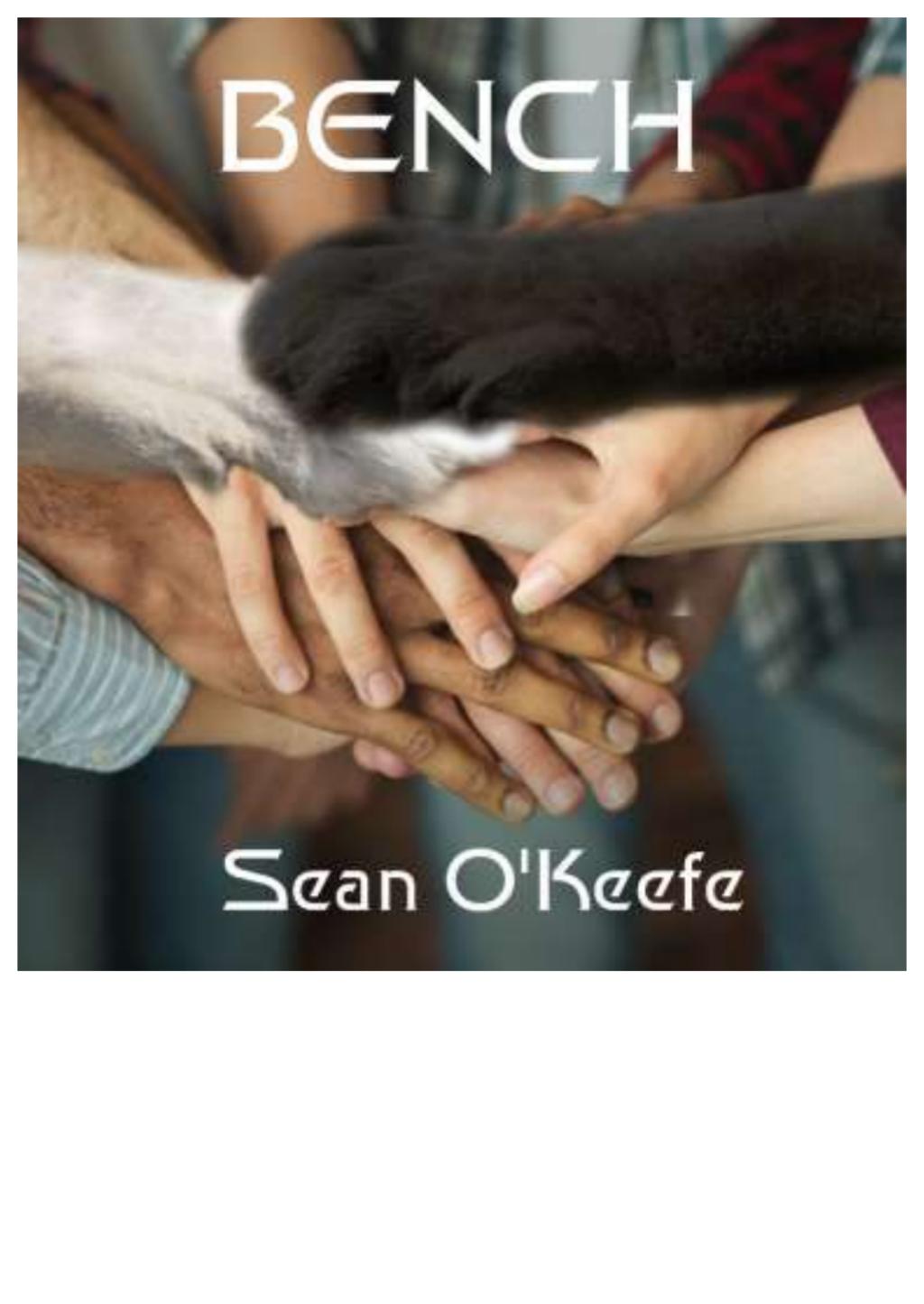


# BENCH



Sean O'Keefe

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By Sean O'Keefe 2021©  
Cover by Edelweiss O'Keefe

