

# Creating Comfort

## *Hurt & Comfort - XI*

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**MultiMapper**

## Creating Comfort

### *[Chapter 1: In Search of Home]*

"Hey there. Are you Lisa?" A man asked in front of the airport's main terminal.

"Yes." The figure huddled in a hooded sweatshirt said with the hood pulled up to hide her face completely.

"Come with me and I'll drive you to your new school." The man said forcefully.

"And you are?" Jan asked curiously.

"Matt Logan. I'm just helpin out by driving people to and from today." Matt said, a little more pleasantly.

"I'm Jan, this as you know is Lisa and the young man hiding behind me is Mark." Jan said with a smile.

"Wasn't hiding." Mark mumbled.

"Sure." Jan and Logan said in the same sarcastic tone.

"I've got some people for you to meet. This is Seth and his father Nick. Seth is a new student too... you two have the same fashion sense." Logan said with a smile as he indicated their matching hooded sweatshirts.

"And this is John. Take a good look, it's probably the only time you'll see him without the other two musketeers." Logan said with a smile and noticed that each group had a luggage trolley fully loaded.

John flashed a scorching look at Logan before saying, "Hi guys, I'm a student too. I'll be in classes with you if you need anything."

"Are you a mutant?" Seth asked in fascination.

"Um, yeah. But that's something you really shouldn't be asking people you just met. Some folks are a little sensitive about it." John said, trying to sound friendly.

"That's one of the reasons you'll have John and his crew hanging around with you. If you're not used to being around other mutants, or not used to

being a mutant, John and the guys will show you the best way to fit in." Logan said, then pointed, "It's that van over there."

Seth walked up beside John and said, "You don't look like a mutant."

"Yeah, well, not every mutant has his ability showing on the outside. Some have abilities." John said uncomfortably.

"Do you have an ability?" Seth asked in wonder.

"Um, yeah. But it'd be better if we not talk about it till we're back at the school. It just feels funny talking about it around the general public." John said seriously.

"I'm sorry. My mutant thing just happened last week. I don't know about stuff like that yet." Seth said quietly.

John smiled and said, "Don't worry about that. It's my job to see that you don't find out the hard way. Now get in the van and we'll go to your new school."

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's beautiful." Lisa said as they pulled onto the campus of the college.

"Yeah. Nice place. Wait till you see the dorms." Logan said as he took them on the scenic tour of the campus.

"I think / want to go to college now." Jan said with a smile.

"You actually could if you wanted." Logan said from the front.

At Jan's puzzled look Logan continued, "The college has a large continuing education program for adults. The standard classes are available as they are to the traditional students. They offer night classes and weekend classes. You can tailor a schedule around almost any work schedule."

"Mr. Logan, are you trying to recruit me?" Jan asked with a playful chuckle.

"Just letting you know what the college offers. I don't actually work here, I just read the brochure so I could answer your questions." Logan said with a smile.

"Mom, look at that. That's where we'll be living." Lisa said with excitement.

"It's very nice. I can't wait to see inside." Jan said with a smile.

Logan stopped the van in front of the first dorm building and said, "Just leave your stuff here for a minute and you can come back for it once you've found your rooms. John will be here to guard your things."

John flashed another glare at Logan but remained with the van.

As the group walked toward the building, the front door opened.

"Here are the other two musketeers, Clark and Trey." Logan said with a smile.

"Hi, Trey has your room assignments so if you're ready, I'll show you the way." Clark said happily.

"Lisa?" Clark called out to the group.

"Right here." Mark said, pointing at Lisa.

"You don't sound like a Lisa." Clark said with a playful look.

"Right here." Lisa called out with a chuckle.

"Your room is on the second floor. You're the only pre-college female student, so you'll be sharing that floor of the building with Teri, the house mother. She's actually a college senior who hangs around here to help the freshmen adjust to school life. She called and she'll be here in about an hour to talk with you, just to tell you the basic new kid stuff." Clark said seriously as he led the group up the stairs.

"Guys, take a good look. This is probably the last time you'll be allowed this far into the hallowed domain of the girls dorm." Logan said with a snicker.

"Ladies, if you'd like to unpack now, you're welcomed to. Your room is number 202, right over there. If you'd rather see the guys dorm, you're welcomed to follow along." Clark said with a smile.

"I want to see where you'll be living." Lisa said quietly to Mark.

"Right this way." Clark said and led the group back down the stairs.

Before they could reach the next building Lisa let out a small squeak of surprise.

A big guy dressed in cowboy clothes had stepped up and pulled down her hood and was still holding on to it.

Lisa's head was uncovered, allowing everyone to see her oval, fur covered face.

The first and only thing anyone who hadn't seen her before could think was 'Rabbit'.

"So you're one of the mutie freaks who's moving in, huh? Looks like we got us a fluffy bunny here." The man said in a poor imitation of a Texas drawl.

Logan took two steps toward Lisa, then stopped when a second cowboy spoke.

"Let her go Josh. You're scaring her." The second cowboy said forcefully.

"What do you care? She ain't nuthin but a mutie." The bigger cowboy said.

"She's a girl. You let her go or I'll knock you out... You wanna try me?" The second cowboy asked seriously.

The big guy... now a little less big, let go of Lisa's sweatshirt.

"What're you stickin up for muties for?" Josh asked angrily.

"They're people. If you don't like 'em, stay away from 'em. But there's no reason to treat anyone the way you just did... In fact, you can stay away from me too." the second cowboy said firmly.

"You start hangin with that type, people're gonna think you're a mutie too." Josh said in a snarl as he started to walk away.

"I can live with that. I'd rather be mistaken for a mutant than a bigoted moron." the second cowboy called out after Josh.

"Sorry about that, are you okay?" The cowboy asked Lisa.

"Yeah... fine." Lisa said in astonishment as she quickly pulled up her hood.

"What's your name kid?" Logan asked.

"Beau Collins." the cowboy replied.

"Is your name really Beau?" Seth asked in surprise.

"Yeah. And I'm really from Texas, not like Josh there. He's from New Jersey." Beau said with a grand smile.

"Thanks for the help kid. I could'a handled him, but I wanted to see if anyone would watch out for the new kids." Logan said seriously.

"Yeah, I think everyone will be pretty cool. There are a few jerks like Josh around, but from what I heard, they usually flunk out in the first six weeks anyway so they don't matter. From what I saw of his homework, Josh will be celebrating this Christmas in New Jersey." Beau said with a grin.

"We're going to look at our dorm rooms, would you like to join us?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Naw, I'd like to but I've got to see if anyone's in the admin building who can get me a new room assignment. Josh is my roommate." Beau said with a queasy look.

"Clark, you take the guys up and show them their rooms. I need to talk to Kurt and Julia." Logan said forcefully.

Clark just nodded and made a 'follow me' motion.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay Trey, you wanna do it?" Clark asked.

"Pre college accommodations are on the third floor in this building." Trey said as he led the group to the stairs.

"I guess because they're the youngest, they can handle three flights of stairs several times a day." Nick said to Jan.

"Forget what I said about wanting to go back to college." Jan said as they crested the second floor.

Matt walked to the door and unlocked it.

"You keep it locked?" Seth asked in concern.

"Yes, from the outside. There is a push bar that will open it from the inside. You will see why in a moment." Trey said as he walked through the door and held it door open for everyone to enter.

"Wow." Seth said as he looked in wonder around the game room.

"You have a pool table, air hockey and a full library of video games on a dedicated screen. The big screen is set up with cable but has pay-per-view and adult channels locked out. And of course you have a VCR and DVD player. There is an extensive collection of videos available at the college library that you may borrow without charge. Now I will show you to your rooms." Trey said professionally.

"Seth, you will be sharing this room with Louie when he arrives. Trey said as he pushed open the door.

"This room is massive." Seth said in wonder.

"As you can see, each of you has his own computer that is hooked up to the campus network. Be aware that you are not allowed to install software on the school machines and there is a lockout in place to prevent viewing of inappropriate materials on the Internet. But they are available for you to use within those boundaries." Trey said seriously.

Clark led the way to the next room and when everyone was inside, Trey announced, "Mark, you will have this room to yourself for the moment. Once you've met Slash, you two may choose to share a room. If not, you'll get whoever's assigned next." Trey said, then left the room.

"Here is a kitchenette area for snacks. You have a microwave and a small refrigerator. The cafeteria is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner so cooking in the dorm is discouraged." Trey said as they walked to the back of the large main room.

"Next we have the weight room." Trey said and led the group into a moderate sized room with two weight machines a stepper and an ab machine.

"And finally the restroom facilities." Trey said and led the group into the large locker room style bathroom with a four head shower room, a whirlpool, a small sauna and of course sinks and toilets.

"I think I've gone to heaven." Seth said as he looked around the weight room.

"Son, why don't you stay home and work to pay for this and I'll come here?" Nick asked as he looked longingly at all the equipment.

"This isn't a standard dorm room." Clark said to the group.

"It was decided that the pre-college students needed a more entertaining dorm atmosphere since many of the after hour diversions available to the college age students aren't appropriate for pre-college." Trey said simply.

"Um, I guess that's it. I guess we'd better get down and get your stuff so John won't have to watch the van." Clark said heading for the front door.

"Where's your room Clark?" Mark asked curiously.

"John and I live with Logan a few miles from here... we can't afford a place as nice as this." Clark said with a big smile.

Mark couldn't help but smile back.

"What about you Trey? Do you live here?" Lisa asked quietly.

"No, I live with my parents." Trey said shyly.

"What do your parents do?" Jan asked curiously.

"They are teachers." Trey said honestly.

"Do they teach here?" Jan asked, getting a sense that he wasn't telling everything.

"No, they teach at a college eight miles from here. I was invited to attend the pre-college classes at this school to ease the way for the new students. If all goes to plan, this years students will be invited to ease the way for the next year's students." Trey said with a smile.

The group headed out to the van and started to gather their belongings.

"How did it go?" John asked Clark and Trey.

"The guys loved it. Lisa hasn't looked in her room yet." Clark said with a smile.

"I'm sure we'll all hear it when she does." John said with a grin.



"Will ya show me the way to the office?" Logan asked Beau as they walked away.

"Sure Mr. ?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Matt Logan. You can call me Matt, you earned the right for standing up the way you did." Logan said seriously.

"Thanks Matt. I've only been here a month and Josh is about the only person I know around here. I just can't stand to see anyone treat someone wrong like that. I grew up in West Texas, a town called Odessa. There's a lot of Mexican-American's there and there's a lot of folks who treat 'em wrong for no good reason. That's where I learned to speak up for myself." Beau said as he led the way to the Administration Building.

"How'd you end up in New York?" Matt asked in interest.

"My Great-Aunt arranged it. She's got nothing but money and thought it best that I get a 'well rounded' education." Beau said with a chuckle.

"How old are you kid?" Matt asked.

"Seventeen... almost... in a month." Beau said shyly.

"You're in college at sixteen years old?" Matt said with surprise.

"Yeah, but no one's noticed. I lived with Josh for a month and he never even caught on that I'm not eighteen." Beau said with a smile.

"Well, Josh don't strike me as the sharpest tool in the shed." Matt said as he walked in the door that Beau held open for him.

"You mind if I talk to Julia first? It won't take long." Matt asked as they entered the office.

"You mean Dr. Hoffman? Go ahead." Beau said and took a seat in the waiting area.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Matt! To what do I owe the pleasure?" Julia asked with delight.

"One of your students, a cowboy named Josh, tried to stir something up with one of the new kids." Matt said seriously.

"Josh Metcalf. Did he do anything that could get him expelled?" Julia asked with an expression that said she knew the answer.

"No. He just said some mutant hating trash. The boy out there, Beau, put him in his place." Matt said, gesturing toward the outer office.

"He's a good boy. I'm actually worried about him. With his age difference and the culture shock moving here from Texas, I'm concerned for him." Julia said honestly.

"Then why'd you room him with Josh?" Matt asked seriously.

"The housing coordinator did that. She saw a cowboy and put him where she thought he'd fit. I've been waiting for a reason to move him out of there." Julia said in thought.

"You've got one. He's here to ask to be moved. If you don't mind me saying. He'd fit in with the others in the pre-college dorm." Matt said as he looked her in the eyes.

"That's good enough for me. Do you think some of your guys can help him move? Josh may try to cause him some grief and I'd like for it to go as quickly and smoothly as possible." Julia asked hopefully.

"Just as soon as you tell the kid, we'll get 'im moved. It's too bad Angel got to you first, I like your style." Matt finished with a smile.

"Sir! You're old enough to be my grandfather." Julia said with a chuckle.

"I'll send 'im in, and I'll be waiting outside." Matt said with a smile.

"Thanks Matt. I'm glad you volunteered to help today." Julia said honestly.

"Anything for you, Doc." Matt said as he walked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dr. Hoffman?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yes, Mr. Collins, how may I help you today?" Julia asked with a gentle smile.

"I'd like to... If it wouldn't be too much trouble I'd like to be moved in with someone else." Beau asked carefully.

"May I ask why?" Julia asked professionally.

"I'm not getting along too well with Josh. It'd just be better if I was living somewhere else." Beau said in a diminishing voice.

"I see. Mr. Logan suggested that you would... how did he put it? 'Fit in with the others'. I took that to mean that he would welcome you into the pre-college accommodations with the other students who are closer to your age. Is that something that you'd be interested in?" Julia asked with a smile.

Beau got a look of surprise and said, "Yeah, I think that'd be great. Those guys all seem like they'd be alright."

"Very well, let's see, the housing office is closed today, but I don't see any reason that we can't move you in there immediately. Mr. Logan has volunteered his young associates to help you with your things. I believe he is waiting for you." Julia said, trying to fight down a chuckle at Beau's excitement.

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman. I really appreciate it." Beau said quickly.

"Beau, if you ever need anything, please come to me. I've been a friend of your family's for many years and owe them much more than I can ever repay." Julia said gently.

"Really? Do you know my mom?" Beau asked in fascination.

"I knew Carolyn when she was your age." Julia said with delight.

"Wow. I didn't know that." Beau said with excitement.

"Maybe I'll sit down with you and tell you some embarrassing stories about your mom sometime. For now, go and move your things. Matt's waiting." Julia said tenderly.

"Okay, thank you Dr. Hoffman." Beau said quickly and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guys, I've got you a new roomie." Logan said as he entered the dorm.

"Beau? You're going to live here?" Seth asked with a smile.

"Yep. Dr. Hoffman told me to go get my stuff and move in." Beau said happily.

"Do you know anyone who'd be willing to help him move?" Matt asked the group.

"Sure. We all will." Mark said immediately.

"Well, I've got to go pick up our next new student. So I'll need someone to come with me. But the rest of you can stay and help Beau move in." Matt said forcefully.

"I will accompany you Mr. Logan." Trey said firmly.

"Let's get going. The flight will be landing soon and we don't want him to have to wait." Matt said and turned to leave.

"I'll miss you." Clark whispered to Trey.

"Me too." John said as he joined their three-way huddle.

Clark reached over and ran his index finger across Trey's ring. John did the same then Trey responded by caressing each of their rings in turn.

"Just kiss and get it over with." Mark said with exasperation.

"What?" Seth said in shock.

