

Thursday, May 3, 2068, 7:30 p.m., Tracy Island

Scott glanced over at the happy face of Cherie, who had just turned 14. She had his gift in her hand and was just opening the card that went with it.

She rolled her eyes, "'To my favorite little sister, love, Scott'. You guys don't get tired of this, do you?" she exclaimed. "I am everyone's favorite sister, little or big, because..."

Gordon held up his arms as if conducting an orchestra and gave the downbeat as she started to say the expected, "I'm your only sister!" Then everyone at the table burst into laughter.

Cherie made a face, slightly peeved to be caught being as predictable as her brothers, then she tore open the package. "Oooh! A unicorn charm! And a tiny ladybug!" She glanced over at Scott and said a bright and heartfelt, "Thank you!"

"You're welcome!" Scott had given her a sterling silver charm bracelet for her first birthday as a Tracy, and each of his original brothers had purchased a charm for it that year with the agreement that after the first year, Scott alone would buy the charms for her birthday and Christmas. He usually purchased two at a time, and afterwards, would solder them on the bracelet for her himself. He had a plan that for Cherie's sweet sixteenth; he would upgrade the bracelet to a gold one, and all the brothers could contribute that year if they wanted, but then after that, he alone would buy the charms again.

He found it a comforting thing to know he had a plan for her gifts, because, though he loved Cherie dearly, he didn't always understand her, especially now that she had entered puberty and was maturing physically and emotionally. It was strange to him that this young girl, who sometimes chafed under his brotherly care, so often turned to him for advice and even comfort. But then, all of the brothers turned to him for advice, with the possible exception of Tyler, who usually called on John, his proclaimed favorite brother. Even Alex had come to respect Scott's wisdom and if he didn't get the kind of answer he needed from their father, who he idolized, he would come to Scott first, then go to Brains, with whom the budding scientist had a special rapport.

"Ooh! I've been wanting this manga book!" Cherie said as she opened the gift from Virgil.

The chestnut-haired brother grinned. "So you've mentioned... more than once."

Everyone laughed again. Virgil's gifts were always music or art related or both. Artistic talent was something that Cherie shared with him, a legacy of the girl's natural father. And somehow he was more attuned to her tastes in music than the others were. The art classes that he taught his youngest siblings were fun, he told Scott, and all three kids had some talent, but Cherie was serious about her art, while the other two dabbled in it, their interest waxing and waning as other things diverted attention.

Scott glanced over at Dianne, sitting close to his father. Now that is a gift of a different kind, he thought, not thinking so much about what he had given his stepmother, (several different bath items in one of her favorite fruity scents) but what his stepmother had given him, and particularly his father. As far as he was concerned, Dianne was the best thing to happen to his dad in a long, long time. Scott had always had the impression that his father's whole view on life had been colored by his grief over his own mother, Lucille. There was always that edge of sadness in his eyes, even at the happiest times, and there had been periods of depression as well, especially at the beginning. But those periods were gone, and so was the sadness. Now there was an underlying joy in his father's eyes and in his step. It was as if Dianne had turned on the light. And Scott had the definite impression that she had given him back his father, the one he remembered from childhood. It was a gift he would always remember.

"So, who's going with me to the ranch?" Cherie asked.

"Alan and I are!" John exclaimed. "We missed out on Alex's birthday party and since we're both here, we're going!"

"You do realize that Cherie's friends will be drooling all over you?" Gordon commented. "Adolescent girls just love handsome older brothers."

"And combine that with horses, and we won't be able to blast them out of there with dynamite," Scott commented. He remembered the party last year and how the girls giggled about him and the semi-whispered conversations between them about how "hot" he was. Not that he didn't want to be admired for his looks, but these girls were more than a bit young for him.

"Horses?" Kat perked up. "You have horses? I love to ride." The new recruits had been invited to the birthday celebration and told very emphatically that they didn't have to come or to bring gifts unless moved to do so. Most of them were enjoying the meal and chatting around the table.

"We have a ranch in Wyoming, a good sized spread," Jeff explained. "We have people raising horses and cattle for us there. That's where we get our beef. It's a refuge of sorts for us."

Scott remembered the occasional summer visits to that ranch. All five of the elder Tracys had worked hard during the visits and proven themselves. They had all learned to ride horses, and now the caretaker's eldest daughter was gently teaching the younger ones how. Cherie loved the place and often wished they lived there year-round.

"So, Dad?" Alan asked. "Where's your gift to Mom?"

"In New Hampshire," Jeff said, putting his arm around his wife and drawing her close.

The resulting silence was profound. All of a sudden, Scott found his mind's eye filled with the cold bleakness of a New Hampshire hillside, the tangled wreckage of his father's helicopter spotlighted in Thunderbird One's belly lights and the figure of his stepmother running across the snow, disappearing inside.

"Are you sure that's such a good idea?" Virgil asked quietly.

"Yes," Dianne said with certainty. "It is. The final step in healing."

There was another silence and Elise spoke up softly, "Will you be requiring my services, Mr. Tracy?" Scott could tell from her voice that she dreaded his answer.

"Not this time, Elise," Jeff replied. "Dianne and I will be taking Cherie's guests home from the ranch, then flying on from Greenville by ourselves."

Elise nodded slowly. Scott's keen eye saw the white knuckles of the hand that had grasped the table relax. I'm sure she needs to go up there, he thought. But she's not ready yet.

Slowly the conversations began again, not as loud as before, and that's why Scott was able to catch the next bit of conversation.

"Can I go to the ranch?" Tyler asked, his voice hopeful. Scott looked on the boy fondly. His youngest brother had given them quite a bit of concern in the days after the tsunami; who would have thought that the stress of the situation would have such a profound impact on the child? To Scott's eye, he was much too thin now, but he ate his dinner with relish and seemed to be pleased to be back in the company of the whole family.

"Yes, Ty, you're coming," Dianne said, reaching out to ruffled the short, stiff hair. "If only so I can keep an eye on your food intake. But you'll be coming back to the island with everyone else. You have a lot of school to catch up on."

School. Scott groaned internally. Now that Christopher was gone, it seemed that he might have to train Elise on the intricacies of Thunderbird One, at least until they got a new pilot candidate. He had trained her before and knew exactly what to expect: trouble.

Well, no reason to cross that bridge before we get there, he reminded himself as he sat up. He realized that he hadn't finished his cake, and he reached out to take another forkful, savoring the flavor and relaxing in the company of his family and friends.

From: Tikatu Sent: 8/17/2005

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