For Mike, who is creative, inspiring,  
and a delight to all who know him

Originally, Judd “Scanner” Sandage had thought that challenging the local junior Starfleet contingent basketball team to a “friendly” game would be fun. After all, how hard could it be? He had the players:

- Drallah and Lila, his and his wife’s adopted children,
- Piper Jr and Rogen AndrusVerandi, the ship’s Doctor’s children
- And their new engineer – on assignment, Lt. Commander “DB” as they liked to call him, who was on board with his wife and twin sons testing out some experimental new equipment.

They had the same level of maturity and fitness; all the pieces fit. So, when their conversation had naturally turned at one point to sport, and Judd had mentioned basketball, DB had made a passing reference that he had taught his boys the rules of the game.

To Judd, it was a sign from the heavens. He spoke to the parents of all involved, they spoke to their children and, once everyone was in agreement, they made a time and Judd booked a space on the *USS Millennium*’s Rec Deck. It was going to take time for him to configure the space to emulate a regulation basketball court.

Naturally, word had gotten out about Scanner’s latest flight of fancy. A small crowd had collected to watch the spectacle. Many

of them were wondering if credits were going to be wagered today.

Alongside the court area, Judd had set up two rows of chairs for the parents and the players, with latter closest, naturally.

Smiling, Judd stood before them, his wife, a huge, pure white Caitian bride at his side. Under her arm she held six vests, all in Starfleet blue, each with a number on their back numbered from one to six. She began handing them out.

His eldest son, Drallah, also Caitian, but midnight black, held it up as if holding a dead rodent. His tone matched his gaze. "Dad, do you seriously want me to wear this?"

Judd gave him an encouraging smile. "C'mon Son! That's no way to treat what used to be a national pastime for our family!"

Drallah's mother was fast. She saw the twitch in her son's whiskers that spoke of defiance and gave him a glare that said: "Don't even think about it!" There had been times in the more distant past when their son had made hurtful remarks to score points about Scanner not *actually* being his father. She had straightened him out quickly after that.

His sister, Lila, who was slightly smaller, but was just like her brother, took the jersey with delight. "Thanks, Mom!"

Manny came to Piper Jr, who held hers up to the light and slipped it over her head. She turned and looked to her elders for approval. "What do you think?"

Dr Merete AndrusTaurus, whose daughter simply looked like a younger version of herself, smiled down on her proudly. "You look amazing, sweetheart." She reached forward as Manny handed her son his jersey and tousled his hair. "And you, too."

"Aw, Mom," Rogen, said, squirming. Even as a teenager, he didn't like too much attention being drawn to himself.

Next to Merete, the ship's captain, Piper, grinned to herself. "This is going to be fun!"

When Judd came to DB's sons he suddenly realised he still had a problem. They were identical twins. When he looked from one to the other, he had no way of telling them apart. They even styled their hair the same! From the back, the numbers would help, but from the front, they would be lost. He held up a finger. "Hang on a sec!"

He darted over to a small replicator and asked for two caps, one green, the other blue, then jogged back to the duo, who he noticed were now wearing their jerseys. He smiled to each in turn. "Ah don't think we've been properly introduced..."

The first young man held out his hand. "I'm Aramis," he said politely, taking the green cap.

"And I'm Barton," who took the blue.

Judd gave them a grin that lit up the room. "We're going to have fun!" He looked over to the right to find his friend and brother-in-law, Commander Krashtallah. Crash understood his cue and

quickly threw Judd the ball over everyone's heads. It landed in his hands with an expert slap.

Manny looked at him curiously and said quietly: "Didn't that hurt?"

Judd muttered back: "Yes, but don't ever let your brother know that." He nodded to his players. "Follow me."

