. "... Help is coming." She said wrapping her scarf around his foot to keep it warm.

He couldn't look at her; once again his ineptitude was shining through like a cheap casino neon sign. Her hand reached out and turned his chin to face her. "Look at me Phineas. This was an accident you're not a loser."

"Whatever. I'm sorry."

"Phineas if anyone has to say they are sorry here's it's me. I over-reacted. I just... it was hard. I know you told me about your childhood, but I really had no concept. Seeing it like that for real, it hit home. You're amazing, you are the sweetest guy I ever met and treat people with so much respect and honor it's hard to comprehend that you lived in hell where no one ever treated you like that. You truly humble me."

"Stop. I'm none of those things. I'm just some street thug good-for-nothing."

"You're good for lots of things, you just can't see them yet."

"Name one thing."

"I can name several. You're great with the girls, you have infinite patience, you are a genius with a pencil, you have half the town already buzzing about you. You make a good impression on people, you're a natural leader, it's no wonder you survived; people follow you because they want to. You have loads of charisma when you stop trying to be perfect and just act naturally. And of course you're really good at that kissing thing, but I believe I already told you that." Romi said still holding his foot in her lap trying to keep it warm and stop the bleeding from the missing toenail on his smallest toe.

"I'm so confused Romi." Phineas confessed, trying to fight the tears, he hated to break down; tears were and undesired sign of weakness. A weakness that could and would get you killed on Mirastor.

"I know Phineas. We all do. Just don't try so hard, you're charming enough naturally." Romi said reaching out to lay a warm hand to his cheek. He smiled at her, his eyes drinking her in like the blind suddenly seeing.

"I love you. It killed me I made you cry." Phineas choked out, no longer able to hold back his tears of frustration and real pain, his foot was throbbing.

"And that's why I love you too. You care from the bottom of your heart. Get used to me crying Phineas. I'm a highly strung, neurotic, flighty musician who swears like a space convoy pirate." Romi said and Phineas chuckled through his tears.

"Yeah, you do. But god I love that. You're full of passion Romi and full of fire. You burn everything you touch and I'm delightfully singed." Phineas said wiping his eyes with his sleeve and sniffing.

"Then come here and let me really burn down the house." Romi purred grabbing Phineas by his shirtfront and pulling him close to plant a hard kiss on him. She wasn't such a bad kisser herself when she decided to run the show. She let him go with a smirk.

"How was that?" She asked as he sat back stunned.

"Thank god I'm sitting in snow."

"Down Boy." Romi grinned just as Val, Farin and Cris came into view on the run.

"Phineas!" Farin's voice was highly concerned as he sank down to his knees beside his son.

"I'm okay Dad. I just got pissed off and kicked what I thought was a drift."

"Okay my ass. Ouch." Val said taking a look at Phineas' foot.

"Let's get him out of this cold, I'm sure it's not doing anything but numbing the real pain his foot is in. If you didn't break your toe, I'll be surprised." Cris said as Farin and Val each took one of Phineas arms over their shoulders and carried him back swiftly between them. Cris hung back with Romi who carried Phineas' boot back.

"Nice kiss Romi." Cris winked at her and she laughed.

"You missed the one he planted on me earlier. Yowza! He's hot stuff."

Cris laughed. "He okay now?"

"Yeah. We're all entitled to mood swings, even Mr. Perfect."

"Mr. Perfect will be a piss-pour dancing partner this weekend with that foot."

"I don't care. I'm usually the one making the music other's dance to. I can't dance worth shit. I just want to go and enjoy the atmosphere with my man. Ya know the usual, gloat that the tall hot one all the girls are at school are secretly crushing on is MINE! Nee-ner-nee-ner-nee-ner-ner. Nothing wrong with that now is there?" Romi grinned wickedly and Cris laid an arm about her shoulders.

"Romi, you're priceless. You're just the sort of spitfire girl that makes the world go around. No wonder he's head over heels for you. I'm gay and married and I'd still date you myself you little pisser." Cris laughed and Romi nudged him in the ribs.

"I'll tell Val on you."

"Just don't tell your boyfriend on me, he'll kick my ass." Cris grinned with a wink as they entered the "Homestead" where Mandy already had Phineas in the clinic tending his foot.

Mandy finished wrapping Phineas' foot and before he went to stand she forestalled him with a small box she pressed into his hand. "I presume you'll know what these are for."

Phineas nodded and tucked the box into his pocket. "I do. Thanks. I was gonna ask where to get some, ya know. Just in case."

"We knew you would. One thing I'm grateful for, you are at least worldly enough to understand consequences to your actions."

"Amen to that. Besides on top of the fact we don't need accidents you have to diaper, I have Dartax. There's no way I'd give it to her."

"You're not contagious. You took your last dose of meds this morning. It's all but gone now. But you're smart, thank god I don't have to worry about you being stupid."

"Stupid is relative, have you seen my foot?"

"Okay stupid where it matters most." Mandy laughed helping him stand.

Phineas hobbled out of the back favoring his right foot and the thick bandage and sock that encased it. "I didn't break it, but I got one hell of a bruise and I ripped the little toenail off. I will never assume its just snow I'm kicking again." He was at least in good spirits about his self-inflicted injury.

"And get off that foot! Go elevate it." Mandy shook her head as she followed him out of the room.

"Climbing stairs at the moment is not on my list of desired things to do." Phineas grimaced at the daunting task of climbing a flight of stairs while his foot was on fire.

"That's what we're for. Grab an arm Farin." Val chuckled once again moving to help support Phineas' weight. In no time both men had him upstairs in his room, Romi trailing them all into the room with a pair of sodas in her hands and an amused expression on her face.

"Can you manage from here plucky?" Val asked and Romi winked.