"They're in love. Don't tell me you didn't notice." Mark said with a roll of his eyes.

"Really?" Seth asked as he looked at the three emerging from their huddle with red faces.

"Um, yeah." John said with a timid smile.

"Now that that's settled, kiss Trey so we can go." Matt said impatiently.

Clark moved in first and gave Trey a deep lingering kiss. John moved behind Trey, and when the kiss broke he moved in to kiss Clark. Finally Trey turned his head and kissed John.

"Wow. I've never seen anything like that before." Seth said in wonder.

"Spend a day with them, you'll get used to it." Matt said dryly.

"Which room is mine?" Beau asked, interrupting the moment.

"Why don't you share a room with me. Right in there." Mark said and pointed to his room.

"Thanks." Beau said and looked in the room to see where he was going to put his stuff.

"Are we ready?" Matt asked, looking at his watch.

"Yes. Thank you for waiting Mr. Logan." Trey said as he stood before Matt.

"Call me Matt, now let's go." Matt said, trying to suppress a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Seth?" Clark asked as he entered the bedroom.

"Yeah Clark?" Seth said as he looked up from his unpacking.

"Would you think about taking off the sweatshirt now? I don't know what you look like, but this is going to be your home. I think it's time." Clark said with concern.

Seth looked at his father and received a reassuring nod.

"Okay, but don't freak. Please?" Seth asked hesitantly.

"I promise." Clark said sincerely.

Seth slowly pulled back his hood while watching Clark's face.

"Cool." Clark said with a smile.

"What?" Seth asked in surprise.

"The way you were acting I thought it was something gross. You look really cool." Clark said as he looked at Seth's horns.

"Um, thanks." Seth said shyly.

"Clark, I think you'd better come here, John's being sick in the bathroom." Mark said with concern from the hall.

"Excuse me guys." Clark said and hurried from the room.

Clark, Nick, Seth and Mark hurried to the bathroom where John was wiping his face with a wet towel.

"How are you feeling?" Clark asked with concern.

"How do you think? God I hate this. One minute I'm feeling fine, the next, I'm puking my guts up." John said in a shaky voice.

"Go in the living room and sit down, I'll get you some water." Clark said with worry.

Clark hurried to the kitchen for water as John walked to the living room.

Seth noticed that John was looking weak and said, "Let me help you. You look like you're going to pass out."

John stopped and looked at Seth as he put an arm around him to support him.

"Thanks." John whispered and continued to walk.

"What's wrong John? Do you need a doctor?" Nick asked with concern.

As John sat down on the couch he said, "No, the doctor is the one who did this to me. I've just got to put up with feeling like this a few more days and then I'll be fine."

Clark arrived with a glass of water in time to hear John's last statement.

"Yeah. The medication John's taking makes him nauseous and weak but he'll be fine soon." Clark said with assurance.

"I'm glad you're going to be okay." Seth said sincerely.

John looked at Seth to see the honest concern and smiled as he said, "Yeah, by the way. Looking good. This is much better than the hoodie look."

"Thanks." Seth mumbled shyly.

The mood was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Mark hurried to answer it and saw four people he didn't know.

"Hi guys, the second shift is here." The adult said as he entered the room.

"Hey Scott, come in." Clark said from John's side.

"What's up? Is John feeling sick again?" The man asked with concern.

"Yeah. Dr. McCoy said he might." Clark said with worry sounding in his voice.

"Why don't I take you guys back to Matt's where you can rest. The second team is here to help the new guys." The man said seriously.

"Thanks Scott." Clark mumbled.

"Would you introduce us before you leave?" The oldest boy asked quietly.

"Yeah, sure. Just a second." Clark said and ran to a bedroom.

He returned a second later with Beau.

"Okay guys, the guy with the sunglasses is my brother Scott. Next we have Bobby Drake and the guy attached to his side is Trey's brother Robert. And finally we have Bobby's brother Ronny." Clark said with a smile.

"On this side we have Seth and his father Nick. Mark and Beau." Clark said as he indicated each.

Greetings were exchanged before Scott spoke up to explain. "We came over to offer to help if you need anything. Bobby, Robert and Ronny are going to be attending classes with you so they wanted to meet you."

"Really? That's cool." Seth said with enthusiasm.

Ronny smiled at Seth's statement and nodded.

"So does anyone need anything before I take Clark and John back to the house?" Scott asked the group.

"We're going to go to Beau's old apartment to get his stuff and move it over. Besides that we're all just unpacking." Mark said as he looked around.

"John, how are you feeling? Do you need to go now?" Scott asked carefully.

"I'm feeling better, my stomach is settled for the moment. I just need to rest for a few minutes." John said quietly.

"Then let's all help Beau move." Scott said assertively.

"I'm going to stay with John." Clark said as everyone headed for the door.

"I'll be fine. Go ahead, they may need you." John said, trying to inject strength into his voice.

"Okay, but I'll only be gone a few minutes." Clark said with renewed worry.

John nodded as Clark followed the group out the door, leaving one last, concerned look.



## *[Chapter 2: Unveiling the New World]*

"Mr. Kenyon?" Matt asked a man accompanying a young boy carrying a pet carrier.

"Yes." Paul said in surprise.

"I'm Matt Logan. I'm here to drive you to the Wagner Institute." Matt said professionally.

"Nice to meet you Mr. Logan, I'm Paul Kenyon and this is Louie Deverou." Paul said formally.

//A-HEM// sounded loudly in everyone's mind.

"Oh yeah, and Jesus is in the pet carrier." Paul said with embarrassment showing on his face.

"This is Trey Summers, he'll be attending classes with Louie." Matt said and noticed that Paul was only carrying two moderate sized suitcases.

"The van is over this way." Matt said and offered to take one of the suitcases from Paul.

//Can I get out now?// Jesus asked impatiently.

"Not until we leave the airport. We talked about this." Paul said sternly.

"Louie? Are you okay?" Trey asked carefully.

Louie looked at Trey with wide frightened eyes and didn't answer.

"I think Louie's a little..." Paul began.

//...terrified.// Jesus interrupted.

Trey hesitantly put an arm around Louie's shoulder and said, "It is appropriate to be frightened of change. Try to recognize that some changes are good and watch carefully for them."

"I will." Louie whispered.

"Everybody in. The sooner we're out of the airport the sooner 'someone' can get out of his cage." Matt said as he unlocked the van.

//Thank you. At least someone's concerned about the poor abused rodent.// Jesus said dramatically.

"I think it'll be okay to let him out now." Paul said with a chuckle.

The cage door swung open of it's own accord and the biggest rat anyone had ever seen crawled out of the cage.

"He's as big as a dog." Matt said as he started the van.

//Yes he is. I'm right here. Please don't talk over me, it's not polite.// Jesus said huffily.

"Neither is pointing out other's failures in etiquette." Trey said succinctly.

"Please forgive Jesus, he's a little grumpy from having to ride in the plane like an animal." Paul said in an apologetic tone.

"I guess I would be too." Matt said as he paid his parking fee at the exit gate and left the airport.

"Louie, are you excited to be attending a new school?" Trey asked cautiously.

"I'm kind of..." Louie trailed off in a whisper.

//...terrified. I think we already covered that.// Jesus said firmly.

Trey put his arm around Louie's shoulder and quietly said, "I came here from very far away. Until recently, I did not have any friends and felt very alone. If you feel alone, you may come to me and we will talk. I will understand."

Louie looked into Trey's eyes and whispered, "Thanks."

Paul looked back on the scene from the front passenger seat and smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is it." Beau said with apprehension.

"Let's just do it." Mark said assertively.

Beau opened the door to find Josh settled into his usual squalor.

"You bring your mutie friends to beat me up?" Josh asked, obviously not believing it to be true.

"Moving out." Beau said shortly and started to gather his belongings.

"You moving in with the muties?" Josh asked as he watched Beau pulling clothes out of his dresser.

"I'm moving into the pre-college dorm. That doesn't mean they're mutants, it just means they're young." Beau said and closed one suitcase.

"Yeah, right. All you guys are muties, ain't'cha?" Josh asked, looking at the group.

"I'm not." Clark answered immediately.

"Neither am I." Mark said next.

"And the word is mutant." Scott said seriously.

"Come on Beau, don't do this, us cowboys gotta stick together." Josh said in a whine.

Beau stopped his packing to look at Josh, then said, "I'm not a cowboy Josh. I haven't earned the right to be called a cowboy because I've never worked on a ranch. Real cowboys aren't about dressing in western clothes, listening to country music and drinking beer. Real cowboys are hard working men and women who take care of cattle and horses for a living. And I've got a little secret to tell you. Most of them aren't beautiful people. Their skin is like leather, their hands have calluses and they look older than they are because they work hard to make a living... Josh, have you ever actually *touched a cow?*"

The room fell into silence as Beau closed the second suitcase and walked into the bathroom.

"What the hell do you know about it anyway?" Josh finally sputtered.

Beau walked out of the bathroom carrying a plastic bag and said, "I know because I lived in Texas and knew some 'real' cowboys. And seeing that you're a bigot, you'll love the next part. Most of the cowboys I knew were Mexican-Americans. Whites were in the minority. But you go ahead and play

dress up and pretend to be whatever it is you think you are. Just leave me out of it. I'm not a cowboy, I never pretended to be one. I dress like this because these are the clothes I brought with me, it's not a fashion statement, it's the way people dress where I'm from."

"Is that it?" Scott asked with a smile.

"Yeah, that's it." Beau said as he took one last look around.

"Beau?" Josh said with a helpless tone in his voice.

"Wake up Josh. See reality. Your hate is driving people away from you. I hope someone can get that across to you someday. Someone else, I'm done, I'm gone." Beau said and led the way out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here we are, what do you think?" Matt said as he pulled the van to stop in front of the dorm.

"Wow!" Louie said as he looked up at the large building.

Jesus hopped up on Louie's lap and crawled to Louie's shoulder to perch.

"The resident advisor will be arriving soon, we should proceed." Trey said as he grabbed a suitcase.

"Resident advisor? What's that?" Louie asked carefully.

"He's a senior student who lives in the building to make sure that everyone is following the rules. He'll explain the rules to you, but it pretty much boils down to 'act civilized'." Matt said as he led the way to the front door.

"Hey guys, wait up." Clark said as he approached from around the corner of the building carrying a suitcase.

"Clark, this is Louie, Paul and Jesus." Matt said as he noticed the others coming around the corner.

"Hi, let's get this upstairs and we'll introduce everyone else." Clark said as he walked in the door that Trey was holding open for him.

The group walked upstairs led by Clark, not noticing that Matt and Scott stayed at the front door.

"Where's Matt?" Clark asked as he reached the closed door.

"He stayed downstairs." Mark said from the stairs.

"He's got the key." Clark said in frustration.

"John's inside, he can let us in." Trey said quietly.

//Let me.// Jesus projected into everyone's mind, and the door opened.

"Cool." Seth said in wonder.

"Jesus seems to be telepathic and telekinetic." Trey observed.

//Do you always state the obvious?// Jesus asked.

"Do you always instigate confrontations?" Trey asked in reply.

//Not always. Only with people I like.// Jesus sent with a smile in his mind/voice.

"He must love me like crazy then." Paul muttered as they entered the room.

Louie walked to Paul and touched his shoulder to get his attention.

"I thought you said everyone here was going to be like me." Louie whispered.

Paul looked around and noticed that everyone had heard.

"They are Louie. They're all mutants just like you." Paul said quietly.

Louie got a questioning look then said with a giggle, "I thought you meant black like me, not a mutant like me."

Paul got a surprised look that melted into a smile.

Beau walked to Louie's side and said, "Don't worry about that. There are plenty of other black students here. They even have meetings that you'll be welcomed to attend if you like."

Trey walked to the door of one room and said, "Louie, you'll be sharing this room with Seth."

//Where is my room?// Jesus asked impatiently.

Trey looked at Clark and Bobby in question.

//Gotcha!// Jesus said with a chuckle in his mind/voice.

Everyone went into their rooms to start unpacking as the Xavier students sat on the couches in the living room.

"I thought Slash was coming with you." Clark said as he cuddled close to John.

"He was busy with Lee and Quaid. Lee said he'd bring him by later." Ronny said as he smiled at John, Clark and Trey cuddled together.

"Are you feeling okay John?" Bobby asked with concern.

"Yeah, just a little weak. As long as I don't have to get up and do anything I'm fine." John said peacefully.

"I think our work here is done. We'll just hang around for a while until the resident advisor has done his thing." Bobby said with a look of concern directed at John.

"Can someone help me with this computer?" Seth asked from his bedroom door.

"I will help." Robert said immediately.

"I'll watch." Bobby said with a smile and followed.

"What a surprise." Ronny said with a sarcastic chuckle.

"How are you doing Ronny? We haven't had a chance to talk in a while." Clark said quietly.

"I'm good. I guess Chris and William decided that us single guys need to stick together. We've been hanging out a lot." Ronny said happily.

"That's great. I'm sorry if our being together makes you feel left out." Clark said honestly.

"Actually guys, if you remember, I've seen what you guys do. I'm *really* okay with being left out." Ronny said with a chuckle.

Clark blushed violently, remembering Thanksgiving morning.

"How are you doing John?" Scott asked from the doorway, followed by Logan.

"I'm feeling better. Just a little weak." John said from between Clark and Trey.

"It looks like you've got plenty of support. Do you want to go home now?" Matt asked carefully.

"No. I'm good. I'll wait till the resident advisor does his thing." John said quietly.

"Just let me know." Matt said seriously.

John nodded.

"I'll need to be getting to the airport soon. My flight will be leaving in about an hour and a half." Paul said as he and Nick walked out of the first bedroom.

"Mine is in about two hours, so I'll need to be going too." Nick said with regret.

"I think Jan's going to need to be leaving soon too. Let's go get her." Matt said seriously.

"I can take them. It'd be better if you stayed with the guys." Scott said quietly to Matt.

Matt looked at Scott with question.

"One of your guys isn't feeling well. Besides, we won't need the van. I can take them in the convertible." Scott said in explanation.

"Thanks Cyke." Logan said with a small smile.

"Paul, Nick, I'm ready to go when you are." Scott said more loudly.

"Give me a minute to say goodbye and I'll be ready." Nick said and walked back to the bedroom.

"Me too." Paul said and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you going to be okay?" Nick asked Seth with concern.

"Yeah Dad, I think I am." Seth said with a brave smile.

"I got this for you. You can call me anytime you need to, even if you just need to tell me about your day." Nick said as he handed Seth a cell phone.

"Thanks Dad." Seth said with a tight voice.

"I've got to get to the airport. I have to go to work tomorrow so I can pay for all this." Nick said with a smile.

"I love you Dad. Tell Mom and Junior that I'm going to be okay and that I love them." Seth said as he pulled his father into a hug.

"I'll tell them. And you can call whenever you want to tell them yourself." Nick said as he felt tears falling down his face.

"I will. Thank you Dad." Seth said in a whisper.

"Do good in school. If you need anything, just let me know." Nick said as he pulled out of the hug.

"I promise." Seth said as he watched his father walk toward the door.

"I love you." Nick said as he walked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you two going to be okay?" Paul asked carefully.

//I'll take care of him. Don't worry.// Jesus said firmly.

