

Tuesday, March 13, 2068, 7:50 p.m. Tracy Villa, the dining room

"That was fantastic, Kyrano!" Alan exclaimed as he finished the rice pilaf almondine that had been piled on his plate. "All my favorite foods all day long! You're spoiling me, really you are!"

"That's funny, I thought you already were spoiled," Scott quipped, to the groans of the others at the table.

"A person should always be spoiled on their birthday, isn't that right, Mom?" Cherie asked. Dianne nodded around a bite of scallop.

"Is that why I actually won a game of air hockey against the pinball wizard today?" Alan asked, hooking a thumb in Tyler's general direction. "Did he let me win just because it was my birthday?"

Tyler sat up straighter and directed his eyes to the ceiling, putting on as angelic a look as he could. "I'll never tell," he said with a smirk.

The people gathered around the table laughed, then Kyrano said, "I thank you for you compliments, Mr. Alan. But they should also be extended to your grandmothers, both of whom did much to create the meal we have eaten tonight and the cake we will eat in a few moments."

Alan got up from his seat and went around to kiss first Emily, then Lisa, on the cheek. "Thanks, Grandma. Thanks, Grandma P. You did a great job and I can hardly wait to taste this cake!"

"Speaking of which, we'd better bring it out. Give me a hand with it, Lisa?"

"Of course, Em." The two older ladies left the table for the kitchen.

Brains looked at Lena, who sat in the guest of honor seat to Jeff's left. "Did you enjoy your tour of the facilities this afternoon, Lena?"

"Oh yes!" Lena said enthusiastically. "Dis is a lovely place and Mrs. Tracy is a wonderful guide. I enjoyed de tour very much."

"Now, Mrs. Matumbo," Dianne began, smiling and her eyes twinkling, "Mrs. Tracy is my mother-in-law. If you really want to be formal, I am Dr. Tracy. However, I'd much rather you just call me Dianne."

Lena returned the smile. "Dr. Tracy? Dat's good. But if I am to call you Dianne, den you must call me Lena."

Dianne laughed. "Agreed... Lena."

The two grandmothers came in with the cake, an enormous four layer confection of dark

chocolate cake with a white chocolate icing. It was decorated with a race car, red and white, the number twenty-four boldly emblazoned on the hood and door. Alan groaned.

"You couldn't have put confetti icing or something generic like that on it, could you?" he mock-complained. "You had to put a race car on it. Now I feel like a little kid!"

"Oh, don't complain, Alan," Virgil chimed in with a sly grin. "You know you love it!"

"Well, we'd better sing happy birthday before those candles burn down to nothing!" Scott rejoined. The group began the traditional song, very few of them on key and all of them at different tempos. Then Alan took a deep breath and blew out all the candles, moving around the cake to get the ones that he missed.

"See? I told you he was full of hot air," Alex quipped, to the laughter of his siblings and the groan of the adults and newcomers.

Alan pointed a finger at his younger brother. "You just wait, Bug Boy, until I get you at that ping-pong table again! I will whup your butt!"

"You can try," came the confident response.

"While we cut the cake to distribute it," Kyrano said, rising to perform that function, "Mr. Alan can open his gifts."

Tyler got up to help Alan by retrieving the gifts that were in a pile behind the table. One by one the packages were opened, and the givers were thanked. Finally, he came to an envelope with a card inside. The card felt thick and Alan glanced around the table.

"I wonder who this is from?" he asked. "Feels like a wad of money in there. Is it from you, Dad?"

"I don't know, son. Why don't you open it up and find out?" Jeff suggested.

Alan slipped his finger under the seal and opened the envelope. Inside was the obligatory birthday card and another plain envelope. Alan read the card, smiled, and said, "Yep. This is from Dad and Mom." He opened the inner envelope and pulled out the contents. His eyes grew wide and he grinned.

"Tickets to the Grand Prix of Malaysia? That's this weekend! Hotel reservations and everything! Wow!"

"There's more, Alan," Dianne said softly. He pulled out another piece of paper and grinned even wider, his jaw dropping a bit. He gazed up at the head of the table.

"Tickets to the Grand Prix of Monaco, too? The most prestigious Formula 1 race in the world? Wow! Thanks so much, Dad, Mom! This is going to be great!"

"One race for this month, and the other in May when you're back down from the station," Dianne explained. "A couple of long weekends so you can reconnect with some of your racing friends."

"This is awesome! Thank you so much!" Alan got up from the table and went down to hug Dianne and kiss her on the cheek, and give his father as much of a hug as Jeff's casts would allow. Then he sat back down to find the first piece of cake waiting for him.

As they ate their dessert, Jeff leaned over to Dianne. "Good call on the gift, love. It's unusual and will give him some time off, too."

"We need to do the same for each of the other boys. And factor in vacations for our new folks as well. I'm surprised our boys haven't burned out for lack of time alone to recharge," Dianne said as she sipped her coffee.

The dinner was winding down, and Scott finally rose. "All those going on tonight's expedition meet us in the aircraft hangar in 20 minutes!" He turned towards his father. "May I please be excused?"

Jeff nodded, and one by one, the table emptied of diners, all murmuring their pardons and telling Kyrano what a great job he did. Finally, only Jeff and Dianne remained.

"You were quiet tonight, love," she said as she rose to help him with his wheelchair.

"I was just enjoying being with my family," he replied. He caught one of her hands and kissed it. "Especially my wife."

"And I was happy to have you back at the head of the table, where you belong," she replied, leaning over to kiss his lips. Together, they left the dining room, warmed by the glow of the closeness their family provided.

Post by Tikatu on 01/10/2004

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