"He's in good hands." She said as the other's left and shut the door behind them. "Okay handsome, let's get you comfortable." Romi stated setting the drinks down and going to help Phineas get ready for bed, she had not noticed his lightening fast slight of hand where he discreetly hid the box in his nightstand. He certainly did not want her assuming that's all he wanted from her. That was moving way too fast and even he knew that. It was good to be prepared for the unexpected, however advertising his preparedness was asking to be celibate for

much longer than he desired. He pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside and was about to just crawl into bed when Romi walked over and yanked his belt.

"Comfortable would probably entail the lack of a belt cutting you in half. You take that off and give me your clothes for the hamper."

She was a bossy one, but that was part of what lit Phineas' fire. You did not argue with Romi, you'd lose. He was just shaking his head amused while he shimmed out of his pants and she helped him pull them off over his bandaged foot. Dressed in just his underwear and socks, Romi walked over to deposit his clothes in the basket in his bathroom while he stretched out in bed. She came back to tuck a spare pillow under his foot to raise it then went to the door. "I'll be right back."

She wasn't gone long, and when she came back she was dressed in just her panties and an overly large night t-shirt that hung down to almost her knees that read "I don't do mornings!" and her pillow was tucked under her arm.

"What the hell?" Phineas asked as she set herself up on the right side of the bed.

"Hello? You're sorta gimpy here. Shove over you've got company to help." Romi said crawling into bed with him. "And don't get any ideas!"

"Too late." Phineas groaned trying to stop the raging hormones suddenly surging to the surface, he was glad to have a blanket draped over his middle.

Romi laughed and leaned over to kiss him. "Phineas, believe me I am not gonna make you pointlessly court me, it's stupid. I can't stand stupid games like Mary plays with Leigh. He's wound up so tight he's about ready to explode. I am NOT going to do that to you. I am putting my foot down tonight for two reasons. One, your bad foot and Two I have school and you have work tomorrow. We need actual sleep. You can however start dispensing with those kisses stud." Romi said crawling under the covers and Phineas almost pounced.

"Romi, you are a pill! I just adore you."

"Too much talking not enough kissing."

"Yes ma'am." Phineas drawled leaning over her, his foot still propped up on a pillow. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and he kissed her until she was purring like a pampered cat.

"God you curl my toes." She sighed and Phineas chuckled as he turned to spoon up with her.

"Good. Goodnight beautiful."

"Goodnight stud, and you can put away the stick in my back Mister."

"You caused it, deal."

"I suppose you have a point." Romi laughed not the least bit shy or daunted. "Goodnight."

"Night." Phineas sighed, drinking her in with his senses as he shut his eyes for sleep.

Mary walked into Romi's room to wake her and was stunned to see her bed had not been slept in and she went to knock on Phineas' door to see if he knew where she was and his door was ajar. She saw the bed through the crack in the door and there was Romi asleep with an arm draped over her middle.

"Oh my GOD!" Mary was flabbergasted and her shocked outburst drew Romi's attention, she'd been awake anyway, just not wanting to move.

"What are you 'Oh my GOD-ing' at?"

"You two! Did you sleep in here all night?"

"Duh Mary. It's pretty obvious I did isn't it?"

"You slept with Phineas?"

"Um, yeah. Are you always this redundant first thing in the morning?" Romi asked and Phineas always a light sleeper himself and who had been privy to the entire conversation tried not to shake too badly as he laughed silently into his pillow.

"Goodness gracious ROMI!"

"What? It's not earth shattering news Mary. We shared a bed to sleep."

"Romi you know damn well what she thinks you shit. Mary calm down, if you've noticed, we're both still dressed, kinda hard to do what you're thinking with clothes on." Phineas chuckled sitting up and Romi grinned at him.

"Spoil sport. I had her knickers in a twist." Romi laughed as she sat up from bed.

"Oh Romi you're EVIL! God I thought..."

"Yeah we know what you thought. Maybe perhaps if you do it you won't be thinking about it all the time. Poor Leigh." Romi said waltzing out across the room toward the bathroom.

"Romi!" Mary gasped.

"Don't get all flustered Mary, it's a natural human impulse. Just be sensible about it and if you love the other person making them wait and dick teasing them isn't nice. You flirt shamelessly, you'll suck his tonsils out of his throat, you make him pant like a dog in heat, and then just up and stop like slamming into a brick wall full speed. That's cruel Mary. Do you not pay attention in Biology or Sex Education? Boys are wired different than girls, they don't switch off so easy." Romi said as she washed her face to wake up.

"But..." Mary was nervous now.

"But nothing. If you're not ready to do it, stop teasing him already."

"I do love him, I just get scared."

"Then tell him your scared. He's getting mixed signals. You'd be surprised when a good boy comes along how they'll cope, most of them will shift down a gear and wait if they love you too."

"Girls? Can you like have this conversation when I'm NOT in the room?"

"Phineas, would you wait for a girl to be ready?"

"I would, I am." Phineas winked at Romi.

"Have you done it before?" Mary asked and here Phineas blanched white and coughed.

"That's kind of personal isn't it?" He managed to choke out.

"I know, but I'm curious." Mary asked and Phineas looked to Romi for an out and he wasn't going to get one from her.

"Okay... Yes I have."

"A lot?"

"Christ Mary, Yes okay!"

"The girls, what were they like?"

"Mary, please. I really, REALLY don't want to be discussing this with you. I had cheap sex education on the street from hookers and that's all the information you're getting damn it. I never had a nice girl so I really can't answer your questions what it's really supposed to be like. Cause I'm a virgin in that area myself. There was no emotion in what I had, it was gratification, period."

"Mary, just trust your heart you'll know when you're ready to be someone's partner. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get dressed and help Phineas get his pants on over that foot of his." Romi smiled and Mary nodded and left.

"Romi, I..."

"Don't even think about apologizing for nothing Phineas. I kind of already suspected you're not a novice. You kiss too damn good, someone taught you."