Over the next half hour, he took them through some basic skill building exercises, passing, dribbling, and shooting baskets. Judd, to his delight, found his children were especially adept at the latter as their natural poise and ability to spring brought them level with the basket so they could literally drop the ball into the hoop if they chose. Their Caitian reflexes gave them a natural edge, but it was clear it was beginning to make Drallah cocky. He was starting to show off.

"Okay, son, that's enough for now. Take your sister over there and practice running passes while we give the others a chance to work on their shooting skills."

"Okay, Dad, sure. We're way better than they are anyway."

Before Judd could say a word, his son was bounding away with his sister in tow, headed for the small pile of balls on the sideline. He scowled, worried about his son's elitist attitude. He was going to have to nip this in the bud, but right now he had other fish to fry. He turned and began coaching the other four youths with their shooting skills. While they couldn't jump as high as a

Cait, their accuracy was nothing to be ashamed of, and he noted that DB's boys were often making 3-point shots. Very impressive!

Just as he was beginning to become aware of it, his wife joined him. Manny said: "Honey, it's time we all had a break."

Judd nodded, took out his whistle and gave it a quick blast, which got the attention of everyone on the Rec Deck. "Okay, guys. Half hour break, then we're going to see if you've learned anything." He gave the youths a friendly wink and gave them their leave.

To his pleasant surprise, the six of them stayed together and headed over to the refreshment bar for a light snack and something to drink. It gave him a chance to chat with the rest of the parents. He grabbed a chair, pulled it towards him and straddled it. His wife sat on the floor, upright, feline fashion.

Manny spoke first. "The kits really seem to be enjoying themselves."

DB smiled through his beard. "The boys are having a "ball"."

Merete gave him a polite shake of the head. "More human "dad" humour that I've heard so much of from Judd?" She turned to DB's wife, Laurel, a striking woman of Earth who was serving aboard as a nurse. "Do all of your men have this curse?"

Laurel chuckled. "I'd say yes. My own parents were certainly not immune."

As Manny had the least connection with their family, she was the most curious. "What brings you to the *Millennium*?"

DB gave an almost embarrassed smile. "I'm here to try out some new, experimental computer interface modules that we hope will speed up their response times."

Manny gave him a blank stare that registered a complete lack of comprehension. "Is that good?"

Captain Piper leaned forward. "Yes, Manny, that's good," she explained, without in any way being condescending. "For you, that means the next time you ask the megaphasers to shoot at something they'll lock on and fire that much faster. Information will be retrieved quicker, scans made more efficiently. We'll be able to figure out if the blip on the scanner is a friend or foe that much faster."

Amantasandage grinned, her enthusiasm level up five notches. "That I like! Welcome aboard Sir! Anything I can do to help?"

DB gave her a warm, from the heart smile of gratitude. "Not right now, but if I think of something I'll take you up on that offer."

Nobody had to explain to DB that Manny was happy. They could hear it. She was purring loudly.

By some unspoken agreement, they gave the kids their space and kept their conversation going while they snacked right up until it was time for the game proper. To Judd's pleasure, Jason Nunn,

the ship's helmsman, and Carman Valastro, their navigator, had put together a team of officers, including Rebecca "Emu" Armytage, herself a fighter pilot, among others. Judd stepped over to greet them.

"Thanks for doing this, guys," he said. "I thought it might be fun for the kids, but I know you'd get a blast out of it as well."

Carman just shook his hand. "Starfleet has regulations that makes sure that our aging bodies keeps up with these kids, right?" The man from Alpha Centauri with his handsome, Grecian looks, was clearly not as young as he used to be. He gave him an almost embarrassed smile.

Emu Armytage, standing at his side, gazed slightly down at him – she wasn't called *Emu* for nothing. "You're kidding, right? We're going to have to bring our A-game guys and pray we don't wind up under Dr AndrusTaurus' care when it's all over."

Judd noted that the rest of Carman's team were pretty much in agreement. While they might enjoy themselves, they knew they were about to be run ragged. He gave them all a grateful nod and turned back to his own players. He found them all looking enthusiastic, ready to go. It never ceased to amaze him the youthful zeal to try something new.