"And take care of yourself too. I've grown to love you like a... rat." Paul said to Jesus with a smile.

//And I've grown to love you like a social worker... pretty much the same thing, isn't it?// Jesus said with a smile in his mind/voice.

"You got me there. How about you Louie? Are you going to be okay?" Paul asked carefully.

"I'm scared." Louie said quietly.



"You've got Jesus here to take care of you and all these people seem really nice. Just give them a chance." Paul said as he pulled Louie into a hug.

"I'll try." Louie whispered.

"Call me if you need anything. Do you have the number?" Paul asked in concern.

//I've got it. Don't worry, we'll be fine.// Jesus responded.

"I've got to go catch my flight. You guys unpack and get comfortable. You've got school tomorrow." Paul said as he stood to leave.

"Will you visit?" Louie asked in a small voice.

"I can't promise when, but yes. I will." Paul said and noticed that a tear had escaped down his face.

Louie nodded.

"I love you Louie." Paul said in nearly a whisper.

Louie looked up in surprise.

"Really?" Louie asked in amazement.

"Really. It's hard for me to say that, but it's true. Call me if you need me. I've got to go." Paul said and hurried out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

A knock on the door startled the group out of the silence that no one realized had fallen over the room.

"I got it." Ronny said and pushed open the door.

"Hey guys, we're not too late are we?" Lee asked as he led Icheb, Quaid and Slash into the room.

"No, the guys are unpacking and we're just waiting for the resident advisor to show up... he's late." Bobby said from a couch.

"Quaid and Icheb wanted to meet the new guys so I brought them along." Lee said as he moved into the living room to take a seat.

Bobby got up and went to knock on both bedroom doors.

When both doors opened, Bobby said, "Come on out guys, we have company."

Beau, Mark, Seth and Louie walked out of the bedrooms.

"Guys, I'd like you to meet Lee, he's going to be hanging around here sometimes. He kind of works for the school. Next is Slash, he's going to be moving into the third bedroom, and finally Icheb and Quaid, Trey's brothers... they just wanted to meet you." Bobby said to one group, then turned to the other and said, "This is Beau, Mark, Seth, and Louie Where's Jesus?"

"He's fixing a bed for himself. He's really picky." Louie said quietly.

Greetings went around the room, then an uncomfortable silence fell.

There was a rattle at the door and then it swung open.

"Helloooo." A falsetto voice said that was reminiscent of Mrs. Doubtfire.

"Oh well, there's a bunch of you. According to this there are only supposed to be four of you here." The young man said in a voice that left no doubt as to his sexual orientation, only slight questions about his true gender.

"Most of us are just welcoming them to the school." Matt said shortly.

"I'm Jamie, if the people living here will gather in a group, I'll pass out your keys and paperwork." the young man said in a demanding, yet somehow feminine tone.

Slash walked over to join the others between the living room and the bedrooms.

"Okay, Seth Oro... Ora... Or... Seth?" Jamie asked in frustration.

"Here." Seth answered with a smile.

"Here's your key to the front door, your paperwork, student handbook and housing rules." Jamie said and handed a packet to Seth.

"Marcus?" Jamie asked.

"Here." Mark said and was offered the folder of materials.

"Louie?" Jamie said next.

"Here." Louie whispered and took the packet from Jamie, keeping a questioning gaze fixed to him.

"And finally... Slash?" Jamie asked, not believing the name.

"Yeah." Slash said and took the offered paperwork.

"And I've got an extra key here... Beau?" Jamie asked as he read the note that the key was taped to.

"Here." Beau said and held out his hand.

"I'm supposed to collect a key from you and give you this one. It looks like you're switching rooms." Jamie said speculatively.

"Yeah." Beau said and fished his old room key out of his pocket.

Jamie looked Beau up and down with an obvious leer before accepting the key and giving Beau the paper.

"Okay guys. A few basics, then we're all going down to get student IDs and complete your registration at the admin building. You guys are lucky. If you were here on the first day of classes, it would take all day to get that done. When we get back, I'm going to order pizza for everyone." Jamie said, then turned to face the other group and said, "You guys are invited too."

"Thanks." Clark said quietly.

"Ooookay. You can read all the housing rules when you have time, but I'll just cover the highlights now. No drinking, no drugs, no smoking, lights out by midnight on the night before classes, clean up after yourselves, I'll be inspecting your dorm once a month to see that you aren't living in filth or tearing up the place. You'll receive a twenty-four hour notice before anyone enters your dorm unless it's an emergency, and then only when accompanied by campus security." Jamie paused to take a breath then asked, "Any questions?"

"Yeah, you said 'no smoking'..." Slash began to say.

Jamie interrupted, "That's just inside the building. There should be a large stone ashtray about fifteen feet in front of most buildings on campus. The administration asks that you not smoke immediately outside the doors as a courtesy to the non-smokers. And campus security will not bother you about being an underage smoker... you will have to be careful if you leave the property. The local police might have a problem with it."

"Thanks." Slash said quietly.

"Any other questions?" Jamie asked the group.

"What about laundry?" Mark asked.

"The machines are in the basement. Your room key will unlock the laundry room door. And if you leave your laundry down there unattended, it may not be there when you get back. There's a TV in there or bring a book." Jamie said in an almost masculine voice.

"Speaking of books, when do we get ours?" Seth asked carefully.

"I think they said that you're going to be taking placement tests to determine your grade levels, so you'll be getting books when they know which ones you'll need. Later this week, I guess." Jamie said and finished with a dainty shrug.

Jesus walked out of the bedroom and up to Louie's foot.

Jamie let out a shriek and hopped about three feet in the air and landed on the arm of the nearest couch.

"Oh Jesus! That's the biggest rat I've ever seen! Kill it! Someone kill it!" Jamie whimpered.

"Jamie, I'd like you to meet Jesus, Louie's p... companion." Matt said, receiving a death glare when he started to say 'pet'.

"No pets... no pets..." Jamie panted as he stayed firmly on the arm of the couch.

"It's okay. Dr. Hoffman approved it." Matt said seriously.

"I'm... we've... let's go to the... admin building." Jamie said, then carefully stepped off the couch and scampered to the door.

"I'll be waiting downstairs." Jamie said as he slipped out the door.

//Sorry.// Jesus said sadly.

"It's alright little buddy. That guy was getting on my nerves. I've always said, 'live and let live' but for some reason screaming queens just irritate me." Beau said seriously.

"Me too." Mark said honestly.

"I thought he was funny." Louie said to the group.

"Yeah." Quaid chipped in, sharing a smile with Louie.

"I guess we'd better get going. We need to get student ID's and get our paperwork done." Slash said, not sounding too thrilled.

//I think I'll stay here.// Jesus said shyly.

"Me too, I've got mine." Beau said to the group.

"Can we go with Uncle Joe?" Quaid asked Icheb hopefully.

"Yes." Icheb said with a smile.

"Trey, Robert, will you come with us?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"Yes." Robert said as he and Trey stood to leave.

"I'm staying with John." Clark said to the group.

"Good, then you can let us in if we come back without a keyholder." Trey said as he walked to the door.

### *[Chapter 3: Interviews and Interactions]*

"Mark?" Lisa's voice called as the group passed the girl's dorm.

"Lisa?" Mark asked with a smile as he waited for her to join them.

"Are you going to the admin building?" Lisa asked quickly as she held her hood to make sure it wouldn't reveal her face.

"Yeah. How is your room?" Mark asked with a smile.

"It's fantastic. Mom was so jealous when she saw it, she wanted to stay here with me." Lisa said with a giggle as the group once again headed for the admin building.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guys, I'd love to hang around out here with y'all, but I need to unpack." Beau said with regret.

"We could come in and keep you company if you want." John said casually.

"Yeah, I'd like that." Beau said with a smile as he walked toward his room.

"Where'd everyone go?" Ronny asked as he walked out of the weight room.

"To the admin building. They just left a few minutes ago, you could catch them if you hurry." Clark said as he helped John off the couch.

"That's okay. I don't think filling out paperwork and stuff is going to be too much fun. I'll just swing by tomorrow and get my ID." Ronny said as he watched everyone heading for Beau's room.

"Beau is going to unpack. We're going to watch." Clark said at Ronny's puzzled look.

"It still sounds better than sitting around waiting for people to be interviewed." Ronny said as he fell into line.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'd like to start the interviews while everyone else is getting their paperwork done. Seth?" Julia asked as she looked around the room.

Seth cautiously stood and walked to follow Julia into her office.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Please have a seat Seth. You don't need to be nervous." Julia said with a warm smile.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do or say." Seth said timidly.

"This is just an interview so I can get to know you a little and we can discuss why you're here and what you hope to get out of your time at our college." Julia said gently.

"Oh. Um... This is why I'm here." Seth said shyly and pulled back his hood to reveal his horns.

"I see." Julia said in thought, then continued, "If your only purpose in being here is to hide from the outside world, I'm afraid we might have a problem."

Seth looked at Julia with wide, frightened eyes.

"That is to say, coming to this college isn't going to shield you from the world. There will be non-mutant faculty and students here. Our purpose is two-fold. We want to provide you a safe place to receive an education and we want to provide you the tools to live in the world outside the college when you're done." Julia said carefully.

"So what you're saying is that I'm here to get an education and to learn how to be around non-mutants." Seth said in thought.

"And to be around other mutants. Some mutants isolate themselves and withdraw from everything and everyone. The stigma attached to the word mutant is enough to make some hate themselves. It is our hope that we can provide a safe place where mutants and non-mutants can live in harmony and work together to achieve common goals." Julia said seriously.

"That sounds nice. So what do I have to do?" Seth asked cautiously.

"You've already done it. You've enrolled at the Wagner Institute. Now that you're here, we have to be sure that you're going to stay focused on 'why' you're here. This isn't summer camp, nor is it a party. It is a college and you

will be expected to do your part to maintain a good academic standing. Your mutancy doesn't give you any special rights or privileges. If your grades fall below an acceptable level, you'll be asked to leave." Julia said firmly.

"I don't know if I'm ready... I just barely started high school." Seth said in a worried voice.

"You'll be given some placement tests in the morning to give us an idea of what grade level you're operating at in the various subjects. Once that is determined, your classes will be assigned so that you won't be overwhelmed with work that is beyond your abilities, nor will you be given work that is no challenge to you. If you give your school work an honest effort, I have no doubt that you will not only excel at your studies, but you will also gain a better understanding of just what potential you have." Julia said passionately.

"That sounds pretty cool." Seth said in wonder.

"I had hoped you would feel that way. You've passed the interview. If you had told me that you aren't interested in working hard to get an education, I would have had to ask you to make other arrangements." Julia said frankly.

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman. Now that I understand why I'm here, I think it'll be great." Seth said with a big smile.

"Good. Would you be kind enough to ask Slash to come in and talk to me now?" Julia asked gently.

"Sure. And thanks again." Seth said quickly as he stood.

"Welcome to the Wagner Institute. I hope it provides you many challenges and rewards."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's that?" Clark asked curiously as he noticed Beau picking up a rawhide pouch.

"My medicine bag." Beau said casually as he put the pouch into his desk drawer.



"What's in it?" Clark asked with interest.

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that. It contains my spiritual totems and is very personal." Beau said seriously as he turned to face Clark.

"Oh... I've never seen one of those before." Clark said in thought.

"I have a friend in West Texas who is Native American. We used to talk about a lot of stuff and he shared his beliefs with me. I guess it made sense to me or something because I began to follow the teachings that were passed down through his family. I don't know how else to explain it except that it brings me peace." Beau finished with a shrug.

Clark smiled and said, "That sounds nice. I think a lot more people could use something in their lives that brings peace."

"Yeah. I guess. I know it isn't for everyone, but it works for me." Beau said as he went back to work unpacking.

Clark thought about Beau's relaxed and friendly nature and thought that he might ask more about his beliefs later.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dr. Hoffman?" Slash asked hesitantly as he walked into the office.

"Yes, and you must be Slash. Please, have a seat." Julia said in a friendly tone.

"Thank you." Slash said in a whisper.

"Perhaps you could answer a question for me. I clearly remember talking to you Wednesday and you telling me that your name is 'Josiah Andrew Haley-Keith'. I wrote it down so I could attempt to retrieve your school records. But Friday morning I came in to find your school transcripts on my desk with the name 'Josiah LeeAndrew Wells'." Julia said seriously as she stood and walked to the window.

Slash nodded timidly.

"Then when I looked back at my notes, I found the name 'Josiah LeeAndrew Wells' on the notepad, written in my own handwriting. Would you care to

explain how that happened?" Julia asked as she walked back to her chair behind the desk.

"Well, all I really know is that I met the Summers family and they... wanted me. When they decided that I was part of their family, everything else kind of happened. I don't really understand all of it, but since I don't want to change it, I'm not really trying." Slash said unsteadily.

Julia nodded and said, "I've met some members of the Summers family. That's enough explanation for me."

Slash smiled in relief.

"Before we get to the academic business before us, I'd like to ask you about the name you'll be using." Julia asked, back into her 'all business' tone.

"I just thought I'd go by Slash... that's not going to be a problem is it?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"Not for me. But it might be a problem for you in the not too distant future." Julia said seriously.

"Why?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"The problem is the name that you've chosen. In some parts of the world, the act of urination is called 'taking a slash'. On the Internet, fiction with male homosexual content is sometimes referred to as slash in deference to the 'male-slash-male' pairings. Given this information, I thought you might reconsider using your real name." Julia said in an expectant tone.

"Do I have to decide right now?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"Not really. As it stands, you'll be listed as Slash on the class roster and on your student ID. But you can ask your teachers to address you in any manner that is reasonable." Julia said professionally.

Slash thought about it and said, "That sounds perfect. I'll go ahead and keep Slash on all my records, and just ask my teachers to call me Josiah."

Julia smiled and said, "If that's what makes you happy, I don't see any reason why not. Your full name will only appear in your file in the student accounts office. Otherwise you'll officially be known as 'Slash'."

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman." Slash said happily.

"I just have one question for you and we can conclude this interview." Julia said, enjoying talking with the pleasant young man.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know." Slash said seriously.

"Can you just tell me why you came here?" Julia asked as she looked into his eyes.

"Because this is my only chance to have a real future. Without an education, I'll just be an ignorant, poor, mutant on the streets. If I can get through college... maybe someday I can help other kids..." Slash said distantly, then remembered where he was and looked at Dr. Hoffman with apology.

Julia smiled and said, "I thought it might be something like that. Congratulations, you're in."

Slash broke into a beaming smile and said, "Really?! I made it! Wait... I don't know how I'm going to pay for it."

"Oh, that's right here." Julia said as she opened Slash's folder on her desk.

"Hmmm... The Piotr Rasputin Memorial Scholarship. It says here that you have been awarded a full scholarship. Books, housing, a clothing allowance and... I didn't know we could do this..." Julia said as she looked at the document curiously.

"What is it?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"Your student ID can be used as sort of a pre-paid credit card. Normally a student would 'charge' the card at the beginning of the semester by either paying into the account or receiving financial aid then they would use it up throughout the term. The card can be used to purchase food in the cafeteria, books in the bookstore, or even a bus pass in the accounts office. But this is the first time I've seen a card issued with no limit."