"They thought they'd teach me what NOT to do. They hated men that were bad lovers, I was their guinea pig."

"Lucky me." Romi laughed as she gingerly slid his foot through a pant leg.

"What about you? I mean have you?" He asked as he stood and fastened his pants.

"No. I never had a boyfriend before you. I'm the nerd remember. If I'm not scaring the boys off with my mouth, they think I'm a lunatic."

"You are a lunatic. I love it. You can keep the frilly girls, As much as I love Mary, she's high maintenance man, and you're afraid and uncomfortable all the time cause she's so sensitive. Give me your unfettered spirit any day of the week Romi. You live life and don't apologize for being you. You had me hooked almost immediately. You're my kind of girl. Wild Thing." Phineas grinned pulling on a clean shirt. Romi just smiled wickedly at him from where she sat perched on the edge of the bed.

"Do you know you already have a bad boy reputation in my school?"

"Eh? I only know five of you. How on earth can I have a rep?"

"The others see you, you're the new tall kid who beat Jack. He's one bad ass didn't you know. Last I heard you had damn near super human strength, could bite through leather and of course you're from Mirastor so you have that cool Mirastornian accent that just sends these girls swooning. Me included."

"I talk like a bum."

"You purr when you talk. You and Cris send chills down my spine the way you pronounce certain words. And you roll your "r's" in almost a trill. Just you saying my name is heaven, you just have to say it and I melt like goo. Not to mention you're handsome too. You have fans you didn't even know existed."

"I had no idea." Phineas replied, a little in shock and then tucking away the information that he could start Romi's engine by just saying her name, that was really a handy thing to know. He smirked as he began to brush his teeth.

"I know. I'm gonna have death notes left in my locker when people find out we're together."

"NO WAY!"

"Yes, way."

"If you get threatened you'll tell me right? I'll kick their asses if they hurt you."

"Oh Mr. Possessive. I can handle them, but I will tell you if I'm worried about it. Just no beating up people."

"Okay."

"Good. How's your foot?"

"Good actually, My toe smarts but I can make it downstairs I think."

"Wonderful. I need a shower, I'll see you downstairs." Romi said kissing Phineas quickly before vanishing into her bathroom to get ready for school.

Phineas spent most of the day with his foot propped up on an old engine casing next to his desk while he worked on his handwriting, practicing the alphabet and his new extended name and just answered the com for Farin who was busy helping a customer in the workshop fix and old generator. It was the last day of work before vacation and Phineas was looking forward to the festival and flying high emotionally. Now that Romi was officially his girl he felt a like a great nervous weight was gone off his shoulders and he was totally relaxed in her presence now and not feeling he was walking on eggshells. Waking up with her beside him was euphoric and Farin only gave him a hard time about it only every five minutes or so in jest.

"So, slick. How's the foot?" Farin asked as he came into the office to check messages. Phineas just shook his head.

"The foot is fine, just my toe hurts, but Mom's pills she gave me help a lot. And you can cut it out Dad. Nothing happened, I'm hardly slick."

"You have, precautions right?"

"DAD! Yes, jeez!"

Farin just laughed and went back to work. He was having a ball giving Phineas a hard time about no longer being single, he was a good young man, he worked hard, he studied hard, he was even tempered and his easy going nature was comforting, Farin could not have asked for a better son.

Even his clients often remarked how impressed they were with the lad, Phineas made Farin proud in everything he did or attempted. Even his choice of girlfriend had Farin giving an immediate stamp of approval. Romi was a perfect compliment to Phineas' nature and they did look quite handsome together. Phineas' fair hair and complexion was like a sunset against the midnight beauty of Romi, even if they had a rather large height difference. Phineas was a good head and shoulders and then some taller. Romi stood to about the middle of his chest, she was short for her age and Phineas was tall for his, it was amusing to watch him bend to kiss her before she left for school. Farin admittedly was amused easily it didn't take much to make him smile. He was happier than he ever had been; he had it all, a beautiful wife, four perfect kids, a fabulous home with all the amenities, and a hefty bank account thanks to Eran's severance package and the salvage shop. There was nothing else he could ask for except maybe a few grandchildren someday.

The bell on the door chimed and Phineas looked up to greet the customers only to stare in confusion when all his friends and Romi walked in laughing.

"What are you guys doing here? It's only lunch time." Phineas asked laying down his pen and gingerly standing on his tender foot.

"It was half day today. We came to steal you for lunch. Farin can we take Phineas?" Romi hollered into the shop and Farin waved Phineas off.

"Go on lad. Take the rest of the day, I'm closing up as soon as we finish this anyway."

"Thanks Dad! Should I bring you back lunch?"

"No, don't bother. I'll grab something from the pub next door when I get hungry. Go have fun."

Phineas slipped on his coat as Romi crawled under his arm. "How's your foot?"

"It's okay I can walk on it, it's just sore." Phineas smiled down at her as Simon and Leigh, Mary and Maevis in tow walked over.

"Oh god I think this is so cool. You two are so cute together." Maevis gushed and Romi rolled her eyes.

"Whatever. I'm starving, can we go eat?"

"I'm with Romi, I'm famished." Simon said as they headed out the door.

"Let's go to Maxi's on the wharf, I want some of their chowder I'm frozen." Mary said and everyone was in agreement as they began walking down the festive and busy streets toward the restaurants along the boardwalk and wharf.

They were almost there laughing as the three young couples walked arm in arm toward their destination when a group of young teenage boys stepped out of an alley, headed up by Jack.

"I gotta bone to pick with you." Jack snarled poking Phineas in the chest.

Phineas' whole demeanor changed in an instant, his face grew hard and dangerous as he stepped in front of Romi. His eyes were steady and icy cold as he fixed Jack in a predatory glare and stalked forward. "Listen, I thought I made myself perfectly clear before. Back off man, you've no idea who you're fucking with. Don't make me hurt you."