"Okay guys. While you worked hard on skills earlier, the one thing you didn't have a chance to work on, really, was team building. When you're out there, five of you are going to have to remember where you are, to make sure the ball is kept away

from those guys..." he indicated the *Millennium* officers with a baleful jerk of the thumb over his shoulder. "... but make sure you keep passing the ball *to each other*. Nobody here is a showboat. Remember, there is no "I" in Team. Pass the ball to the person with the best shot at the hoop."

All six, grinning ear to ear, stepped forward. Judd moved toward them and did something they didn't understand at first. He put his hand out, his fingers slightly splayed, palm down. It was Lila that got it first. She stepped forward and put her paw on his. The others quickly caught on and, once the last had joined in Judd said loudly: "Go team!" and dispersed them. The kids ran out, with Rogan staying with Judd as his first interchange player.

To the children's surprise, the referee for the game was going to someone they were not going to be able to debate. His word was always going to be final. First Officer, Commander Sarda of Vulcan. The stately, red head male with his bronze coloured, upturned brows took in the players. While the officers were not intimidated, the children almost took an involuntary step backward.

"I believe the rules of the game are understood by all?" he announced.

Some of the teens were seen to visibly gulp. "Yes," they answered.

Sarda threw up the ball and the game commenced. What happened then took everyone by surprise. The youth's tipper

was Drallah, and he had used all of his ability to spring to bounce unbelievably high in the air, almost fifteen feet, to send the ball flying down the court into his sister's waiting hands.

The Officers barely had time to react before Lila jumped and dropped the ball through the hoop. A short blast on the whistle and two points were awarded to the Youths.

On the sidelines, Judd gave a whoop! "Way to go guys!"

Manny wasn't so sure.

Now the Officers had the advantage, they began passing forward, and it was clear they had been practicing. Their skills at working as a team were clear. Try as they might, the youths were struggling to get anywhere near the ball. Judd noted very quickly one skill he had failed to teach them. They all had a tendency to chase after the ball, rather than spread out and cover the other players. It cost them, as a surprise pass to Jason had the ball sailing through the air and dropping through the hoop for a three pointer.

Now the Youths had possession, Aramis was standing and looking for someone to pass to and finding that all of his allies were pretty much covered by his opponents. "Come on, guys," he said out of mild exasperation. "Give me *something*."

To Emu's surprise, Lila dropped and dove between her legs and came up before her. Aramis took the opportunity and passed her the ball before running down the court.

Lila began moving down the court, doing her best to dribble the ball as she went, but she found the aggressiveness of the Officers intimidating. They were not giving her any quarter. Then she saw something. Her brother was trying to get her attention with a strategy she hadn't considered. She gave him a nod, then dropped, bounced the ball through her opponent's legs and into the grasp of her brother's outstretched tail.

On all fours, he leapt once, twice, then dropped the ball through the hoop.

"Woo hoo!" he cried.

Sarda blew his whistle. "Carrying!"

"What?" Drallah asked, dumbfounded.

The Vulcan expounded. "You failed to "dribble" the ball while in motion with it. The point does not count."

"Great," Drallah said, annoyed and not afraid to show it.

From the sidelines, his coach was noticing his player has having issues as well. Judd announced: "Drallah, off. I want Rogen to play for a while."

"But Dad..."

Sarda looked down balefully at the youth. "You will obey the directions of your coach, or you will be excluded from the remainder of this game."

While Drallah might have been willing to debate his father, he would rather have tried to tame a Mugato than tackle their First Officer. "Yes, sir." The lad sauntered off and Rogen subbed in.

While Judd watched the game progress, he noted that his son seemed out of sorts. "Are you Okay, son?" he asked, concerned.

"I don't see what his problem was," Drallah whined.