Slash gave a shrug.

"No matter. Everything is settled. You've passed the interview and everything is paid for in advance. All that's left to do is take advantage of this opportunity." Julia said warmly.

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman, I promise that I will." Slash said happily, still somewhat in awe.

"I believe you will. Would you please send in Lisa next?" Julia asked with a contented smile at Slash's happiness.

"Yeah, and thanks again." Slash said with joy as he hurried out of the room.

[And *that* is the reason I stay with this job.] Julia thought to herself with a wistful smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is that you and your parents?" Ronny asked as he looked at the picture Beau placed on his desk.

"Yeah. It's the best picture I have of all of us." Beau said with a smile as he looked at the picture.

"Your parents look really happy." Ronny said speculatively.

"They usually are, but dad's job makes him travel a lot. He's in Saudi right now." Beau finished in a sad voice.

"When will he be back?" Ronny asked with a note of concern.

"He'll be traveling to about six different countries in the next few months, so he won't be back in the States until next summer. But he's going to take the whole summer off work and I'm going to take the summer term off from school so we can spend the whole three months as a family." Beau said with a contented smile.

"That sounds really great." Ronny said with a wistful smile, then felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe we can do something as a family next summer too?" Clark said in a gentle voice.

"Yeah. Matt's cool enough that I think he'd go for it." John said honestly from Ronny's other side.

"I bet he would. I think we should do that." Ronny said with a small smile.

Beau looked at Clark, John and Ronny curiously.

"Matt kind of took all of us in. Even though we're not really related, I feel like these guys are as much a part of my family as my mom and dad." Clark said honestly.

"It sounds like you guys are more of a family than a lot of families that I've met." Beau said in thought.

"Yeah. That's a good way of putting it." John said seriously.

"If you ever feel like you need to spend time with a family, you'd be welcomed to share ours." Ronny said shyly.

Beau looked at Ronny in thought for a moment, then gently smiled and said, "I've been getting a little bit homesick lately. I think I'd like to do that."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lisa, please come in and make yourself comfortable." Julia said as she watched the girl go to the chair without a word.

"Please Lisa, I want you to feel safe here, you can take off the jacket." Julia said softly.

Lisa hesitantly pulled back the hood to reveal her furry, oval face.

"That's better. How are you doing Lisa?" Julia asked carefully.

"Okay I guess." Lisa said timidly.

"Well, I just need to ask you a few simple questions, then I'll let you get back to your registration." Julia said professionally, feeling concern.

Lisa nodded, but didn't make eye contact.

"Why do you want to go to our school Lisa?" Julia asked seriously.

"I guess maybe so I can have a life." Lisa said in a whisper.

"How so?" Julia asked, now even more concerned.

"I've been living in my mom's basement since... this... happened." Lisa said, making a dramatic gesture to include her entire being.

"Well, now that you're out of the basement, what do you see in your future?" Julia asked carefully.

"Mark and I are going to get married." Lisa said firmly.

Julia nodded and waited for the rest of the answer.

"I guess I'll learn to do something where I won't have to be around people... I hate being around people." Lisa finished in a mutter.

"Is that all you hope to gain from being here?" Julia asked carefully.

"Mark is the one who really wanted to do this. I could have stayed in the basement but... he really wants for us to go to school together again." Lisa finished timidly.

"I don't think I would be doing you a service by being less than honest with you." Julia said seriously.

Lisa snapped out of her thoughts of Mark and looked at Julia curiously.

"I appreciate the fact that you want to escape the basement existence you've been trapped in. But what concerns me is that your answer didn't include anything about learning or self-improvement." Julia said firmly.

"You can't understand what it's like for me." Lisa said defiantly.

"What you're going through has nothing at all to do with you being a mutant, so don't even try to go there. You're not the first girl who went to college so she could be with her boyfriend..." Julia began to say.

"But I'm doing this for him!" Lisa snapped.

"You're doing what he wants so he'll marry you and take care of you for the rest of your life. You're letting him decide what's best for you so you can blame him if things don't turn out the way you want them to." Julia said with venom.

Lisa stared at Julia in disbelief.

"When word gets out that there is a school that accepts people regardless of their mutation, I believe this place will fill up quickly. Can you give me one good reason why you should occupy a seat in our classes. Because as I see it now, the only thing you're going to do is waste the time of your professors and the money of your family if you go through the motions of getting an education." Julia said firmly.

"I... I didn't know..." Lisa said in disbelief.

Julia took in a deep, cleansing breath and released it slowly before saying, "I wouldn't call it a 'good reason' but... it is a reason. Let's try this. Think about what I've said and use this first semester to decide if college is what you really want. There are also a few books I'd like for you to read."

Lisa looked at Dr. Hoffman in confusion.

"Lisa, we're going to figure this out together. If you'll work with me, by the beginning of next semester you should know what you want to do... for yourself." Julia said with resignation.

"I'll really try Dr. Hoffman." Lisa said honestly.

Julia got up from her desk and scanned a shelf of books until she found the one she wanted.

"Here, I'd like for you to read this and tell me your thoughts on it when you're finished." Julia said as she handed the book to Lisa.

"The Feminine Mystique?" Lisa asked curiously.

"From what little I've seen, I'm afraid that you're on a path that leads to a very lonely and resentful place. Read the book and let's see if we can't find you a path that leads to independence and fulfillment." Julia said with a smile.

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman. I'll start reading it tonight." Lisa said seriously.

Julia nodded and said, "Please send Louie in to talk with me next."

Lisa clutched the book to her chest and hurried out of the room.

"Who knows, by the time this semester is over, you might even want to get an education..." Julia said absently as she walked back to her desk.

"I think that's it." Beau said as he looked around the room.

"That didn't take long." Clark observed.

"I don't have that much stuff. My laptop has games and plays CDs and DVDs so I don't need to lug around a stereo, TV, DVD player and a game system." Beau said casually.

"That's good thinking. And with Internet access, you can get news and just about anything you want to read." Clark said in thought.

"Yeah. I only have three books with me that aren't for school and if they were available on the Net I wouldn't even have them." Beau said as he looked around one last time.

"It looks like Mark has a lot of stuff. Maybe you can fill him in on your secret to college living." John said as he looked at the other side of the room.

"I'll probably mention it to him, but there's a good argument for carrying all that stuff with you." Beau said in a considering voice.

"What's that?" John asked curiously.

"If my laptop breaks down, I'm totally lost. If Mark has one thing break down, he still has everything else." Beau said honestly, then gestured to the door to indicate that he was ready to leave.

A look of realization came over John's face as the group walked out of the bedroom.

"You were here before the college accepted high school students... You're taking college classes, aren't you?" John asked in a voice of deep thought.

"Well, um, yeah." Beau admitted shyly.

John looked at Beau consideringly as they all took seats on the couches in the common room, then said, "You don't act smart."

Beau looked at John with question. Not quite sure if he'd just been insulted or complimented.



"I mean, you don't spout off a bunch of facts or use really big words like some smart people I've met." John continued.

Beau nodded and said, "Acting like that is a really good way to get your ass kicked. Besides, now that I'm taking college classes, I really don't feel that smart. It's a lot of work for me to keep up with everyone else. I'm no big brain, I just skipped a few grades and got into college early. Now that I'm here, I'm no different from anyone else."

"I see what you mean. Still, it's pretty cool that someone our age is taking college classes. It's like proof that we don't all have to fit inside the grade/age boxes that were made for us." Ronny said seriously.

Beau laughed and said, "That's a really great way of thinking about it Ronny. It makes me feel a lot better about being different from everyone else."

Ronny concentrated his power on a video game case in the book case and redirected it's gravity so it gently glided into his waiting hand.

Then he turned to look at Beau and said, "Being different isn't always a bad thing."

"I'll remember that." Beau said in an impressed voice.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dr. Hoffman?" A small voice said from the doorway.

"Yes?" Julia asked curiously as she looked for the source of the voice.

"Louie is scared, can I come in with him?" The voice asked, even more softly.

"That would be fine, please come in." Julia said and watched as the two boys walked into the room together.

"If you'll have a seat, I just want to ask you a few questions."

Julia watched with amusement as the two boys tried to fit in the same chair.

"You can sit in separate chairs if it would be more comfortable." Julia finally said with a smile.

Finally the white boy took charge and sat back in the seat, then guided the black boy to sit on his lap.

Julia couldn't hide her smile as she said, "Louie, would you like to introduce me to your friend?"

"Quaid." Louie mumbled, barely loud enough to be heard.

"It's nice to meet you Quaid... I don't recall seeing a Quaid on the list of new students." Julia said as she looked at the roster.

"No ma'am. I came here to visit with my grandpa and my uncle and my brother lcheb." Quaid said seriously.

Julia thought for a moment, then asked, "Would your last name happen to be Summers?"

Quaid nodded with a proud smile.

"I've met some of your brothers, they impressed me greatly." Julia said seriously.

"Uh huh. They do that a lot. I been telling Louie about my brothers and asking if he wanted to be my brother too." Quaid said frankly.

"What did he say?" Julia asked curiously.

"Nothing yet. I'm still working on him." Quaid said and gave Louie a quick hug.

"Louie, if you can answer a few questions for me, we'll get this over with so Quaid can get back to work.

Louie hesitantly nodded.

"Can you tell me why you're here?" Julia asked softly.

"Dr. Paul said that I'm coming here so I can grow up to be smart and someday get a good job." Louie said with difficulty.

Julia nodded at the response and asked, "What do you think about that plan Louie?"

"It's better than being in an orphanage." Louie said frankly.

Julia was about to break into 'Importance of Education' speech when she was struck by the sight of the two boys holding on to each other.

"Louie, I think that later on we'll need to have a talk about your plans for the future. But for right now, just do your best in your classes and make sure to ask for help if you need anything." Julia said warmly.

"I will, thank you Dr. Hoffman." Louie said timidly.

"Your very welcomed Louie. And it was nice to meet you Quaid, don't be surprised if I come to visit your house sometime." Julia said kindly.

"That'd be cool." Quaid said with an ear to ear grin.

"Okay guys, we're done. Send in Mark." Julia said with a shooing motion.

Louie and Quaid hurried out of the chair and seemed to be racing to get to the door.

Julia shook her head in amusement at the antics of the two boys.

\* \* \* \* \*

//What have I missed out here?// Jesus asked as he ambled into the common room.

"Not much lil buddy, I just unpacked my things." Beau said casually.

//Most people are more frightened of me when they first meet me. Why aren't you?// Jesus asked seriously as he half hopped, half levitated onto the couch beside Beau.

"I guess mainly because I'm from Texas. We got roaches bigger than you." Beau said with a teasing smile.

Jesus looked at Beau appraisingly for a moment, then said, //I'm glad we're going to be living in New York then. Roaches gross me out... filthy creatures.//

John, Clark and Ronny all cracked up at the comment.

"What have you been up to lil buddy?" Beau asked casually with a smile.

//Just making my bed. It takes longer when you actually have to MAKE your bed.// Jesus said frankly.

"I see what you mean... can you tell how Louie is doing? He seemed really scared when he was here." John asked curiously.

Jesus looked at John for a second, then said, //I'm too far away to see his thoughts, but he's doing okay. I get the feeling that he's finished his interview and it went well.//

"Good. I don't know Louie, but it seems to me that he needs to learn to be around people. He seems so frightened and unsure..." John drifted off in thought.

//That's my Louie. And I agree, this is the best place for him. I've been his friend for a long time, but he needs a variety of people in his life.// Jesus said seriously.

"He's got all of us here to be his friends and help him however he needs... All he has to do is let us." Clark said honestly.

//Yeah. That's the part that's going to give us trouble.// Jesus said in thought.

"It's not going to happen overnight, but hopefully someday he'll learn to trust us and let us get close to him. Otherwise it's going to be awfully lonely here for him." Ronny said with concern.

//Being lonely is familiar to Louie. Even the idea of having friends and being a part of a group is terrifying to him.// Jesus said with concern sounding in his mind/voice.

"We'll just have to let him know that we're here for him, then give him time and space until he's ready." John said slowly.

The others nodded their agreement, all of them realizing that waiting and standing back was probably the most difficult thing to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dr. Hoffman?" Mark asked cautiously as he walked into the office.

"Come in Mark, have a seat." Julia said in thought as she stood.

"I know what you're going to say." Mark said as he took the offered seat.

"Oh?" Julia asked with surprise.

"You're worried that Lisa is really dependent on me and that I'm using her or trying to control her." Mark said with a look of turmoil on his face.

"The thought had occurred to me." Julia admitted slowly.

"Dr. Hoffman, I really do love Lisa and I want what's best for her. It's just... she's been in that basement for so long, living her life through me... I don't know how to get her to take care of herself without hurting her." Mark said with concern.

"I see." Julia said in thought.

"Me and her mom and her aunt are the only people she's talked with in almost three years. I'd do anything for her." Mark said firmly.

"Anything?" Julia asked seriously.

"Anything." Mark said in a definite tone.

Julia nodded and pulled a three-ring binder out of the bottom desk drawer.

After a moment of leafing through the pages, she said, "Mark, You and Lisa are going to have the fifth class period free every Tuesday and Thursday. I'm going to schedule for you to meet with Dr. Susan Riley, our psychology professor. I want you to talk honestly with her and hopefully she can either help you or guide you to the help you need to make your relationship grow into something healthy and beautiful."

"Really? That's just what we need. Thank you Dr. Hoffman. I was afraid you were going to nuke me when I came in here because Lisa kind of, um... goes along with whatever I say." Mark said shyly.

"You're very perceptive." Julia said without humor as she took her seat.

Mark realized her meaning and waited expectantly.

"Why did you want to come to our college Mark?" Julia asked seriously.

"I wanted to go to *a* college so I can become a veterinarian someday. I wanted to come to *this* college so Lisa could come with me and get out of that basement and be around people again." Mark said seriously.

"That's a very precise answer Mark. It's refreshing to find someone as young as yourself who has a realistic plan for the future." Julia said seriously.

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman. And thank you for listening to me." Mark said shyly.

Julia smiled as she stood and said, "I'm just glad to see that my preconceived notions of you were wrong. Welcome to the Wagner Institute. I sincerely hope that we'll be able to give you a good head start on your goal to someday be a veterinarian."

Mark stood as Julia walked around her desk and walked with Mark to the door.

"Let's go see what still needs to be done to get all of you on your way." Julia said happily as she led the way to the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on the door that drew everyone's attention.

"Hey guys. How's everything going?" Scott asked as Clark let him in.

"Everyone else is still getting their IDs and stuff." Clark said as he walked back to his seat on the couch.

Scott looked around and settled into an open chair before saying, "So what are you guys up to?"

"Not much right now. Beau unpacked and we gave him moral support... that's about it." John said frankly.

Scott smiled, then asked, "How are you feeling John?"

"Fine now. My stomach goes crazy when I'm up moving around very much. As long as I'm sitting down I'm fine." John said frankly.

"It's just for a few more days." Scott said with sympathy.

"Yeah, I can handle it." John said with a small smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julia walked around the room and checked on everyone's progress with their registration paperwork.

"Jamie, have you ordered the pizza yet?" Julia asked as she approached him helping Louie fill out his forms.