"Nor do you. I don't take kindly to people getting into my business."

"And I don't like people disrespecting my family and friends."

"Big talk from a brat off the streets. You've got no family, you've got people who pity losers."

"That may be, but I still won't let you get away with your crap. Move it and give it up, you have no chance against me."

"You don't scare me. Get him!" Jack hollered to his cronies who jumped Phineas. Romi gasped as Phineas shoved her out of the way into Leigh's arms and in the same fluid motion he got her out of harms way he dropped into a squatting position and spun with his leg outstretched. Effectively sweeping three boys' legs out from under them sending them to their backs onto the slippery pavement. Phineas pushed up with his legs from his low position and time slowed as he jumped over one of the fallen boys and literally grabbed Jack by the face. Phineas whole hand covered his face as he pinned Jack against a wall. He took his other hand and grabbed Jack's wrist and pinned it painfully behind his back and made Jack turn around to face the others and the crowd that had gathered to witness the ruckus.

"I told you, you stupid little thug, you're messing with the wrong man. Now apologize to all these people for making a scene."

"Screw You!" Jack grunted and Phineas just twisted his wrist harder.

"I said tell all these nice people you're sorry for picking fights during such a peaceful season."

"I'm sorry." Jack whimpered his wrist throbbing and his friends were long gone.

"I don't think they heard you. Speak up."

"I'm SORRY!" Jack hollered and Phineas let him go with a shove.

"Good boy, now for the last time bugger off and leave my friends alone."

Jack ran off holding his wrist and the entire crowd erupted in laughter and applause, Phineas however grimaced, that stunt had hurt his toe. Romi was right by his side.

"That had to have hurt." She said softly and Phineas nodded.

"Oh yeah, he had piss pour timing."

"Dude you did that INJURED?" Some complete stranger around their age asked in awe as Phineas hobbled over to an obliging planter and sat down.

"He's got a bad foot. Almost broke his toe last night. Damn Phineas, I already thought you were cool, holy shit you're awesome. That was wicked man!" Leigh said answering the boy's questions and worshipping Phineas' skills.

"Stop, please. I hate fighting, I'd really rather leave it behind me. I only fight when I have to, I don't like it." Phineas said hating being the center of attention. Romi however was standing by his side and wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

"Baby, you're wonderful. If I didn't already love you, after that statement I'd have been a goner like these people. You're first class through and through." Romi smiled and Phineas reached up and rubbed the back of his knuckles across her cheek.

"I'm sorry I broke my promise and fought."

"Phineas, you're allowed when Peckerhead Gits pick fights with you with a back-up squad of goons. I'd rather you do what you did than let them walk all over you. You didn't throw a single punch and had them all disabled in seconds with no one getting hurt. You're a true gentleman."

"She's right lad. Saw the whole thing, where did you learn moves like that?" A man dressed in the local law enforcement uniform walked over.

"Mirastor." Phineas said as the man held out a hand for Phineas to shake.

"I thought you had an accent lad. What's your name?"

"Phineas Corcoran."

"Ah yes, Farin's boy. Heard rumors about you I see are true. You need a hand there?"

"Nah, just letting the throbbing stop for a minute. I'm fine. I've been through worse."

"I don't doubt you have lad. Happy Winterfest, and if you ever decide you want to join the local volunteer squad, you come see me, we can use men like you." The man said handing Phineas a card with the address of the local department of law enforcement on it, which Phineas tucked into his pocket.

"I used to give cops a hard time. I think it's ironic I'm being offered a job as one." Phineas laughed as he stood again and the crowd dispersed.

"That was sweet though." Cris grinned coming out of a local restaurant, Val and the others behind him. "We saw it all. Oh man, I was pissing myself laughing when you made him apologize. He's so gonna come back and try again."

"Yeah, I know. Nothing I can do though about it, idiots never learn." Phineas said as Eran lit up his cigarette.

"Don't be a cop, the pay SUCKS." Eran said with a wink as he exhaled.

"You did good, now go get off that foot." Beau said with a smile as the quartet headed out and about their own business.

"Yes, let's go I'm starving and I want you sitting down five minutes ago." Romi said setting off and giving Phineas support as he limped and they found Maxi's as fast as possible.

Once inside, Phineas had his foot propped up on a chair as they ordered rounds of fresh clam and corn chowder in sourdough bread bowls and warmed apple cider that had been steeped with mulling spices.

Their meal must have been interrupted a dozen times by people coming over to talk to Phineas and congratulate him and pay their respect to him, Phineas thought these people were nuts, he didn't do anything.

"They just don't see a lot of action like that. Rael is pretty peaceful. You have moves they've only seen on the Vid." Simon winked; he too was a little awestruck.

"It's making me lose my appetite, and if one more girl shoves a communicator number in my pocket I'm gonna lose it, and you're not helping Romi by laughing about it."

"I'm sorry, I just think it's funny that I'm sitting right here and they're still doing it. I must be invisible or something, I find it amusing as hell."

"Only you would. I think it's horrible. It's pretty obvious he's your boyfriend, they shouldn't." Mary huffed and Romi just shrugged.

"I'm not worried. Phineas is not the type you have to worry about. I trust him to be a good boy." Romi grinned at him and Phineas leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"I'm all yours, no worries."

"See." Romi laughed as they finished their meals and chatted over chocolate pie and coffee for dessert.

After lunch, the happy and on vacation teens ended up at the ice rink in the center of town, Phineas even with a good foot wouldn't have strapped a pair of skates on if you paid him, but he did like to watch and he had to admit Mary was very good. Romi, not a very good skater herself sat off to the side with Phineas on a nice cozy bench where he had one arm about her shoulders, the other holding a cup of hot chocolate. Romi was using hers to keep her hands warm as they laughed at Leigh falling all over his own two feet trying to keep up with his girlfriend.

