

Saturday, January 19, 2069, 1:00 p.m., outside of Auckland, NZ

John stood by the paddock rail, watching as Tyler mounted a horse within. The horse was full-sized, not a pony, and the instructor had to cinch up the stirrups quite a bit. Other students stood nearby, some older than Tyler, watching the proceedings with varying degrees of interest.

"Mr. Tracy?" a soft voice called his name, and John turned. A short 30-something blonde with a windblown braid stood there, smiling and offering her hand. Two men, one dark and in his 20s, and the other just as fair as the woman and about her age, stood behind her. "I'm Esther McGill, of Tracy Industries Security." She motioned to her companions. "This is Maaka Potaka, and here is my twin, Edward. We're here to see after the children."

"May I have your identification please?" Actually, John had already seen pictures of the trio, and showed them to the kids, but he wanted to make perfectly sure that these people were who they said they were.

Edward extracted his first, and handed over the card with the data chip embedded in it. John pulled a small data pad and scanner from his pocket and inserted the card into a slot. The pad read the chip and indicated that this was indeed Edward McGill. The other two did the same, and when he handed Maaka's card back to him, John said, "Everything looks like it's in order. I take it you're going to shadow Cherie, Ms. McGill. Which one of you gents will be keeping an eye on Alex?"

Maaka smiled. "I will."

"And I'll be shadowing Tyler," Edward confirmed.

"Very good." John gestured in the direction of one of the other paddocks. "My sister will be in the beginner's class for English dressage, which starts in an hour. Right now, she's across the way there, looking out over the pasture." He gestured to where Cherie stood, on the opposite side of the paddock, gazing out over the green lawn and talking to a girl about her age. "Tyler is here, in the beginner's Western class, while Alex is with the intermediate group." John indicated another paddock behind and to his right. "I'll be hanging around today myself, just to get acquainted with the way things are run, though I'll probably not be here every week." Actually, that's a given, he thought.

"Sounds good," Esther said. "Do the children know who we are?"

"They've seen your pictures. I've also made sure that the owners here realize that there will be security for the kids, and there can be no press allowed. They're not very happy about it, but I assured them you'd be discreet. And you have the power to deal with any members of the press who might slip in."

"Right." Esther glanced at her companions. "Well, then, let's get to our stations."

John turned back to watch Tyler for a moment. He had swung back off the horse, ending up on a box that was placed there for the younger kids. There had been quite a bit of "discussion" about what the kids would do next as far as an outside opportunity was concerned. Each of them had proposed their own ideas, and there hadn't been much overlap. Finally, their father had weeded out some of the more outrageous things, and a few that only one would like and the others would loathe, coming down to three choices, of which riding lessons was one. Then there was the kerfuffle over which kind of riding lesson. Cherie was adamant that they take English-style lessons as she felt she was proficient in Western riding. (John remembered Virgil's quickly covered snort at this statement.) Both of the boys, however, preferred Western.

"English riding is for sissies," Tyler had firmly declared.

"No, it's not." Gordon weighed in. "The only type of riding allowed at the Olympics is English-style. So, you'd be learning an Olympic sport. And those aren't for sissies."

A quick bit of on-the-spot research came up with a riding stable that held lessons in both English and Western. When Jeff approached them by phone, the owners had originally suggested private lessons for the kids. But Jeff said no. "Part of the reason I want my children to take classes is for them to get to know others of their own ages. Private lessons defeat that purpose." Once it was clear that the boys could take Western while their sister learned English, the choice was made.

Jeff and Dianne went back and forth with the stable's owners about the timing of the lessons. The Tracys preferred that the children have their lessons on the same day. It took some shuffling, but the name of Tracy did carry quite a bit of weight, and as a result, the children were enrolled in classes on Saturday afternoons.

"I wish Mom and Dad were here." John turned to see Cherie come up beside him, putting her hands on the paddock's rails. "I'd have liked them to watch our lessons."

"You know they're celebrating Dad's birthday," John reminded her. "They'll have some time to come out when they get back."

She glanced behind him. "Is that my bodyguard?"

"Yes." John didn't look. He'd seen Esther out of the corner of his eye. "She'll be discreet, just like your other one was."

"I wish we didn't have to have them."

John rolled his eyes. "You went through this before last time." Changing the subject, he asked, "Who were you talking to over there?"

"Her name's Patty and she'll be in my class." Cherie put her chin on her forearms, which now lay on the paddock rail. "At least there'll be one person my age there." Sighing, she added, "I miss my art class."

John just smiled a little and put a hand on his sister's shoulder. "You'll have fun here, too."

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