"Oh, no. I forgot." Jamie said quickly.

"It's just about time. Everyone else is finished so I'll take them into the next room and get their student IDs made." Julia said pleasantly.

"Louie's almost done. I'll call for the pizza delivery right now." Jamie said as he walked to the phone.

"Make sure to get enough for their guests too. We don't want to be stingy with our welcome." Julia said with a smile.

Jamie nodded as he dialed the phone.

"Louie, come into the next room when you're finished with your forms." Julia said gently, then led the other students into the adjoining room to make their IDs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lovely, just lovely." Julia said happily as she inspected Lisa's ID card to see that everything was correct.

"Really?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

Julia smiled and handed the ID to Lisa.

"It looks just like me." Lisa said with disappointment.

"That's what I said, lovely." Julia said with a gentle smile.

Lisa looked back at Julia with an incredulous stare.

"I'm finished." Louie said timidly as he held out his paperwork to Julia.

"Let me see." Julia said as she put on the reading glasses that were hanging around her neck.

"You have very nice handwriting Louie. If you'll stand over there with your toes on the line, I'll take your picture and we'll be done." Julia said pleasantly.

Louie and Quaid walked and stood side by side on the line.

Julia chuckled and said, "Quaid, I need you to step aside for a moment so I can take Louie's picture, then I'll take yours."

Quaid looked at Louie with question for a second, then reluctantly took a step away.

"Very nice. Just look at me Louie." Julia said as she adjusted the machine to center Louie's face in the picture.

There was a flash and Julia said, "Okay young Mr. Summers, if you'll take Louie's place, I'll make an ID for you too."

Louie and Quaid traded places as Matt said, "He ain't goin to this school."

Julia clicked a few commands on the computer beside her, then said, "I know. But I have a feeling that we might be seeing a lot of young Mr. Summers at the Wagner Institute, so I thought I'd take this opportunity to make things easier for everyone.... Quaid, look at me."

Quaid looked at Julia curiously and was surprised by the flash.

Julia looked down at the computer and chuckled as she said, "'Deer in the headlights' is a good look for you Quaid. I think we'll keep it."

Quaid looked at Louie with question to see if he understood what she was saying. From the puzzled look on Louie's face, he didn't.

"Here you go Louie. Your student ID." Julia said as she held it out to him.

Louie accepted the ID and held it out so he and Quaid could look at it together.

Julia smiled at the pair, then took the next ID as it emerged from the machine.

"Quaid, I have yours ready." Julia said with a smile as she held it out for him to accept.



Quaid looked carefully at the ID, then asked, "What is it for?"

"Well, I just thought that you might want to come by sometime to visit with Louie. This is a permanent visitor's pass to let security know that you're allowed to be here anytime you want." Julia said gently.

Quaid looked at Louie then back to Julia and said, "Thank you Dr. Hoffman. That was really nice of you."

"Your very welcomed Quaid. And unless anyone can think of any reason that we still need to be here, I'll wish you all a good night and let you be off to your pizza party." Julia said with a gentle smile.

"Do you want to come have pizza with us?" Louie asked in a timid whisper.

"No thank you Louie. I'm expected for dinner in half an hour. But thank you for inviting me." Julia said tenderly.

"Then I guess that's it. Come on you guys, let's get back to the dorm... Lisa, you're invited too." Matt said firmly.

Lisa smiled and nodded happily.

## *[Chapter 4: The Worst]*

"How could they burn the crust and still have part of it not cooked?" Mark asked with disgust.

"The cheese isn't melted." Lisa said in a small voice.

"And I'm not sure these little round squishy things are really something that's supposed to be on a pizza." Clark said, then took a step away from the pizza boxes.

"We have fifteen of these things to eat." Seth said queasily.

"No, you don't. Someone made a mistake. Put the pizza down and I'll call the store." Jamie said in a voice that was almost masculine.

Seth didn't even think about arguing; he just dropped the half burned, half raw pizza into the box.

"We really should be getting back to the mansion." Scott said to his group.

"Please stay. I promise that it won't take long for me to straighten this out. Everyone should have a party on their first night in a new home." Jamie said imploringly, then took out his cell phone as he walked to the door.

"Well, when you put it that way..." Scott said with a smile at Jamie's retreating form, then said to the group in general, "How would you feel if us old folks left you guys alone for a while so you can enjoy your party?"

Looks were exchanged around the room, indicating that no one knew how to respond to the suggestion.

Finally Trey broke the silence by saying, "I do not feel inhibited by your presence. And I do not anticipate any of us experiencing greater enjoyment as a result of your absence."

After a moment for everyone to comprehend Trey's distinctive manner of speech, the rest of the group started to nod in agreement with the sentiment.

"Thank you, Trey. I appreciate you saying that." Scott said shyly, then looked around and asked, "So what do we want to do to get this party started?"

"Does anyone have any CDs that they'd like to share? Mine are all packed in with my stuff." Seth asked as he walked to the stereo.

"I have some, but they're over in my dorm... I could go get them." Lisa finished hesitantly.

"You don't need to do that. I have a few and I know right where they are." Beau said with a grand smile.

After a long silent moment, Mark hesitantly asked, "Country?"

Beau chuckled and said, "Don't worry. I like both kinds of music. Country AND Western."

"I'm sure that we can get some music on the radio." Scott said cautiously, not wanting to offend Beau by rejecting his generous offer.

"How 'bout you give me a chance before you do that?" Beau asked seriously.

After a moment of looking at the reactions of the others in the room, Scott finally said, "Fair enough."

"Be right back." Beau said quickly, then dashed off to his room.

"You can stand one CD, can't you?" Scott asked the group hopefully.

"I like some country." Clark said with a casual shrug.

"I would be interested to investigate another genre of musical expression." Trey said in his ever serious Borg manner.

"Be sure to tell Beau that if I run out of here to puke, it probably won't be because of his music." John said with weak humor.

Some chuckles spread through the group as Beau returned.

"I'm bettin that y'all are gonna love this." Beau said with enthusiasm.

"I'll take that bet." Ronnie said dryly.

Bobby chuckled at Ronnie's remark, then turned his attention toward Beau as the music started.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a long moment of listening to the unfamiliar style of music, Ronnie hesitantly admitted, "It's not bad."

Beau burst into a smile, then said, "Well, this style is called 'Alternative Country'. This is a band from back in Texas."

"I really like this. It's like it has everything that I like about country music without the stuff I don't." Clark said happily.

After a moment of consideration, Beau said, "Yeah. That's a good way of putting it."

"We have another pizza delivery on the way." Jamie said as he glided into the room.

"Is it going to be like this?" Bobby asked with a queasy look at the boxes of inedible pizza.

"No. It was just a misunderstanding... actually, someone I stood up on a date." Jamie said shyly.

"Oh, so this is revenge pizza..." Scott said with a nod. "That explains it."

"It really was a misunderstanding. I thought he stood me up, he thought I stood him up... anyway, we're going to have some more pizza arriving as soon as they're out of the oven." Jamie said shyly, watching closely for Scott's reaction.

"But these are going to be better, right?" Scott asked slowly, just wanting to be sure of that one point.

"If they aren't, then he'll be hearing about it on our date tomorrow night." Jamie said with a grin.

"Good for you." Scott said with a smile.

Jamie broke into a grand smile, then quickly said, "I'm going to wait downstairs. He's going to bring them himself."

"We'll be waiting here." Scott said as he tried to restrain a chuckle at Jamie's obvious happiness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey look, Lisa, we have Resident Evil 2." Mark said happily as he looked through the small video game library.

"That's great. I love that game." Lisa said quietly.

"Do you want to play?" Mark asked hopefully.

"I'd feel funny about playing when no one else has anything to do." Lisa said shyly.

"Actually, I'd enjoy watching you play. I'm not very good. Maybe you'll be able to show me some tricks in the game that I haven't discovered yet." Clark said from beside Mark.

"I too would enjoy watching you play." Trey said simply.

"I'll load it up." Mark said happily.

Lisa hesitantly glanced at Clark and Trey to see if they were staring at her. To her surprise, they both had their full attention on John who was sitting on the couch.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do any of y'all play chess?" Beau asked as he noticed a chess board set up on a game table just inside the front door.

"I do... but not very good." Louie said hesitantly.

"Well, the only way to get better is to practice." Beau said simply.

"Jesus plays a lot better than I do. Maybe you could play with him?" Louie asked cautiously and moved a little bit closer to Quaid at his side.

"Sounds good. Where is the little guy?" Beau asked as he looked around.

"He went into the bedroom when Jamie came in... he didn't want to cause me any trouble." Louie said in a low voice that could barely be heard.

"I've never played chess, but I've always wanted to learn. If someone could teach me, maybe I'd be a good match for you, Louie." Seth said gently to the timid boy.

Louie looked at Seth appraisingly for a moment, then shyly nodded.

"I haven't played for about a year, but I bet I still remember how." Slash said as he moved to Beau's side and looked at the set.

"How about you, Mark? Do you play chess?" Beau asked casually.

"No. I'm more of an RPG kind of a guy." Mark said honestly as he watched Lisa going through the beginning level of the game.

"Nothin' wrong with that. If you'll show me how to play one of your games, maybe I could join you." Beau said seriously.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Mark said happily.

\* \* \* \* \*

"John, are you doing alright? You don't look so good." Clark said with concern.

"The smell of the pizza is starting to mess with me. I think I need to go outside for some fresh air." John said with a queasy look.

"How about I take you guys back to the house now?" Logan asked from beside the door.

"Yeah. That sounds good to me." Clark said immediately.

"You guys don't have to do that. I just need to get away from the smell for a few minutes." John protested.

"As if we could enjoy having pizza knowing that you're feeling sick." Clark said with a roll of his eyes.

"Hey, you guys won't be really insulted or anything if we take John home will you?" Ronnie asked as he looked around the room.

"We understand. Take John home and take good care of him." Slash said with concern.

"We will. He just needs to rest." Clark said as he stood in front of John and held out his hand to help him off the couch.

"If you're sure you don't mind." John said hesitantly.

"C'mon. Let's go." Ronnie said, then moved to Logan's side.

"You heard him." Clark said with a grin, then helped John to stand.

"Alright, then. Move 'em out." Logan said and gestured toward the door.

"Trey, since John isn't feeling well. I think it would be best if you went with him to help take his mind off of it." Scott said quietly.

"Thank you, Uncle Scott." Trey said with a sincere smile.

"Just call me at the mansion if you need a ride home." Scott said gently, then motioned toward the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Seth, aren't you hot in that hoodie?" Lee asked curiously.

"A little." Seth admitted shyly.

"This is going to be your home now. You should be comfortable." Lee said seriously.

"I wouldn't want to gross anyone out before they eat." Seth said shyly.

Curious looks went around the room at Seth's unusual statement.

"I wanna see." Quaid said seriously.

Seth looked at Quaid with obvious indecision.

"And Louie wants to see too." Quaid added, then casually put an arm around Louie who was at his side.

"Okay. But if it bothers anyone, you've got to let me know." Seth said cautiously as he looked around the room.

"Go ahead. It'll be fine." Lee said in an encouraging tone.

Seth looked around the room one more time, then unzipped the front of the hooded fleece jacket that he had been wearing.

"Nothing gross so far." Bobby said frankly.

Seth glanced at Bobby, then took the final step and took the jacket completely off.

"Oh. Your skin is transparent." Beau said with surprise when he saw Seth's bare arms.

"Yeah. Pretty gross, huh?" Seth asked apprehensively.

"Not really. I look at stuff like that all the time when I'm studying my A & P." Beau said frankly.

Confused looks flashed around the room as everyone tried to understand what Beau was saying.

When Beau noticed, he clarified, "Anatomy and Physiology. I'm taking pre-med classes."

"Oh. Okay." Seth said as he finally understood.

"If you wouldn't feel too funny about it, maybe you could help me out with it sometime. I mean, the pictures in the book don't always have enough detail." Beau said in thought.

Seth broke into a wide smile and said, "Yeah. Sure. I'd like to help if I can."

After a long moment of silence, Lee turned toward Mark and Lisa and asked, "How about you, Lisa? Would you like to be more comfortable?"

"I... um..." Lisa stammered.

"When we get the next batch of new students, we should invite Beast along." Scott said as he glanced at Lee.

"Beast?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's his mutant name." Scott said as he turned to face Beau. "He's covered with thick blue fur. I was thinking that if he was here, you guys would see that there's no need to be shy about whatever mutation you have. Despite his appearance, he's a really nice person."



"I don't know." Lee said distantly. "Dr. McCoy might scare the new guys on their first day. You should probably let them get used to the place first."

Scott considered for a moment then said, "You're probably right. I'm so used to Hank looking the way he does that I forget that he is a little bit intimidating to someone who doesn't know him."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Pizza's here!" Jamie called as he opened the door wide.

"Do you need some help?" Slash asked quickly.

"Would you clear the other pizza boxes out of the way so we have a place to put these?" Jamie asked with strain in his voice.

"Got it." Slash said as he rushed to the table where Icheb was already starting to move boxes.

"Everyone. This is Miguel from the pizza place." Jamie said as he rushed across the room to put down the stack of pizza boxes before he dropped them.

"You can call me Mike. Sorry about the first pizzas." Miguel said as he followed Jamie at a slower pace.

"Jamie explained everything. No problem." Scott said casually.

Miguel looked at Jamie with question.

"It's okay, baby. These people are alright." Jamie said gently.

"You sure?" Miguel asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I let it slip that we were going on a date and they were nothing but nice about it." Jamie said softly.

Miguel looked around the room, then shyly said, "Okay. I've just learned to be careful about who I come out to. There are some really strange people out there just looking for a reason to hurt someone."

"Trust me, Mike. We understand." Slash said frankly.

Miguel looked at Slash, then around the group. His gaze paused on Lisa for a moment, and finally fixed on Seth.

"I guess you would understand." Miguel said uncomfortably, then glanced at Jamie and seemed to relax a little. "I've got to get back to the shop now. Thanks for not being sore about the first pizzas."

"I'll walk you out." Jamie said as he started to gather the boxes from the first delivery.

"Thanks." Miguel said gently as he also gathered pizza boxes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is a lot better." Seth said with appreciation.

"Oh yeah. The party can begin." Slash said happily.

//Did I hear someone say party?// Jesus asked as he ambled out of his bedroom.

"Yeah, come on in here, little buddy, and get some pizza." Beau said as he took two pieces for himself.

//Are any of those cheese only?// Jesus asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I saw one... hold on." Seth said as he looked through a few different boxes. "Here it is. How many do you want?"

//Just one for now.// Jesus said, sounding a little bit surprised by Seth's offer.

"Where do you want it?" Seth asked as he held the pizza on a paper napkin.

//Does anyone mind if I eat on the coffee table?// Jesus asked the room.

"Go for it!" Slash said, then added, "I'm going to get something to drink. Can I get you anything?"

//A small dish of water if you have one.// Jesus said as he half jumped, half levitated up to the coffee table.

"I'll see what I can do." Slash said as he walked to the kitchenette.

//Louie, aren't you going to have any pizza?// Jesus asked curiously.

"Yeah. I was just going to wait for everyone else to get theirs." Louie said shyly.