"Stupid git, one sure way to have a bruised backside for vacation." Romi chuckled and Phineas recoiled in sympathy pains when Leigh's feet went straight up in the air. Again.

"That's true. Ouch." Phineas replied finishing the last of his drink and tossing the cup in the trash receptacle beside the bench.

A stray cat, the same tabby color as Phineas' hair sauntered over Phineas' feet then out of the blue leapt into his lap. "Do I have a cat magnet stuck inside me? I swear even on Pirotaine I can't escape you lot. Shoo pussy."

The cat however had different ideas, it was wet and Phineas was warm. Romi just laughed and reached over to scratch it behind its ears. "It must think you're its long lost twin, you match."

"Ha, ha, ha Romi. Very funny."

"I thought so. What's the matter puss-puss is he being mean to you?"

"Romi... Really, I'm gonna start sneezing in about three seconds. Come on kitty, I like you and all, but get." Phineas tried to budge the cat that just dug her nails into his clothes just as he felt the first sneeze coming on.

"Allergic to cats?" Romi asked disengaging the cat from Phineas' pants and transferring the young cat to her own lap.

"Very." Phineas' statement was punctuated with a hardy sneeze. Romi fished into her bag for a tissue and then handed him a small white pill.

"Take that, I'm allergic to oh just about everything. Those help almost immediately." Romi said taking one herself so she too didn't start sneezing her head off while she played with the cat with her scarf. Phineas let the chewable pill dissolve on his tongue and sure enough within moments the itchy and scratchy tingle in his nose and throat was gone.

"That's handy stuff. I always did like cats, they just didn't like me." Phineas smiled watching Romi play with the cat.

"Me too. Dogs, Cats, Rabbits, anything with fur and four legs and I like it, I'm allergic too, I ALWAYS carry those pills in my bag, because I know my will power sucks rocks. I'm gonna play and then pay for it later. Those are wonderful miracle pills if you're an animal junky like me."

"Yet another thing we share in common." Phineas grinned just watching Romi when a shadow fell over them and a group of young girls skated over.

"Hi, you're Phineas right? I'm Tera and I heard all about what happened. That must have been so cool. Are you going to the dance tomorrow?" She went on and on not taking a breath and Phineas' was losing his sanity slowly.

He finally had to interrupt. "Goodness sakes. Come up for air! Yes, I'm who you think I am. Yes, I am going to the Festival Carnival. No, I do not want to talk about what happened. And fuck me! Are all the girls blind here? Can you not see I have a girl beside me already? I'm getting really fucking annoyed at everyone pretending they can't see you sitting here Romi. It's fucking RUDE."

"It's just Romi. You're not dating HER are you?" Tera looked shocked then leaned closer to whisper but loud enough where Romi could still hear "She's crazy and not all there if you know what I mean."

That tripped Phineas' trigger "God Damn it! Romi do you put up with this sort of treatment all the time?"

"Pretty much, don't get your underwear in a twist."

"Too late. Listen, Sara, Farah, Tiara, whatever the hell your name is, you wanna gossip about me, chew on this. I'm quite happily attached to this girl here, so you can all stop wasting your

time, I'm not impressed and if one more person treats her like she doesn't exist or like shit, heads are gonna roll. Ask Jack what happens when people disrespect those I care about."

That did the trick and girls backed away almost on a dead run. Romi rolled her eyes. "You make great Idle threats."

"I know, but damn it Romi don't put up with that bullshit. You are gonna outshine all these girls one day, then they'll regret how they treated you."

"I don't really care Phineas. You treat me right and that's all I care about."

"Come on, let's get out of here. I'm freezing and I want to be alone with you somewhere. I don't care where." Phineas said standing and purposefully holding Romi's shoulders in a blatant advertisement they were an item as they stood, her hand slipped into his back pocket as they called over to Mary telling her they'd see her later.

They walked out of the rink hooked together and all eyes were trailing after them and Romi couldn't resist giving Phineas' backside a squeeze where her hand was stuck in his pocket. "Down girl. No fondling the merchandise if you're not buying."

"But you have such a nice ass. I can't help it and the cat is following us." Romi laughed and Phineas shrugged.

"I don't care about the cat. Take me somewhere, anywhere we can escape idiots."

"I never did show you the art gallery. Wanna go?"

"Yes."

And with that Phineas and Romi made haste to the small art gallery on the boardwalk.

The section of boardwalk the gallery was situated on definitely catered to the creative people of Rael. Amateur Performance Clubs, dancing studios, craft stores, and great smelling coffee houses with live music, and the art gallery that showcased the local talent. The owner of the gallery smiled when Romi walked in. "Back again Miss Nguyen?"

"I am. What's new?"

"The gentleman with you." The older woman commented looking Phineas up and down appraisingly.

"That's true. Phineas this is Ms. Renault. Ms. Renault this is Phineas Corcoran, my boyfriend."

"About time someone got smart about a hidden treasure. Welcome Mr. Corcoran, is this your first visit to my gallery?"

"Yes Ma'am." Phineas said surprised at the woman's formality not used to it at home.

"He's an artist too Ms. R." Romi interjected and Ms. Renault smiled.

"Really. What's your medium?"

"My what?"

"Medium."

"Phineas uses pencil mostly, he's not formally trained Ms. R but he's absolutely amazing."

"Some of the best ever known were never formally trained. I would like to see some of your work."

"I don't have anything really. I usually just toss it or give it away." Phineas replied with a shrug.

"I have what you drew me. Hang on." Romi fished into her backpack and pulled out her school notebook where she had the portrait he sketched of her safely tucked away. She'd been looking at it all day.

"You took that to school with you? It's not done Romi."

"I think it's perfect as is. Can you believe he did this in about ten minutes?" She handed the rough sketch to Ms. Renault who scrutinized the picture.

"Sure lines, excellent eye, no wasted strokes, even hand and marvelous shading. I'd love to see what you could do when you're not just sketching. Can you paint?"