Judd mused for the thousandth time that kids were kids, no matter what they looked like. "You did two things wrong, son. One, you broke the rules. Pure and simple. You know you're supposed to dribble the ball. Oh, and while there's strictly no rule against using your tail in basketball, I *can* guarantee you it'll be a sure-fire way of annoying the hell out of all the other players. Nobody likes having that kind of advantage rubbed in their faces, bless their hearts."

"Okay..."

"The other thing you got wrong was, well, did you notice that Barton was standing right next to the hoop with a clear shot? You could have made the pass easily, but didn't. What was with that?"

Drallah looked at him quizzically. "Huh? I thought the idea was to get the ball through the hoop?"

Scanner sighed. It was clear his son didn't yet get the object of the game. "The idea is for your *team* to get the ball through the hoop, Drallah. Not just you."

The tall, fury youth sat back, crossed his arms, defiant. "I'm faster and more agile than they are. I can do it without them."

Scanner was exasperated. "Son, if you're going to go through life with that attitude you're going to spend a lot of time on the bench."

Any further conversation was ended by the blast of a whistle and Scanner's attention was drawn elsewhere. However, Drallah wasn't the only one who had been listening to Scanner.

Shortly after, half-time break was called and everyone took five minutes to cool down. The scores were fairly even, but the Officers were ahead by two points, 32-30.

At the beginning of the second half, Sarda stepped forward to begin. Drallah prepared for the tap-off.

To his surprise, Emu stepped forward and quietly said: "Don't think you're getting away with that twice, kid." Then she moved off and had a quiet word with one of the other officers, who began nodding.

Drallah watched them and thought to himself: "What could they possibly do to me?"

What they did was get inside his head. He missed the throw and Carman got the tap. Before he realised it, his team was chasing down the Officers and he was being left behind. He took off at a run, but by the time he got anywhere useful the ball was already through the hoop. Score two for the Officers.

Now they were four points behind. Drallah saw red. Piper Jr had the ball, and she was looking around for someone to throw it to. Drallah was being effectively blocked by Emu who, even though she was human, was intuitively throwing her arms and legs in all directions to keep Piper from using him. She was infuriating! Out of her view, he caught the tip of her outstretched foot and gave it the slightest trip.

She fell face first.

However, she was Starfleet trained. She rolled, come to her feet, and stepped right up to his face. "You tripped me!"

She wasn't the only one who noticed the offence. Sarda's whistle screamed. "Tripping! Foul! You're off!"

Drallah tried to protest innocence. "Me?"

One person who was having none of it was his father, who had stomped onto the court, grabbed his son by the arm and whirled him around. Everyone else backed off and gave them room. Scanner got in close so only his son could hear him. "You can either get off this court like the Ref said or I will drag you off by the scruff of the neck."

For a Cait, there was nothing more shaming for a lad than for a father to treat him in that manner before others. He knew right then and there he had screwed up. He dropped his head and said quietly: "Yes, Dad."

Scanner growled: "Go sit on the bench until I decide what to do with you."

Drallah skulked over and sat down, knowing all eyes were on him and wishing he could disappear through the cracks in the floor. He had really looked forward to this game, to not only have fun but to do something that might make his family, and his dad, proud. Now all he'd done was bring a mountain of shame. He felt entirely miserable.

A presence joined him, and he looked up, expecting more recriminations, but he was surprised by the nature of his visitor.

Scanner had to coach the youths through how to handle the foul situation that Drallah had handed them, and Sarda had allowed him the timeout. The game was new to all of them. By the time they were through and resuming normal play, he turned back and was beginning to consider how to deal with his wayward son. Before he could do so, his wife blocked his view. Manny was standing before him with Laurel, DB's wife. Manny had that look in her eye that pulled him up short. She had something to say. "What is it, Hon?"

Her eyes twinkled that he knew her so well. "We should wait," she said cryptically.

"Why?" Scanner asked, curious and a little worried.

Laurel gave him a confident smile. "Because my husband is working his magic."