"Get in there, guys. This pizza is for you too." Lee said seriously.

Louie shyly nodded, then, with Quaid at his side, made his way to the pizza boxes to make his selections.

//Thanks. I'm always trying to encourage Louie to be more assertive, but I think it will seem to him that he has permission if others will encourage him too.// Jesus said as he nibbled on the edge of his pizza.

"I hope this works for you. We don't really have a lot of choices in there." Slash said as he placed a paper dessert plate of water beside Jesus.

//This is great. Just right. Thank you.// Jesus said happily.

"Aren't you going to have any pizza, Itchy?" Quaid asked quietly.

"No, Quay. I do not ingest this type of nourishment." Icheb said simply.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Jesus, Louie was telling me that you like to play chess." Beau said casually.

//Yes. Although I don't get many opportunities to play.// Jesus said honestly.

"Well, we've got a chess board right over there. And as long as I don't have studying or anything like that, I'm just about always up for a game." Beau said frankly.

//How about now?// Jesus asked hopefully.

"I was hoping you'd say that. I've been itching for a game for the past month and my old roommate... well, I doubt that he could figure out the moves in checkers." Beau said as he moved to the game table.

Jesus looked at the empty chair across from Beau, then around the room.

"Did you need something, Li'l Buddy?" Beau asked curiously.

//Something to sit on. The chair is too low for me.// Jesus said honestly.

Beau looked around, then said, "How about a few of the empty pizza boxes? We could stack them up for you."

After a moment to consider, Jesus said, "//Yes. That should work just fine.//

"We'll work on getting you a cushion or something later, once we're all settled in and knowing what we're gonna need." Beau said as he walked to the stacks of pizza boxes and found a few empty ones.

"Will this be enough?" Beau asked as he turned to show the stack to Jesus.

//I think so. Let me try it out.// Jesus said, then the stack of empty pizza boxes slowly levitated out of Beau's hands.

"Do you guys mind if we watch you play?" Bobby asked as he approached with Robert at his side.

"No problem. The more the merrier." Beau said as he watched the pizza boxes levitate into place on Jesus' chair.

"I am familiar with the fundamentals of the game, but I would be interested to see a game played." Robert said seriously.

"So you read about it?" Beau asked slowly.

"He probably downloaded it." Slash said as he approached.

Beau looked at Slash with question.

"Robert is Borg, he has computers inside him. Because of that, he can hook up to a computer and learn things that way if he wants to." Slash said casually.

"Oh. I guess that could come in handy." Beau said, then noticed that Jesus was seated on his pizza boxes, waiting for their game to begin.

Robert walked to Slash and put an arm around him as he quietly said, "I like the way you explained being Borg. Thank you, Uncle Joe."

"Anytime." Slash whispered as he returned the hug, then asked, "Hey! Do you and Bobby want to help me unpack my stuff?"

"Yes. I would like that, I will get Bobby." Robert said before rushing away.

Slash turned his attention back to Beau and Jesus and said, "You guys will probably be at this for a while, so I'm going to unpack and I'll be back in a little bit."

//I have a feeling that you'll have plenty of chances to see us play.// Jesus said, then turned his attention fully to the board before him as Beau finished making his move.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where's Louie?" Beau asked casually as Jesus levitated his knight to make his move.

//He's in his bedroom, unpacking his things.// Jesus said, then looked at Beau with question, prompting him to make his move.

"You know, it's weird. At first I kind of thought that Louie was, I don't know, controlling you, or making you talk or something like that." Beau said as he considered his next move.

//I really don't know anything about that. I'm just a rat who woke up one day with a kid talking to him.//

"So you don't remember anything from before that day?" Beau asked, then moved a pawn to threaten the knight.

//Just flashes of things. Eat. Sleep. Hide. I really don't like to think about it.// Jesus said frankly, then levitated his knight out of danger.

"I bet. Do you think that if you left Louie, that you'd go back to being a plain old rat?" Beau asked as he studied the board, suspecting that Jesus' move wasn't just a casual event.

//Maybe. But even if I knew for sure that I could leave Louie and still be myself, I'd still want to stay.// Jesus said, then added, //Your queen is in danger.//

"What?" Beau asked, then saw the trap the Jesus had tricked him into. "Hey! You're just trying to suck me into giving up my knight."

A chuckle sounded in Beau's mind, then Jesus said, //Don't blame me for it. You're sucking all on your own.//

"Well, let's see how you like this." Beau said as he moved his bishop to take Jesus' knight.

//I like it just fine.// Jesus said calmly, then moved his rook to take Beau's bishop and said, //Check.//

"What?" Beau asked frantically as he looked over the board.

//That means that my piece wearing the pointy hat can take your king if you don't move it.// Jesus said with chuckles under his mind/voice.

"Smart ass rat." Beau muttered as he studied the board.

//Hillbilly red neck hick.// Jesus retorted, then continued, //Now if we're done name calling, could you move so we can finish this?//

Beau reluctantly reached up and tipped his king on it's side.

"You'll have me in two moves no matter what I do." Beau said in resignation.

//All jokes aside, that was the best game I've played in a long time. I hope you'll consider playing me again.// Jesus said seriously.

"Sure thing, li'l buddy. I used to play at school, but the guys I played weren't very good. I didn't really have to try. I guess I got sloppy." Beau said, then added, "You're the first person to beat me since the last time I played my dad."

Jesus telepathically chuckled, then said, //You called me a person.//

Beau looked at Jesus with a smile and said, "I didn't mean it as an insult. I don't know exactly why you're like this, but you're as much a person as anyone I've ever met."

//Thank you. There have been a few people along the way who've treated me with respect, but you're the only one besides Louie who has ever made me *feel* like a person.//

\* \* \* \* \*

"We really need to be going. These guys have classes in the morning." Scott said frankly.

"Yeah. We should probably be getting ready for bed too." Slash said with regret.

"We're just a phone call away." Lee said as he draped an arm around Slash's shoulders and gave him a quick, assuring hug. "You have the number, don't you?"

"Yeah. I've got it." Slash said past the lump in his throat, overwhelmed by the love that he felt for his newly adopted brother.

"Xavier students! Let's move out." Scott said loudly from the front of the room.

"I don't want you to go." Louie said in a whisper to Quaid.

"Come over here." Quaid urged as he started walking across the room.

"Uncle Joe, can you give Louie the phone number so he can call me if he wants to?" Quaid asked as he approached.

"Sure." Slash said, then looked around until he saw the phone. "In fact, why don't I just write the number down by the phone so he can call you whenever he wants to?"

"Yeah. That'd be nice." Quaid said happily as he held Louie close to his side.

Slash smiled at the sight, then walked to the phone to write down the number.

"Is that everyone?" Scott asked from beside the front door.

Robert looked at their group and said, "Yes, Uncle Scott."

"I hope all you guys have a good first day of school. Remember to call us if you need anything at all." Scott said seriously to the group of new students.

"I should go too. I'll walk down with you." Lisa said, then gave Mark a quick kiss on the cheek before joining the group at the door.

"Bye." Slash said in a small voice as he waved at the members of his new family.

Several members of the group waved before they funneled out the door.

The new students stood in silence for a moment, staring at the closed door.

"I feel like this day's gone on forever." Seth said absently.

"Yeah. Last night I slept in my own bed and tonight I'm in a whole other state." Mark said with a disbelieving chuckle.

"We should probably clean this place up before we go to bed." Seth said as he looked around the room.

"How about we do that in the morning? We can pick up the empty boxes and carry them out to the trash when we leave the building." Beau said casually.

"Yeah. That sounds good. I still need to finish unpacking anyway." Mark said seriously.

//Then I suppose it's time to say goodnight.// Jesus said as he levitated down from the stack of pizza boxes at the chess table.

"Yeah. Have a good night, little buddy. Give us a yell if you or Louie need anything." Beau said with a grin.

//Count on it.// Jesus said seriously, then looked at Louie and asked,  
//Are you ready for bed?//

"Yeah." Louie whispered, then walked immediately to his room.

Seth looked with concern at the others.

"Give him some space and some time to adjust." Slash said quietly.

Seth slowly nodded, looking with concern at the door Louie had just passed through.

The sound of keys rattling and the front door opening drew everyone's attention.

An older teenager with dark brown wavy hair and glasses opened the door, then reached back and picked up two suitcases.

"Hi." Slash said cautiously to the stranger.



"Where is my room?" the new guy asked seriously.

"I guess you'll be sharing a room with me." Slash said, then pointed as he continued, "Right in there."

The stranger immediately walked past the group of boys and into the indicated room.

Some curious glances were exchanged, but nothing was said.

Finally everyone went their own separate ways to get ready for bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you doing, Louie?" Seth asked as he sat on his bed.

"Okay." Louie mumbled.

Seth nodded, then quietly said, "Just let me know if there's anything you need so you can be more comfortable."

"I'm fine." Louie said, but the tremble in his voice betrayed his anxiety.

Seth nodded, then took out a Walkman and a pair of headphones.

Louie sat at the head of his bed hugging his knees tight against his chest.

"Crap!" Seth exclaimed with frustration.

Louie jerked at the sound then watched silently as Seth tried to untangle the wires that had become twisted around his horns.

Not being able to really see what he was doing, Seth ended up making the tangle worse.

//Do you need some help?// Jesus asked with a chuckle under his mind/voice.

"I think I can get it, but these horns are nothing but trouble." Seth said with frustration.

//If you'll hold still, I can untangle that for you.// Jesus said in a more serious voice.

"Fine." Seth said with resignation as he let his hands drop.

A chuckle from across the room drew both Jesus and Seth's attention.

Louie was desperately trying to fight down his laughter at the sight of Seth with the mass of wires tangled in his horns.

"It's not that funny." Seth said dryly.

//Are you sure?// Jesus asked with amusement. //Look in the mirror.//

Seth rolled his eyes, then stood from his bed and walked to the mirror over his dresser.

"Yeah. Okay. It *is* that funny." Seth reluctantly admitted.

//Just stay still for a second and I'll get you untangled.// Jesus said with a mental chuckle.

Seth watched in the mirror as the headphone and wires untangled themselves from around his horns.

//You should probably try putting the headphones on from the back next time.// Jesus said seriously.

"Yeah. I already figured that out. I just forgot. This is all new to me. I've only had the horns for a week." Seth said as he carefully brought the headphones up behind his head and slipped them over his ears.

//Things change. Things always change.// Jesus said frankly. //We all just have to adapt.//

Seth nodded at the words, then noticed that Louie seemed to have a frightened look in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Louie?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Are you mad at me for laughing at you?" Louie asked in a whisper.

"No." Seth said immediately. "If I was mad at anyone, it was at myself for not being able to do something as simple as putting on headphones without making a mess of it."

Louie reluctantly nodded, but didn't seem to be assured.

//He felt your anger.// Jesus explained quietly. //Given everything he's been through, I can understand it making him nervous.//

Seth nodded to Jesus that he understood, then turned to Louie and said, "Louie, if I ever do get mad at you, I promise that I won't hit you or scream at you or anything like that."

Louie looked at Seth uncertainly, but finally gave an almost imperceptible nod.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you already unpacked?" Mark asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. I unpacked while you were getting your ID." Beau said as he sat at his desk and turned on his laptop.

"Oh. Good." Mark said as he opened his suitcase.

When the startup was complete, Beau sat and waited for his laptop to connect to the campus network.

"I wanted to thank you again for helping Lisa the way you did." Mark said quietly as he put his clothes into his dresser.

"No problem. Josh was being an asshole and someone needed to let him know that it's not okay to act that way." Beau said casually, then slowly said, "That's weird. I can't connect to the network."

Mark glanced at Beau, then quietly said, "I should have been the one to protect her."

Beau looked up at the quiet statement and thought about the words. "Don't beat yourself up about it Mark. You're new here and you don't know anyone yet. I've been around Josh for a month now and I know how much of a pussy he really is."

Mark considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Thanks, Beau. I guess you're right."

Beau smiled and nodded that he had heard before he turned his attention back to his laptop and said, "If the network's not back up by morning, I'll have to leave early to run my printouts for the day."

"Would you like to listen to some music?" Mark asked as he looked over his stereo to make sure it was hooked up correctly.

"Depends on what kind of music." Beau responded as he started proofreading some text files on his screen.

"It doesn't matter. I liked that CD that you played in the living room. I just think it'd be nice to have some music playing." Mark said honestly.

Beau reached into his laptop bag and pulled out a small wallet of CDs.

"Here, see what you think of this." Beau said casually as he held out a CD to Mark.

As Mark stepped away from the dresser where his stereo was located, a sudden 'pop, pop, pop' sound caused him to turn, then he heard the sound of breaking glass as the shards of the window glass fell to the floor.

"GET DOWN!" Beau said as he dived at Mark.

Beau tackled him, then listened carefully.

He heard the sound of an engine racing and tires squealing outside.

"What's going on?" Mark asked in a whisper.

"A drive-by shooting, I guess. Are you alright?" Beau asked as he slowly backed away.

"I... I... don't know." Mark said absently, then whispered, "I think I've been shot."

## *[Chapter 5: What Happened]*

"Did you guys hear that?" Slash asked as he walked in the open bedroom door.

"Get down! Someone might still be out there." Beau said as he looked over Mark to see if he could find any sign of injury.

Slash immediately crouched in the doorway, then noticed the chilly breeze blowing in through the broken window.

Before all the pieces could fit together in Slash's mind, Beau quickly said, "FUCK!"

"What happened?" Slash asked in panic at Beau's desperate tone.

"Mark's been shot. Hurry and call 911." Beau said as he ripped Mark's shirt open to expose the wound on his chest.

"On it." Slash said as he ran out of the room.

"How you doing Mark?" Beau asked in a whisper.

"I... I don't know..." Mark said distantly.

Beau reached over to his bed and grabbed the blankets with one hand and pulled them to him with a jerk.

"Just relax and let me take care of everything." Beau said gently as he covered Mark with the blankets.

"Will you call Lisa and make sure she's alright?" Mark asked with sudden concern.

"Don't worry about it. I'll call just as soon as I know that you're okay," Beau said quietly as he took Mark's torn shirt and balled it up to press it over Mark's wound.

"But what if whoever shot me already shot her?" Mark asked with worry, then his eyes went wide as he asked, "What if he's over there right now?"

"I'll take care of that as soon as I can. I promise." Beau said, then noticed that blood was running down Mark's shoulder and starting to pool on the floor.

"I need to get a towel or something to do this right." Beau said helplessly.

"The phone's dead." Slash said as he rushed back into the room.

"Oh shit." Beau said under his breath, then looked up and said, "We're cut off from the computer network too. That could mean that someone is planning to come in here to finish the job."

"How is Mark?" Slash asked with concern.

"Bleeding pretty bad. Get me a towel or something to try and slow it down." Beau said as he held the balled up shirt firmly over the wound.

//I felt your panic. What can I do to help?// Jesus' voice sounded in Beau's mind.

"I don't know lil buddy. We need help but the phone and computer access have been cut. I'm afraid that if anyone tries to go for help that someone will be waiting to gun them down." Beau said into the air.

//Seth has a cell phone. I can get him to call for help.// Jesus said seriously.

"Yes! Good! Do that." Beau said with some small measure of relief.