"I never tried."

"Come back and see me after the holiday, I would love to see you try your hand at watercolor. You have a softness you should develop. I haven't seen such rough talent walk in my door in years. I want my hands on you boy."

"Are you serious Ms. R? They said you don't take students anymore."

"I only take people who do art because they love it and show a gift. He has it. I want you in here Tarisday Evenings can you commit?" Ms. Renault asked and Romi was bouncing on her feet with excitement.

"What time? I sorta work with my dad and sometimes we run late. I'd have to ask him first."

"Like Farin would say no? Hardly."

"Seven, that's when I close on Tarisdays. Here's my number Mr. Corcoran, you discuss this with your father and call me. Now I'll leave you to go look at the gallery since that's what you came in for." Ms. Renault said patting his arm with her aged and wrinkled hand and disappearing into her office.

"Phineas! She never ever teaches anyone. That is so cool!"

"What kind of stuff does she do?"

"Here, follow me, I'll show you some of her pieces." Romi said leading him back to a private wing of the gallery. Wall after wall of beautiful paintings, some oil, some watercolor, some landscapes, seascapes, and portraits she was very versatile. Phineas was in awe, this was the type of art he'd always wanted to be able to do, but with only a pencil he'd never had the chance.

"These are amazing. Wow. Not even the big mural in the Emerald Casino is as nice and they paid like a billion credits to that artist they hired. They should have hired her."

"She never ever does commissioned work. She only paints for her joy in painting."

"I believe it, you can see the love in these paintings." Phineas breathed wanting to touch the seascape, knowing his fingers would be cold and wet if he did it looked so real.

"I should have brought you here sooner, you're drooling." Romi laughed as they walked the walls of paintings hand in hand.

"I've always liked art. It's something beautiful in a place without beauty. A Touch of paradise in hell."

"You've a wonderful outlook on life Phineas. I adore you."

Phineas winked at her. "The feeling is mutual." Phineas replied, his limp becoming more pronounced.

"You need to get off that foot, are you hurting again?"

"Yeah, a little been walking on it a lot this afternoon."

"Let's go get something to drink next door you can rest before we go home." Romi said as they finished touring the small gallery and headed for the door.

"Don't forget to call me Mr. Corcoran."

"I won't forget, thank you Ms. Renault." Phineas said as he and Romi left and went into a quiet coffee house next door where they sat with frothy sodas and listened to the guitarist on the tiny stage.

Romi was in her element, and Phineas was swept along in her wake. She utterly fascinated him she was fresh and new and alive with music and talent and art, everything he liked she embodied. It was no wonder he loved her like he did, she was everything he ever saw beauty in, she was, in all actuality, his perfect match. He sat transfixed as the guitarist called on her to sing, it seemed everyone knew her in this part of town and appreciated the talent she was gifted with.

Phineas sipped his drink and watched and listened to her sing soft and low, life was amazingly good and warm and all was right and in balance as far as he was concerned, life just did not get any better.

The walk home was long and arduous on his foot and by the time they got there, everyone else was getting ready to head into town for dinner. All he wanted to do was rest and he wasn't really all that hungry anyway, so he'd nibble on leftovers out of the cooling unit for dinner and he and Romi set themselves up in front of the fire to watch vids as the "Homestead" emptied of occupants.

For the first time they were utterly alone and it didn't take long for two teens to forget about the movie on the vid and find kissing in the glow of the fire much more preferable.

Phineas was curled around her, pressing her into the couch as he captured her lips again and again, taking her breath away as she gasped and clung to him in almost desperation. His courage growing as his hand slowly and deliberately found its way under her layers of clothes and found the warm skin of her stomach first. Her skin was soft as silk and it trembled involuntarily when his hand made contact.

"Phineas." Romi moaned breaking contact and moving to get off the couch and taking his hand. "Upstairs." She whispered tugging him up off the couch.

His hormones surged to the surface and he nodded almost panting in need as he took her hand firmly in his and kissed her all the way up the stairs in a clumsy ascent to his room.

As he shut the door and locked it behind him, he turned and groaned as he watched her pull her sweater off over her head, she stood there in just her bra and his hands were shaking as he closed the space between them. "Allow me." He purred into her neck as he bent to nibble at the juncture and with deft fingers undid the clasp as he edged her toward the bed.

As she sat on the bed and lay back, her legs still dangling off the side, Phineas still kept contact with his lips to her skin as her torso was exposed and his warm hands encased her breasts. She moaned into his kiss as he softly kneaded them in his hands, his fingertips caressing the hardened nipples and areolas. He let his hands trail down to her pants and once again his talented fingers made quick work of the button and zipper and he stood back to slide them from her legs. Kneeling before her in the process. And before she could recover her senses, he slowly spread her legs apart and continued to kiss her in the most intimate of places.

"PHINEAS!" She cried out, her hands diving into his hair and her legs lifting from the floor to fall over his shoulders. He worked sinful magic and he had her writhing and mewling and begging for more in moments. She shuddered as an intense wave of pleasure hit her at full force as he showed her no mercy and she came in great spasms.

He sat back with a smirk. He had wanted her to come first, this was her first time and he'd never had a virgin before so he was pulling out all the stops to show her pleasure before he even dared go further. It would hurt her, and he wanted her totally relaxed and pleased before he took her virginity away from her.

"We can stop if you want to." Phineas breathed into her neck as he crawled into bed beside her.

"No. I want this too Phineas, you're not taking anything I'm not offering." Romi replied right back breathless still from his tender onslaught.

"I know you're a virgin, I don't want you to feel pressured is all."

"God I love you. Stop being such a gentleman already." Romi smiled at him as she moved to a more comfortable position on the bed and held out her arms to Phineas. "I'm all yours."