Scanner looked over Manny's shoulder and saw that DB was having a close, deep conversation with his son. He didn't know whether to be delighted or jealous. He looked at Laurel. "What does he know about raising Caitian boys?"

The woman of Italian descent gave a wide, confident smile. "Try raising twin boys with strong wills. It's not double trouble, it's multiplied! Sometimes they work together to make mischief!" She shook her head. "DB's not only survived his kids, but he could also probably write the manual on raising them. So, don't worry. Your son's in good hands. He'll make sure your boy's head's screwed on right."

Scanner was torn. He wanted to help; it was the engineer inside him. If you see a problem, you fix it. However, here was another engineer, a man he respected greatly, who clearly had a lot more experience raising children than he did as he had been in the game a lot longer than he had. He made a choice to put aside ego and let the man have a chance to set his son right. He looked inside and considered: *He hadn't exactly been a spectacular success today, either.*

The three stayed together and supported the youths from the far side of the court. The kids did a great job of gradually catching up with three-point shots from DB's boys. Even Piper Jr managed one. However, when Emu scored an amazing long shot herself, things were beginning to look a little bleak. With only two

minutes to go, Scanner noticed DB sit up, give his son a smile, scruff his head fur, and resume his previous seat, with a polite nod to Judd.

Scanner plonked down next to his son, wondering what to say. Before he got out a word his son spoke.

“Dad, I’m sorry. I was so caught up in thinking it was all about me and winning. I forgot about the team. I forgot to have fun. I’m sorry.”

The apology was so heartfelt that Scanner was moved. He glanced at the clock and realised if he was going to do anything he had to move fast. He jumped to his feet and called a timeout.

Sarda blew his whistle.

Scanner looked down at Drallah. “Come with me, son.”

Surprised, Drallah, humbly, followed.

Sarda’s eyes narrowed the tiniest fraction. “What do you ask, Commander?”

Judd stated: “I want to substitute Lila for Drallah. The lad has learned his lesson and will give you his word he will behave. He will abide by the rules – and their spirit. Won’t you, Drallah?”

Drallah found it difficult to meet Sarda’s gaze. Today the man looked like a Titan and was as fearsome. “Yes, sir.”

His father continued. "And what do you have to say to Lieutenant Armytage?"

Emu was still scowling at him from her six-foot frame. She was a warrior of renown, and she was not happy. She would not be impressed with a petty apology.

Drallah stepped over to her. "I sincerely apologise, Lieutenant. You deserve better than what I did to you. How can I make it up to you?"

A slightly wicked grin spread across her lightly freckled cheeks. "Oh, that's easy, son. Tomorrow, you're going to polish my fighter."

For a moment, Scanner wasn't certain whether Drallah would balk at the notion, but to the boy's credit, he didn't beg off or try to renegue. He just nodded and said: "I'll be there at oh-six-hundred."

The smile became genuine. "I'll supply the wax."

All eyes turned to the Ref. He hadn't given his decision. He gave them a simple nod. Lila joined her father, and they cleared the playing floor. The game continued.

It was down to the last ten seconds, and Drallah had a choice. He was uncertain about his position. He had the ball, he thought he could make a shot, but he was being crowded and Emu was

making life difficult for him, as usual. However, she was just being her resourceful self.

Then he realised what his teammates were doing. He had seen them do the same thing when he had been sitting on the bench earlier, setting up a shot for basket. However, he would not be the one to take it. He realised he needed to surrender the ball. He made the pass.

Aramis caught it cleanly then passed it off to his brother. Barton quickly snapped it to Rogan who popped it into the hoop for two points.

The whistle blew.

While many in the crowd celebrated the game, many more were distributing credits. The Officers had won by two points.

All the same, the parents were cheering their children like they had just won the Boston Marathon.

“Well done!” Scanner said to his team. “I’m proud of you all. Considering you’ve only had a little training, you did well!”

All of the kids beamed, except one. Drallah hung his head and sat down. He would not celebrate with the others. He had enjoyed the remainder of the game, but he still bore the shame of his earlier actions.

