

Tuesday, April 24, 2068, 9 a.m., Tracy Island

"How was he, Nikki?" Dianne asked as she came into the sick room.

Nikki adjusted the I.V. as Dianne ran a scanner over the sleeping form. "He seemed to have a good night at first, but I think he had some nightmares. He didn't quite wake up, though. He's gone through a unit of glucose solution and his output has been consistent with that." She shook her head. "I tried him with a bit of lemon-lime soda, but he just couldn't keep it down."

Dianne sighed. "I think I know what's going on; it's just getting him to open up about it that's the hard part. I don't think he knows why this is happening." She turned to the nurse. "Thanks, Nikki. You've done a great job. Better get some sleep."

"All right, Dr. Tracy. I'll be back tonight." Nikki softly closed the door behind her and sighed. ~This is a tough job right now. I hope Dr. Tracy can get him to feeling better. It's always hard to see the little ones suffer.

Dianne logged herself in as physician/medic on duty and looked over the readings she had gotten. "He's lost some more weight, weight he couldn't afford to lose," she murmured to herself. "I wish it hadn't come to this. It seemed so minor when he first got back from Bongo-Bongo. But it's progressively gotten worse." She left the confines of the office and walked over to the bed, reaching out to stroke back the stiff brick red hair. Tyler stirred beneath her hand and opened his brown eyes.

"Hey, Spud," she said softly. "How are you doing this morning?"

He shrugged, his skinny shoulders lifting and falling. "It's morning?"

"Yes, Ty. It's morning," Dianne replied. "Ms. Nikki told me you had some nightmares."

He shrugged again. "I dunno. I don't remember any." He glanced with distaste at the needle in his hand. "When can I get out of here?"

"When you can eat solid food and keep it down, hon. You know that," Dianne reminded him gently.

"Mom, how come I'm so sick? I want to eat, but I keep throwing up," he asked, voice a tremulous whine.

At that moment, the door opened, and Jeff strode in. He smiled at his son, and the boy reached for him with a happy, "Dad!" He took the skinny body in his arms for a firm hug. Tyler seemed to not want to let go, so Jeff kept one arm around him while he reached out for Dianne and cupped her face briefly with his hand.

"When did you get back?" Tyler asked, still clinging to his adoptive father.

"In the wee hours of the morning, Ty. Your mom wanted me to sleep, and she wanted you to sleep before I came to see you," Jeff explained. "Now what's this I hear about you still not eating?"

"I try to eat, Dad, really I do. But I always throw it all up again," Tyler explained tearfully. "Now I have to have an IV..."

"I see that, Ty. They're not fun, are they?" Jeff asked. He raised the head of the bed and got the boy to scoot over towards Dianne, then put down the bed rails on his side and sat up on the mattress, his arm around Tyler's shoulders. "Now, your mom said she was going to tell me what she thought was wrong with you. What's the diagnosis, Dr. Mom?"

Dianne smiled at the little joke, then put down the lower rails on her side of the bed so she could perch at Tyler's feet. "Well, I've done a lot of testing on our Tyler here. All kinds of tests, everything I could think of, and none of it showed me what was wrong. No intestinal bugs, no nasty viruses, no terrible diseases, nothing like that. So, the only thing I could think of this possibly being is... stress."

"What makes you say that, Dr. Mom?" Jeff asked, squeezing his son to him.

"Well, for one thing, I've actually seen this before. Alex had it back in the days after Rick's death, back when people were blaming Rick for the bombing and I was... going to pieces. It took a while, but eventually he was able to realize that our family was still intact and that I was getting better. He learned some ways of dealing with stress, and I learned some ways to help him."

She reached out to stroke Tyler's skinny leg. "Now, our Mr. Tyler here has had a lot of stress over the past few months. His daddy nearly died in a helijet crash, there have been new people come to our island to live, and then a big wave threatened to wash us all away and he was shipped off to keep him safe without his mom or his dad to comfort him. That's a lot of stress for a nine-year-old to handle, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do," Jeff said quietly. He turned to Tyler. "What do you think of Dr. Mom's diagnosis?"

Tyler looked down at his hands, his tanned fingers twisting around each other. "I guess it might be right." He got quiet for a long moment as his parents waited to see what else he might say. Suddenly, he looked up at Jeff with big tears in his eyes, and nearly flung himself into his father's arms. "I was scared! I saw the pictures of the tsunami and what it did to other places and I was so scared that you might die and Cherie might die and Gordon might die! Alex told me I was being silly, and Grandma said I needed to be brave, but... I couldn't be! They told me you would be okay, but I didn't know until we got home... then there was all the junk in the boat pen and the smashed catamaran and... and... I heard you had to save Miss Collins and.... I was scared! So scared!"

Jeff held him and rocked him while Dianne smoothed the top of his foot. Tyler rested in his father's arms for a bit, then turned and flung himself at his mother, who enfolded him in her arms and rocked him some more, rubbing his back as she did. Jeff sat up and moved forward so he could encircle them both. She murmured, "It's okay, Ty. It's okay. It's okay to be scared."

She drew back for a moment and planted a kiss on his forehead. "I'm sorry that you felt you had to be brave, sweetie. And Alex should not have said you were being silly. Though if I know him, it was to cover up the fact that he was scared, too."

She stroked his hair again. "You know, whenever I wasn't really busy keeping track of patients and all, I was pretty scared, too. Scared for your Daddy and Cherie and Gordon. Scared and worried, worried for you and Alex and Grandma, too. And it was all right for me to be this way because it's natural. It shows how much we love each other."

Tyler looked from one parent to another and asked suddenly. "What would happen to me if you died? If you both died?"

Jeff glanced over at Dianne, then put a hand on his son's head, and sighed. "If we both died, Scott would become guardian to you and Alex and Cherie, depending on how old you were. If Scott was unable to be guardian, then Virgil would be, and then John, and then Gordon, and then Alan. If all of us died, then you'd go to either Lady Penelope or your Uncle Jared, depending on who was better able to take care of you."

"I hope that never comes," Tyler said, nestling in his mother's arms.

"Me, too, Ty. Me, too," Jeff replied fervently.

"Now, young man," Dianne said, giving Tyler a squeeze. "There are some things we're going to have to do over the next few days to help you deal with the stress and fear you've been feeling. For one thing, I'm going to make sure you get enough good sleep. That means some medicine to help you sleep and get the rest your body needs. Then we need to talk about the things that scare you, and not only what scares you about your Daddy and I, but what scares you about the rest of the family. We live a very scary life, Tyler, and we all need to know how to deal with it every day. I'm going to teach you some things that will help you relax your body so it's not so tense. And hopefully soon, you'll feel like you can keep your food down so you can get out of here!"

"Okay, Mom," Tyler said with a sigh.

Jeff reached out and ruffled his son's hair. "How about we try a little ginger ale right now? Would that be okay?" He glanced at Dianne, who nodded her head slowly.

"I think we could try it, if Tyler feels up to it," she said. "What do you think, Tyler?"

"Maybe later," the boy said. "I'm kinda sleepy right now. Can I go back to bed?"

"Sure, Spud. You can. We'll have something a little later." Jeff climbed off the bed and let Tyler lie back on the mattress. Dianne lowered the head of the bed back down and both parents put up the side rails. Jeff kissed Tyler on the forehead and Dianne bussed him on the cheek. Then she lowered the lights in the sick room and, after giving Jeff a kiss of his own, went into her office. Jeff left, glancing back at the boy, who had turned onto his side, away from the door. He shook his head sadly. ~There are times when I forget that my dream comes with a cost. I just wish that my little ones didn't have to pay for it.