Phineas stood and slowly undressed, Romi giving him appreciative looks as he bared his skin. He was naked and hard as he returned to bed kissing up her leg, her abdomen, her breasts, her neck and then nibbled on her earlobe, keeping her distracted as his quick hands found the condoms in the nightstand and he sat up just long enough to rip the package open with his teeth. "Do you want to or shall I?"

"I do. How do I do this?" Romi asked taking the condom in rock steady hands. She had no fear, no regrets, and was full of anticipation and desire to touch his handsome body.

"It just rolls on." Phineas instructed, his voice unsteady, he was about ready to explode from desire. The minute her fingers brushed his erection he gasped.

"Did that hurt?"

"Oh no. So good." Phineas' eyes rolled back as her hands finished their task. Light fingers tracing him in wonder.

"Does that feel nice?" She asked daring waters she'd never tread before. Marveling at how his body responded to her touch.

"God yes." Phineas groaned, letting Romi take her time no matter how maddening her touch was, how desperately he wanted her.

Her hand grew bolder and when she squeezed gently and Phineas moaned she had a smirk of her own cross her features. "You're gorgeous." She said leaning forward to kiss him. His return kiss was hard and full of passion. She was lost as he kissed her back down into the mattress and crawled between her legs, positioning his body before her.

"You're absolutely sure." His voice was quivering with need, but giving her one last chance to change her mind.

"I've never been more sure of anything. Make love to me Phineas."

That was all he needed and slowly he pushed forward, not knowing what to expect with a virgin but not wanting to rush in and cause her more pain than was necessary. He felt resistance but he pressed forward and when it gave she whimpered and he stopped.

"Phineas DON'T STOP! Just... Just do it I'm fine." Romi urged, begging for him to continue what he'd started.

He slid back out and then in again as far as he could go. She was unbelievably warm and soft in all the right places. He was seeing stars; it had never been like this. It really did make a difference when you loved the person you were with. Sex was sex, this was making love and there was a huge difference. He was crying against his will as he set a tempo, clinging to her, his chest to hers, his lips buried in her neck, his arms under her back and his hands gripping her shoulders from behind.

Her legs wrapped around his waist as he made slow and steady moves, each stroke complete and gradually gaining momentum. It was all a blur as he climbed higher and he felt her shudder and moan and her muscles clamp down around him, bringing him to an unexpected and sudden explosion of desire. He spent himself in hard spasmodic thrusts and he was taking in huge gaping breaths as he sobbed with joy, clinging to the love of his young life.

Nothing in life compared to how she made him feel. In all the joyous things that had happened to him recently, she was by far and away the most important. He fell to his side on the bed and pulled her atop him as he rolled onto his back. He held her with desperate arms, afraid the moment would end and he'd lose this angel in his bed.

Romi held him back and kissed a row across his sweaty brow. "I love you too Baby. I love you too." She cooed softly, his emotions barred raw for her eyes only. If she'd had any doubts about how he felt about her, they were gone. She felt humbled again. This wonderful, caring young man loved her more than she could have ever hoped or dreamed for. If it took the rest of her life, she'd show him just how much he meant to her in return. She had no idea what she'd done to earn his love, but she'd move heaven and earth to keep it.

"God, Romi. I never in my life felt anything like that." Phineas hiccupped and Romi sat up to smile down at him.

"Me either. You make me feel like a queen."

"You are." Phineas grinned up at her and she poked his chest.

"Well my King, I don't know about you. But I have this insane desire to raid a cooling unit. I'm thirsty and hungry and I always thought people were kidding when they said you got those desires after great sex."

"Beautiful, as soon as I find my legs again enough to stand, I'm with you. I'm dry as a desert."

They lay curled up together a few minutes while they caught their breath and regained a sense of normalcy before they dressed in baggy night clothes, even if it was early in the evening, and wandered back downstairs to eat and drink and finish watching their movie. Rumped, happy, sated and very much in love with one another where they snuggled on the couch under a blanket and watched an old earth vid called "It's a Wonderful Life." Farin and Mandy had an obscene collection of very old movies; this one definitely fit the season and their mood.

They had fallen asleep in each other's arms on the couch and that's where they were found when the other's returned.

"Five bucks he got lucky." Cris whispered to Beau.

"No way, I don't take sucker bets." Beau replied right back as Farin nudged his son awake.

"Go on you two, off to bed." He said as two bleary eyed teens stumbled upstairs to bed, the same bed. It was pretty pointless to have separate rooms at this point not to mention it was awfully cozy snuggled together in Phineas' bed under the covers and sharing each other's warmth.

"Told you." Cris grinned and Beau smiled as they sat downstairs by the fire.

"I think they're beautiful together. They'd make pretty babies." Beau said plucking out a soft tune on his guitar.

"No babies yet damn it. They are way too young for that." Mandy said as she rocked Valeria in her rocking chair, the other girls long abed.

"But you gotta admit love, they would." Farin smiled from his chair as he flipped vid channels.

"True. One step at a time, one step at a time."

The clock on the mantle chimed midnight.

"Happy Anniversary Baby." Val said to his husband leaning over for a long tender kiss.

"Happy Anniversary Love. Happy Winterfest everyone!" Cris beamed as he settled closer to Val on the couch.

"Cheers. Happy Winterfest and Blessings to all those we love." Eran said holding up his glass and running his fingers through Beau's blond curls.

"Cheers!" Everyone drank to Eran's words and soon filtered away to their own beds for the night.

The next twelve days were a glorious, jubilant blur. Presents were exchanged daily, tears of joy shed, songs were sung, food devoured until pants had to be loosened and belts undone. The "Homestead" was full of jubilant warmth and love. Children played with their new toys and the adults with theirs too. Phineas was in heaven and his fingers were aching from using all his new pencils to make gifts of thanks to everyone. Mandy's landscape was framed and hung over the mantle and Mandy was often found just standing in front of it staring, a smile on her lips.