"Here. What else can I do?" Slash asked as he handed a jet black towel to Beau.

After a moment to press the towel over Mark's wound, Beau said, "Jesus is getting Seth to call for help. When that's done, I think you should call the guys who just left so they can be on the lookout. If someone is hunting mutants, they might be in danger too."

"Call Lisa." Mark said in a small, weak voice.

"Right. I'll call her for you Mark. I promise." Slash said, then rushed out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Seth, I need to use the phone to call the Xavier people. They might be in danger too." Slash said quickly.

"Hold on. The 911 operator wants to know how Mark is doing." Seth said in an overwhelmed tone as he held his cell phone out to Slash with a look of desperation.

"Mark was shot in the chest! How the fuck do you think he's doing?" Slash snarled into the phone.

"Listen lady. Whoever just shot Mark may be after my family too. Get an ambulance and some cops over to the Wagner school, the third floor of dorm 3. I need to call my brother and warn him." Slash said, then hung up the phone without waiting for an answer.

"Do you think they're going to hurt Quaid?" Louie asked as his eyes filled with tears.

Slash quickly dialed the phone, then tilted his head toward Louie.

Seth nodded, then hurried across the room to sit on the bed next to Louie and pull him into a comforting hug.

"Quaid is going to be just fine. Slash is just going to let them know to watch out for anyone who might want to hurt them." Seth said quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"*Xavier Institute.*" A woman answered pleasantly.

"Hi, this is Slash... I'm... Um, Andrew's uncle." Slash said disjointedly.

"*Yes Slash. What can I do for you this evening?*" Storm asked carefully, concerned by his tone.

"Someone just shot Mark. He's one of the new students at the Wagner school." Slash said as he felt his panic spiraling out of control.

"*Have you called for an ambulance?*" Storm asked calmly.

"Yeah. Right before I called you." Slash said quickly as he fought to keep his breathing calm.

*"Slash. you need to maintain your composure for one more minute. I'll call Andrew and he can make a portal to bring you all the help you'll need."*

Storm said gently.

"Just tell them to be careful. Whoever shot Mark may not be gone." Slash said quickly.

*"I'll let them know. One minute... just hold on for one more minute."*

Storm said, then hung up the phone.

Slash squeezed his eyes tightly shut, then realized that tears were falling down his cheeks.

//You need to call Lisa.// Jesus said quietly.

"I want to check on Mark. Seth, do you think you and Louie could call Lisa and make sure she's okay? Tell her not to go outside until the cops get here. It may not be safe." Slash asked as he walked to the bed where they were sitting and holding each other.

"Yeah." Seth said as he held out his hand for the phone.

As Slash held out the phone to him, he noticed that it had become completely black.

"Sorry." Slash whispered.

Seth looked at his phone, then gave a one shouldered shrug, obviously not bothered by it in the least.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How is he?" Slash asked as he rushed into the room.

"Not good." Beau said as he held the blood soaked towel firmly in place.

"Seth called 911 and I called the Xavier guys. Seth is calling Lisa right now." Slash said quickly.

"Good." Beau said seriously, then leaned down and quietly said, "Did you hear that Mark? Help is on the way and they're calling Lisa right now."

The sound of the front door slamming immediately drew Beau and Slash's attention.



"I'll go check." Slash whispered.

"Be careful. It might be the gunman." Beau said quickly.

"Yeah. I will." Slash said, then noticed that the bedroom door that he was touching had turned black.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Who was it?" Beau asked as Slash hurried back into the room.

"No one. I think the new guy just left. He's not in our room." Slash said as he knelt in the floor at Mark's other side.

"Oh." Beau said thoughtfully, then thought to ask, "What's his name, anyway?"

"I have no idea. I introduced myself, but he just ignored me the whole time we were in there together." Slash said frankly.

"What's taking them so long?" Beau asked in frustration.

"It's only been a couple minutes. I'm sure they'll be here any second." Slash said as he looked at Mark helplessly.

"Lisa's fine." Seth said in a rush as he hurried into the room with Louie held tight to his side.

"Is she safe? Are you sure she knows not to go outside?" Mark asked quickly as he tried to sit up.

"Stay still Mark. You need to stay calm." Beau said as he continued to hold the towel firmly to Mark's chest.

"Yeah. She wanted to come over but I told her to stay there until the cops get here and we're sure that the guy who shot you isn't around anymore."

A rumbling drew everyone's attention.

"Oh God! What now?" Beau asked as he looked around.

A plume of flames erupted from the middle of the floor, leaving a gaping hole in it's wake.

Seth clutched Louie tight to his side as he backed against the wall just inside the door.

All the boys watched as something started to emerge from the burning pit.

Slash wilted with relief as he saw Lee and Andrew slowly rising from the flames.

The boys watched with amazement as the flaming hole faded and the floor became solid under their feet.

"Sorry about the dramatic entrance guys. Dad's portal ability forces us to travel through a hell dimension. But since he knew exactly where we were going, this was the quickest way to get us here." Andrew said, then hurried to Mark's side.

Slash ran to Lee and pulled him into a firm hug.

"How is everyone doing?" Lee asked Slash gently.

"Mark's hurt... I think the rest of us are just scared." Slash said past his tears of relief.

"Is your name Mark?" Andrew asked gently.

"Yeah." Mark said uncertainly as he looked at the stranger who had apparently just risen from the depths of hell.

"My name is Andrew and I'm something like a paramedic. Just relax and I'm going to check you out to see how you're doing." Andrew said as he moved his medical tricorder over Mark's body.

Everyone was silent, waiting anxiously for the results.

"Good news." Andrew said as he looked up from his medical tricorder.

All the boys looked at Andrew with hope, urging him to continue.

"The bullet didn't hit anything vital. Mark should be fine." Andrew said, then injected a hypospray into Mark's neck and whispered, "I just gave you something to ease the pain a little."

"That's really good news." Slash said, maintaining his hug on Lee.

"You did exactly the right thing by keeping pressure on the wound and keeping Mark warm. You probably saved his life." Andrew said as he looked Beau in the eyes.

"Thanks. It was all I could think of to do to help." Beau said honestly. "Oh, and I'm Beau Collins."

"And that's Seth and Louie over there by the door." Slash said quickly, just understanding that Andrew hadn't met any of them before.

The sound of sirens drew everyone's attention.

"C'mon Slash. Let's go out to the living room to let the police in the door." Lee said as he encouraged Slash to walk with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Police!"

Slash looked out the peephole to find two uniformed police officers standing in the stairwell.

"Come on in. Mark's back here." Slash said as he opened the door.

The first policeman did a quick visual survey of the room while one of the others blocked open the door.

Slash noticed that the officer's name badge said 'Grossman'.

An adolescent and completely inappropriate bubble of laughter welled within Slash, wanting desperately to escape.

Officer Grossman followed Slash down the hall as the other three police officers filed out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

When officer Grossman saw Mark's blood pooling onto the floor, he picked up his radio and said, "What's the ETA on the ambulance?"

A moment later a voice on his radio responded, "They're pulling into the parking lot now."

"Send them up to the third floor with a stretcher. We've got a chest wound and a lot of blood here." Officer Grossman said firmly.

"Confirmed. They'll be to you in just a moment."

"Out." Officer Grossman said, then looked at the people around the room.

"Who's going to tell me what happened here?" He asked impatiently.

"Someone shot Mark." Slash said immediately.

"Do you have any idea of who that someone might be?" The officer asked firmly, directing his full attention to Slash.

"No... No sir. I was across the hall in my room when it happened." Slash said in a quieter voice.

"I was here when it happened, but there's nothing to tell. Gunshots, breaking glass, squealing tires, Mark bleeding," Beau said frankly.

"How many shots?" Officer Grossman asked immediately.

"Three or four," Beau said in thought.

The officer looked at the window, then at Beau sprawled in the floor.

"Where was he when the shots were fired?" Officer Grossman asked cautiously.

"He was standing over there, a foot or so from the desk." Beau said as he gestured in the general direction.

The officer walked to the indicated spot, then looked toward the window again.

Andrew and Lee exchanged a look at the officer's line of questioning.

"He's in here." they heard Seth say, then turned to see Seth and Louie leading the paramedics into the room.

"Back up guys. We need to get in there to have a look at him." One of the paramedics said as he rushed to Mark's side.

"His pulse is strong and 85, his BP is 105/73. There's one entry wound, no exit. So he's still got the bullet in his chest, but from the amount of blood

and his breathing, I'd guess that it missed his heart and lung." Andrew said professionally.

"You a doctor?" The first paramedic asked as he started to get Mark's vitals.

"I'm studying to be a paramedic. Actually, I've got the training, just not the certification for this state." Andrew said carefully.

"Stick with it. From what I'm seeing here, your assessment seems to be spot on." The paramedic said to Andrew, then turned to his partner and said, "It looks like he's stable enough to transport. Let's get on the road and call it in along the way. Bullets have a funny habit of going to the worst possible place if you leave them in there too long."

"Are there any special considerations we need to take into account?" the other paramedic asked seriously.

Everyone was confused by the question, but Beau finally realized what the paramedic was asking and said, "He's not a mutant."

"Sorry. But we have to ask, sometimes it's important." the paramedic said with apology.

"Mark!" Lisa called as she ran into the room.

"He's going to the hospital now. But he's going to be fine." Slash said quickly as he ran to intercept her before she could get in the paramedics' way.

"Lisa!" Mark called across the room.

"I'm here Mark. I'm right here." Lisa said as she fought against Slash's grasp.

"Lisa. Listen to me." Mark said as he strained to see past the other people in the room.

Lisa calmed slightly as she watched Mark through tear filled eyes.

"I'm going to be fine, I really am." Mark said with conviction, then winced as the paramedics lifted him onto a stretcher.

"I love you, Lisa." Mark said as he forced an assuring smile onto his face.

"I love you too." Lisa said as she finally stopped struggling against Slash's hold.

"Andy, do you think you could take Lisa to the hospital? I'd like to stay with these guys." Lee asked hopefully.

"I'd be glad to," Andrew said with a smile, then walked to Lisa's side.

"Lisa. I'm Andrew. If you'll come with me, we can go to the hospital and wait for Mark there." Andrew said gently.

One of the paramedics glanced at Andrew with a grateful smile, then lifted his end of the stretcher to carry Mark out of the room.

"Where are you taking him?" Andrew asked the first paramedic seriously.

"Women's and Children's." The paramedic answered immediately.

"We'll meet you there."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hold on. I need to get statements from everyone about what's happened here." Officer Grossman said firmly.

"I already told you, we were here in our bedroom, minding our own business when someone shot Mark through the window." Beau said as he stood. "What more do you want to know?"

"Can you think of anyone who would have a reason to want to attack him?" Officer Grossman asked seriously.

"I'm sure there are a few 'friends of humanity' who would think it's a real hoot to shoot up a school for mutants." Andrew said as he held Lisa to his side, then asked, "Can we leave? We weren't even here when it happened."

"If you'll give me your names, we'll contact you at the hospital if we have any questions." The police officer said irritably.

"LeeAndrew Summers." Andrew said quietly, then looked at Lisa.

"Lisa Brogan... can we go now?" Lisa asked desperately.

The officer wrote down the names, then said, "Go on."

"Come on Lisa, let's go to the hospital." Andrew said gently as he guided her out of the room.

A pair of police officers walked into the room as Andrew and Lisa left.

"Any word on forensics?" Officer Grossman asked immediately.

"Half an hour or more." One of the officers said with a look of apology.

"We've got a motive." The other police officer said firmly.

"What have you got?" Officer Grossman asked curiously.

"Fresh graffiti on the front of the building. 'Die! Mutants! Die!'" The officer said frankly.

"Did you already call it?" Officer Grossman asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah. In fact, they said that the task force is already on their way and could be here any minute." the second officer said seriously.

"Then pull our men out. Get them on crowd control and protect the crime scene. This is out of our hands now." Officer Grossman said firmly.

"What's going on?" Lee asked curiously.

"That graffiti has just elevated this to a full fledged 'hate crime'. That makes it federal jurisdiction." Officer Grossman said firmly, then noticed the looks of concern around the room.

"That means that this is going to be done right. They have the manpower and resources to do the things we wish we could do." Officer Grossman said seriously as he looked Lee in the eyes.

"Thanks." Lee said with some small measure of relief.

"Why don't you guys go into the other room so we can preserve the crime scene... besides, it's cold in here." Officer Grossman said more gently.

"Yeah. Thanks." Lee said to the officer, then turned to the rest of the group and said, "Let's go into the living room."

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you doing Louie?" Seth asked as soon as he and Louie were settled on the couch.

"Do you think Quaid is okay?" Louie asked in a small voice.

Lee heard the question and squatted beside the couch to look Louie in the eyes as he said, "Quaid is completely safe. The place where we live has all kinds of security so there's no way anyone could get in and hurt him."

Louie looked at Lee uncertainly, not fully trusting his words.

"I'm pretty sure that we're going to have to hang around here for a while to answer a lot of questions, but when we're done, what would you think about coming over to my house and spending the night with Quaid?" Lee asked gently.

"Really?" Louie asked with excitement.

"Yes Louie. Really." Lee said with a smile, then stood and looked at the rest of the group as he said, "That goes for all of you."

//Including me?// Jesus asked cautiously from Louie's other side.

"Of course that includes you." Slash said immediately.

"I have a room at the boathouse. It's really nice there and I know that you'll all be welcomed." Slash said with certainty, then turned his gaze to Jesus and said, "And that definitely includes you."

"I don't know..." Seth began to say.

"I doubt that they'd let you stay here, even if you wanted to. And I don't think anyone else would be able to rest comfortably if they were worried about your safety." Lee said frankly.

"Slash." Seth said hesitantly.

"Huh?"

Seth looked down at the couch that Slash was leaning against.

Slash followed Seth's gaze and was surprised to see that the couch had become a deep, midnight black.

"Sorry." Slash said in a whisper. "When I get nervous, I forget to control it."

"Just do the same thing to the chairs, so they'll match, then don't worry about it." Lee said with a grin.



Slash thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah. At least it'll give me something to do."

"I heard that someone around here got shot. Is this the right place?" A smallish dark blond haired man asked from the doorway.

"Yeah. C'mon in." Lee said as he tried to restrain a chuckle.

"Thanks. I'm Detective Kowalski, you guys can call me Ray. This is my..." Ray trailed off when he noticed that no one was with him.

"Fraser! Where'd you go?" Ray called into the stairwell.

"Be right back." Ray said impatiently, then hurried back out the door.

"Is *that* the federal agent we're waiting for?" Slash asked cautiously.

"Could be." Lee said hesitantly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sorry about that." Ray said as he walked back into the room, then muttered under his breath, "Sometimes it's like taking care of a three year old."

A man in a striking red uniform followed Ray into the room. He stopped suddenly when he heard Ray's comment and seemed to be confused by it.

"Okay. This is Constable Benton Fraser." Ray said seriously, then added in a conspiratorial whisper, "He's a Mountie."

A few looks of confusion went around at the announcement.

Constable Fraser cleared his throat, then nodded downward to his side, to indicate the large wolf that had just sat down by his foot.

"Oh, and that's Diefenbaker." Ray said casually.