DB took pity on him, squeezed his shoulder, leaned forward and whispered in his ear: ‘You’re supposed to learn from your time

on the bench, son, not carry it forever. Let it go. Otherwise, you'll poison everyone else's fun."

Drallah looked up at him and realised the man was right. He *was* being a killjoy. He gave him a rueful smile and got off his behind and tried to join in.

Not long after, the kids spent and about to drop, the parents decided it was time they all needed a shower and a break. As the Sandage family walked down the corridor towards their quarters, Lila was the one who couldn't help but ask: "What was that human male talking to you about?"

Scanner rolled his eyes. His daughter had a way with words. It was anything but subtle.

Drallah shrugged. "Not a whole lot. He just helped me realise that it's not all about me."

His curiosity piqued, his father asked: "It seemed to take a long time to get that point across."

His son stopped and took a deep breath, looked around him to see if anyone was watching and said: "He told me that if I want to be in Starfleet, that basketball was just like serving on a starship. I could have all the talents in the world, but I can still be the wrong person in the wrong place and get overwhelmed. The point is for us to all work together to get the mission done."

It's the *mission* that's important, not the individual. I get that now. No man is more or less important than all the rest.

"Take you and Mum. Mum likes to joke that she's more important than you because she fights off the bad guys, but I know that she can't do her job if you don't give her the power to do it. You work *together* to get the job done."

Scanner didn't remember a time that he was prouder of his son than he did at that moment. His son *got it*. He glanced at Manny and said: "Remind me to send DB a bottle of Jack, he deserves it." He turned back to Drallah. "Look, son. Sure, you did some things today you aren't proud of, but you did the mature thing and you *learned from them*." He looked his son in the eye, so he made sure he understood his next meaning. "That's what a *man* does."

Drallah's eyes widened a little, his pupils dilating as he gained understanding. His father was speaking to him on a new level. This was the start of something new. Something wonderful. With a bit more dignity than usual, he said: "Thanks, Dad."

His father just gave him a warm smile and said, "You're welcome, son." Then he broke the moment by shooing them off. "Now, go home and hit the sonic shower. You both need it!"

The kits took off run down the hall in a dark, furry blur leaving their parents to smile fondly.

Manny slipped her paw under her husband's arm and took his hand in hers. "You're going to miss DB when he leaves next week, aren't you?"

Scanner looked up at her as he resumed their march to their quarters. He was blessed to have such an intuitive wife, although she might have been listening to his surface thoughts again. He never knew with his telepathic bride. He sighed. "Yeah, ah will. He's one in a million. He's one of those few people who ... ah have to show you."

His wife knew what that meant. She opened a telepathic link and looked into his thoughts.

*DB's the kind of guy who can create amazing things but is also kind and loyal. He'll also give you the shirt off his back. You know that DB's part of the design crew at Utopia Planitia who created the Ingram-class?*

Manny was surprised. *No, I had no idea.*

*It's people like him who make it possible for people like us to be out here at all. They're the guys who dream this stuff up. They're the backbone of Starfleet, but they rarely get any recognition for it.*

He continued. *Anyhow, what you saw today is DB's style, it's what he does. He makes the little adjustments. He fixes things quietly where there's no podium to stand on to take a bow – and I don't think he'd take it if it was offered to him.*

Judd's mind went elsewhere. It went back to 1912, to the mid-Atlantic, to the *Titanic* in its death throes. Deep, in its bowels, men struggled to keep the remaining systems working, to keep the lights on for the passenger's safety, knowing they were most likely not going to survive themselves. *That's the kind of man DB is. That's his level of self-sacrifice. Ah totally respect men like him. He's the sort of man you never leave benched in a game.*

Scanner's spirit was filled with his wife's love and adoration for him. It was like swimming in emotion. If he could have drowned in his love for her right then he would have willingly. *You're not that different from him, you know, my love. I love you so much.*

She then took him back to their quarters and made sure he knew.