On the twelfth day Phineas gifted Romi a lovely coral ring for her finger. It wasn't a bonding ring; he had just thought it pretty and appropriate for the newness of their relationship, which was growing stronger and more secure by the day. Farin teased them endlessly and neither of them minded in the slightest.

Almost as soon as it began, the season was over and it was back to routine. Maintenance began in earnest on the "Infinity". Phineas became quite adept at getting that hopper to and from the shop for Farin and Val who had more time to work on the upgrades with Phineas doing their running for them. Romi and Mary were back in school again and Phineas spent Tarisday evenings with Ms. Renault, then Tarisdays and Fellsendays. His work was improving by leaps and bounds and the room he shared with Romi was always cluttered with his art projects and her instruments. They bought a second table for the room so they each had their own work surface and as Romi did her homework, Phineas was either painting or playing in a new medium, clay. He absolutely loved sculpting and he was currently dirty up to his elbows making a bust of Romi from clay.

All too soon, the work on the "Infinity" was done and everyone was tearfully bidding each other goodbye. Phineas held Tovi tight; he was going to miss her terribly. Val came and took her into his arms and resting her on his hip while giving Phineas a hug, followed by Cris as they carried their daughter on board. Both men thanking him again for being there for Tovi when she needed him. They had her because of him and they would forever be in his debt. Phineas just shrugged it off with a smile. He loved her too; it was just the right thing to do and nothing more. They'd learned that was Phineas' signature style. You didn't need to tell him what to do and when to do it. He knew and followed his own conscience and moral code, which was impeccable.

Phineas had Erin on his hip and Romi under his arm as they waved until the ship vanished into the sky.

The "Homestead" seemed horribly empty.

"Was it like this the last time they left?" Phineas asked Mandy who sighed.

"It sure was. Let's just hope they come back soon, Time for them is fleeting and they easily lose track of it." Mandy said wiping her eyes on a dishtowel.

"Now everyone, they are like boomerangs. They always come back. No matter how far away they go or for how long. This is always HOME." Farin stated moving to his chair by the fire.

"That it is, that it is." Mandy smiled as Bo knocked over her milk, Valeria began to cry and Erin played sullenly with her dolls, her playmate gone. Life went on. Mandy rocked the baby, Phineas cleaned up his sister's accident and Romi went over to play dolls with Erin. Life did indeed go on, especially when there were children who didn't understand yet.

Five years later

"They're COMING!" Valeria hollered where she hovered by the window that began to rattle as the "Infinity" began its decent.

All the girls rushed out to greet their uncles while the adults chuckled and pulled on their coats.

Tovi was the first down the gangplank and she and Erin squealed with delight. As soon as Tovi had learned to use a vid letter pad, she and "cousin" Erin had sent communications to each other and soon both girls were inside and up in Erin's room exchanging nine-year-old gossip. Bo and Valeria too young to actually remember their uncle's last visit were joyfully greeting them as the adults waited impatiently for their hugs.

"Phineas!" Val cheered as the very tall young man walked over full of bright smiles. He'd filled out nicely and at almost twenty-two he was a handsome man indeed. But what caught everyone's attention was what he was carrying.

"NO WAY!" Cris grinned like a fool and Beau was floored. None of them had known.

"It was hard to keep the secret what with Erin always telling Tovi everything." Phineas chuckled as Romi, a little taller but still much shorter walked over to join her husband.

Phineas handed over his burden to the eager hands of Beau. "How absolutely beautiful." He said of the small bundle, which was wrapped up snug and warm.

"God so tiny. Boy or Girl?" Beau asked, as he cradled the tiny infant not very old at all.

"Boy. He's a month old today." Phineas beamed proudly at his son, a thick thatch of black hair atop his head and Phineas' blue eyes.

"What's his name?" Cris cooed, touching the irresistible softness of newborn hair.

"Brion Seamus." Romi answered looking tired but happy.

"Inside everyone before the baby catches a chill. He's much cuter when he's not hidden under all those blankets." Farin grinned, obviously a doting grandfather.

It seemed life on Pirotaine was going well for the Corcoran's. Romi sang to sold-out performances all over Pirotaine with her back-up band. She'd taken time off touring to get married and have the baby. Her home was still the "Homestead" and if Phineas wasn't touring with her, he was making a name for himself in his own right. He used part of the salvage yard as

his workshop and if he wasn't selling paintings he was selling his sculptures. People were lining up for his works. He used old spare parts that no one wanted to buy from Farin's yard and with some creative placement he was selling those parts for fifty times what they were worth alone.

He always split the profits with Farin since he was raiding the shop for his art.

The girls adored their big brother who spoiled them rotten with his earnings. If he wasn't taking them to the amusement parks near the capitol, he was making them insane contraptions to play on in the field. He was very creative with his hands and ingenious when it came to reusing things others considered trash.

Mary had moved out after graduation and was attending the university in Talestine City. It had a marvelous medical program and Leigh was taking law classes there and they were currently banded and sharing a small apartment on campus.

"We've gotta come back more often. Things change way too much when we're gone." Beau sighed seeing more gray in Farin's hair and more lines around Mandy's eyes. He held the newborn and smiled. "And I was right, you two did make a pretty baby. I think he has Romi's face and hair, but those are definitely your eyes Phineas."

"I know. But what do you expect when Mom is so damn pretty? Of course my son is beautiful."

"You're still sucking up to me after thirty three hours of labor Shithead."

"I am no fool love. After what I put you through I'm still surprised you left me in one piece."

"Well you did give me a pretty baby, I'll let you live a little longer." She grinned right back.

Eran sat back in his chair and propped his feet up as Valeria sat on his lap showing him her new book. "This is what life is all about. Nothing is as warm as home."

Everyone heartily agreed as yet another Winterfest descended upon the extended family that enjoyed the Jubilant Warmth created by each other's love and the comfort of coming home.

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