"Hold on." Lee said cautiously, "*You're* the feds?"

Ray seemed to be considering his response when Constable Fraser answered, "No. Not as such. We represent a newly formed international task force that was created to address the increasing problem of hate crimes directed at mutants."

"Yeah. What he said." Ray said with a smirk.

As everyone considered what Constable Fraser had said, Ray asked, "Where's the police guy that's supposed to be up here with you?"

"He's in the bedroom back there. He sent us out here so we wouldn't mess up your crime scene." Seth answered honestly.

"You wanna talk to the local? I'll get statements out here." Ray said seriously, revealing the tiniest glimmer of professionalism.

"Understood." Constable Fraser said, then made a motion to the wolf at his side before walking down the hallway.

Lee watched curiously, noticing that Constable Fraser walked directly to the proper room without being told which one it was.

"Okay guys. Who wants to fill me in on what happened here?" Ray asked as he took a small notepad out of his pocket.

"I guess I will." Beau said cautiously.

"What's your name?" Ray asked seriously.

"Beau Collins." Beau answered hesitantly.

"Just tell me what happened in the order that it happened." Ray said as he wrote down Beau's name.

"Would you like to sit down?" Lee asked as he indicated one of the armchairs that was unoccupied.

"Yeah. Thanks." Ray said casually as he took the offered seat, then continued, "Go ahead Beau."

"Well, Mark and I were in our room... he was unpacking." Beau said carefully.

"What were you doing?" Ray asked curiously.

"I was trying to sign onto the campus network to print out my homework for tomorrow. But I couldn't make a connection." Beau said seriously.

"The phone is out too." Slash added.

Ray nodded and made a note.

"Well, Mark wanted to listen to some music and I offered him one of my CDs. When he was about to take it from me, that's when he got shot." Beau said carefully

"Was he in front of a window when that happened?" Ray asked curiously.

"Yeah." Beau said quietly.

"What next?" Ray asked as he looked up from his notebook.

"I guess I heard a loud car engine and tires squealing outside." Beau said distantly.

"Loud? How loud?" Ray asked slowly.

Beau blinked with confusion at the question.

"Did it sound like a small car, a sports car or something else?" Ray prompted.

Beau considered carefully as he tried to remember the sound.

"Actually..." Beau said as he looked up with dawning realization, "...it sounded a lot like my old roommate's truck."

## **[Chapter 6: Person of Interest]**

"Your old roommate? Who is that?" Ray asked seriously.

"Josh... Josh Metcalf." Beau said as his mind whirled.

"And why is he your 'old' roommate?" Ray asked slowly.

"Because this afternoon he was really rude to Mark's girlfriend, Lisa." Beau said with a sinking feeling. "After that, I moved in here."

Ray nodded as he wrote another note on his notepad.

"Do you think he shot Mark?" Seth asked nervously.

Beau sat silently, not knowing what to think.

"Do you know if your old roommate owns a gun?" Ray asked seriously.

"I... I'm not sure. If he does, he never mentioned it." Beau said quietly.

Constable Fraser and Diefenbaker walked into the living room with the police officer following close behind.

"Officer Grossman has been very helpful. I'm going down to see if we can find any evidence in front of the building." Constable Fraser said seriously.

"We have a person of interest." Ray said as he stood.

Constable Fraser looked at Ray with question.

"We need to talk to a student named Josh Metcalf. He was in an incident with the victim's girlfriend earlier today and he's this guy's former roommate." Ray said seriously.

"And he hates mutants." Beau added under his breath.

Constable Fraser and Ray exchanged a significant look at the statement.

"If you would like, we can track down Mr. Metcalf for you." the police officer said professionally.

"Yes. Thank you kindly, Officer Grossman." Constable Fraser said courteously.

The officer blinked with surprise at Constable Fraser's unusual manner of speech, then keyed his radio as he walked out of the room.

"Is there any other significant information?" Constable Fraser asked professionally.

"Yeah. The phone and computer access were cut. We need to check that out." Ray said frankly.

"Understood." Constable Fraser said, then motioned for the wolf at his side.

The wolf made a little 'yip' then walked around the couch and started sniffing.

"What have you found Dief?" Ray asked curiously.

"He can't hear you Ray. He's deaf." Constable Fraser said seriously.

Ray rolled his eyes and watched as Dief started sniffing beside Louie.

//Nice doggy.// Jesus said in a quiet, nervous mind/voice.

"That's new." Ray said with mild surprise as he looked at Jesus.

"He appears to be telepathic." Constable Fraser said speculatively.

//Could you, maybe, stop this thing from eating me?// Jesus asked with a slight note of panic.

"Don't worry. Diefenbaker won't hurt you. I think he likes you." Constable Fraser said as he watched Diefenbaker nuzzling Jesus.

//Diefenbaker? Do you think maybe we could do this later? I'm sure you have work to do.// Jesus asked hopefully.

After a quick lick, Diefenbaker moved to Constable Fraser's side.

"Ready?" Constable Fraser asked Diefenbaker calmly.

The wolf gave one quick, quiet bark in response.

"Diefenbaker will be back to talk to you again later." Constable Fraser said to Jesus, then walked out the door.

"It looks like someone's made a new friend." Ray said with a mischievous grin.

//Oh. Lucky me.// Jesus said nervously.

"It's getting late. Is there any way I could take these guys to my house where they'll be able to get some rest?" Lee asked cautiously.

Ray looked around the room, then said, "I think we have enough to work with for now, but I'll need to be able to get in touch with you if we have anymore questions."

"Sure. I'll give you the address and phone number." Lee said as he held out his hand for the notepad.

Ray waited for Lee to write down the information, then looked it over when he received the pad back.

"Looks good. Get these guys tucked in and I'll be in touch if we have any more questions." Ray said seriously.

"Thanks." Lee said with relief.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We're here for Mark... what's his last name?" Andrew asked Lisa at his side.

"Stanton, Marcus Donatello Stanton." Lisa said quickly.

"Are you family?" The nurse at the desk asked cautiously.

"No, but he's a student at the Wagner Institute. His family lives out of state." Andrew said anxiously.

"Are you a member of the Wagner Institute staff?" The nurse asked cautiously.

"Yes. I teach there." Andrew said, vowing to himself to teach at least one class at the Wagner school at some future date, just to make it not a complete lie.

"Have a seat over there and the doctor will be over to talk to you soon." the nurse said as she indicated the waiting room area.

Andrew looked at the crowded and chaotic waiting room and slowly nodded.

He put an arm around Lisa's shoulder and guided her to stand with him against a wall, since there were no chairs available.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Excuse me. I'm going to call for a ride." Lee said as he walked to the other side of the room, then fished in his pocket for something.

"Do you need my phone?" Seth offered quietly.

"That's okay. I've got it." Lee said as he faced away from the group, then pulled a metallic 'X' in a circle out of his pocket.

"That is, if I can figure out how to work this thing." Lee muttered to himself, then purposefully tapped the center of the 'X' twice.

The metal emblem chirped which made Lee smile with accomplishment.

"Hellport to Cyclops." Lee said into the emblem, then glanced over his shoulder and noticed a few of the boys looking at him curiously.

"We were in a rush to come up with a code name." Lee said in a shy whisper.

"Cyclops here. Go ahead." Scott answered professionally.

"We're done here for now. I'd like to get the kids to the boathouse where we know they'll be safe. But Portal is at the hospital with Mark, so we're going to need a ride." Lee said seriously.

"Storm is on her way. She should be there in a few minutes." Scott said seriously, then continued, "What can you tell me about your situation?"

"I'll fill you in after we get the kids tucked in." Lee said, then glanced over his shoulder and noticed Ray watching him curiously.

"Understood. Cyclops out."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Code names, a private communications network... You know, I've heard a few stories about a mutant militia operating in this area." Ray said casually.

"Oh." Lee said shyly. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Don't worry about it. I didn't hear nothin." Ray said as he looked Lee in the eyes.

"Good." Lee responded with a relieved smile, then casually said, "And I haven't heard anything about a mutant militia, but I heard a few stories about a group of people who sometimes try to help out when good people are being treated unfairly and it looks like no one else will step up to defend them."

"Yeah. That's what I meant to say." Ray said slowly. "I was just thinking that if our new task force were to meet someone from a group like that, well, that we might have a few common goals."

Lee thought for a moment, then said, "You might. I guess if the people in that group found out that you were willing to talk, that they might get in touch with you to discuss it."

"Yeah." Ray said thoughtfully, then added, "By the way, since we're on the subject of getting in touch, here's how you can get in touch with me. You know, if any of the kids remember anything or if you need a little help."

Lee accepted a business card from Ray, then looked up curiously. "Chicago Police?"

"Yeah. Me and Frase were just assigned to the task force this week. In fact, we arrived in New York this morning to get the official assignment. But that cellphone number is still good." Ray said with a grin.

"So does that mean that you and Constable Fraser aren't mutants?" Lee asked cautiously.

"No. But..." Ray trailed off with a look of distant thought. "...Now that you mention it, that *would* explain a few things about Fraser."

Lee smiled at Ray's playful and casual nature.



"Do you guys need to get anything out of your rooms?" Ray asked the group of boys who had been listening.

"Yeah." Slash said and the rest of the boys nodded their agreement.

"Is it okay if I get my laptop? I mean, since my room is a crime scene?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But I'll go with you so no one will be able to say that you messed with the evidence." Ray said, then gestured for Beau to walk with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Professor?// Andrew called in his mind, hoping that Professor Xavier was using Cerebro and paying attention.

//Yes Andrew, what can I do for you?// Professor Xavier asked immediately.

//Could you check on the doctor who's helping Mark and make sure that he's really doing what's best for him? I don't know why, but I really don't trust these people.// Andrew asked hopefully.

There was a long moment of silence, then the Professor responded, //The doctor is currently with another patient, but Mark has received adequate care for his injury and is in post-operative recovery.//

//Thank you, Professor.// Andrew said quietly.

//Andrew. I believe what you are feeling is unease at being around non-mutants.// the Professor said frankly. //Perhaps you might take time while you have the chance to examine why that is.//

//Yeah.// Andrew responded quietly, then put a hand on Lisa's shoulder at his side and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

\* \* \* \* \*

Someone rushing in the door caused everyone to jump.

"Mr. Wagner?" Seth asked with surprise, recognizing him from his picture on the website.

"Yes. I am Kurt Wagner." Kurt said seriously, then continued, "I came as soon as I heard about zhe incident. Can you tell me vhat has happened?"

"Mark got shot. He went to the hospital in an ambulance. Andrew and Mark's girlfriend, Lisa, went to the hospital to be with him." Slash said seriously.

Kurt slowly nodded in consideration, then said, "I believe we will need to find you another place to stay until the police have concluded their investigation."

"Lee said that we can stay at the boathouse tonight." Slash said immediately.

Kurt considered for a moment, then nodded decisively. "That is probably best. We know that they will be safe there."

"Hello?" Ray said cautiously as he walked down the hallway with Beau at his side.

"Detective... um, Ray. This is Kurt Wagner, the dean of the Wagner Institute." Slash said haltingly, trying to make a formal introduction.

"Detective Kowalski, but you can call me Ray."

"Until I am Kurt. Please let me know if there is anything that I can do to aid in your investigation." Kurt said seriously.

"I'd like to talk to the campus security in case they saw anything." Ray said immediately.

"Of course. But I doubt that they will be of much help to you. They were investigating a case of vandalism at the administration building when the incident occurred." Kurt said carefully.

Ray thought about the words for a moment, then said, "I'd like to talk to them anyway."

Kurt nodded his agreement.

"But first I'd like to get these guys settled in for the night." Ray said seriously as he glanced at the group of boys who were listening intently.

"Storm is on her way with a van." Lee said quickly.

"Zhat may pose a bit of a problem. I noticed several reporters in zhe parking lot." Kurt said seriously.

"Yeah. I should have expected that. An attack on a new mutant school has all the makings of a full blown media circus." Ray said frankly.

"Are we going to be on the news?" Seth asked with a tremble of fear at the idea.

"Let me worry about that." Ray said decisively. "I'll go down and make sure the locals let your friend past the barricade and keep the reporters back."

"Thank you." Kurt said sincerely, "I would not want zhe children to haff to be exposed to zhat kind of public scrutiny."

"She's probably out there waiting for us by now." Lee said seriously.

"Then let's do this thing." Ray said as he started walking for the door.

"I vill go viss you." Kurt said as he moved to Ray's side. "Perhaps my appearance will be enough to distract zhem from zhe children."

Ray chuckled and said, "Yeah. You might be right about that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Seth's cell phone started ringing and he looked at it apprehensively before accepting the call.

"Hello?" Seth asked anxiously.

"Hey there Horney! I just wanted to call you and wish you a good night in your new home." Junior said cheerfully.

Seth blinked at the statement, then quietly said, "Thanks."

"Did I wake you up?" Junior asked with concern.

"No. I wasn't asleep." Seth said, then glanced around the room at the others who were pretending not to listen to his side of the phone call.

"Is everything alright? You sound weird." Junior asked curiously.

Seth thought for a second, then said, "Everything's fine. I guess I just wasn't expecting you to call. It's good to hear from you."

"Yeah. Well, to tell you the truth, Mom is kind of freaking out here. One minute she seems fine, then the next she's blubbering 'My baby! He's just a baby!'" Junior said frankly, then in a lower voice he continued, "Personally, I think she's going through 'the change'."

Lee poked his head in the door and made a motion for everyone to follow.

"Listen Junior, I've got some stuff to do so I have to go now. I'm really glad that you called." Seth said as he leaned down and picked up his suitcase.

"Yeah. But remember that this phone thing works both ways. Next time it's your turn to call me." Junior said seriously.

"Okay. I'll do that. I've got to go. Thanks again for calling." Seth said quickly.

"No prob. Have a good night, Horney." Junior said with an obvious smile in his voice.

"You have a good night too."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Who is here with Marcus Stanton?" the doctor asked as he walked toward the waiting room.

"That's us!" Andrew said immediately as he stepped forward.

"Come this way." The doctor said and led them past the reception desk and down a hallway.

He led them into a large room that was partitioned off by curtains.

"We performed emergency surgery to remove a bullet from the patient's chest. There is no indication that any vital organs were damaged and his prognosis is a full recovery." The doctor said in an emotionless and detached tone.

"When will he be able to leave the hospital?" Andrew asked hopefully.

The doctor looked down at the chart in his hands, then seemed to freeze in place.

//Andrew, I am seeding the idea in his mind that Mark is sufficiently well to leave immediately. Sign him out, then port him to the med lab at the

mansion. I assure you that Mark will receive far better care from Hank than he will in that place.// The Professor said firmly.

Andrew couldn't resist the temptation and asked, //Is this because they're non-mutants?//

//No Mr. Summers, it's because these people are so overworked and jaded that no person who is conscious should ever be left in their 'so called' care.// Professor Xavier responded frankly.

//From what I've seen since we've been here, I completely agree.// Andrew said seriously as he noticed that the Doctor seemed to have become animated again.

"I think that as long as he has someone to watch after him, he should be fine to leave with you now." the doctor said seriously.

"Then if you'll tell me what I have to do, we'll be on our way." Andrew said as he tried to restrain a smile.

"There's some paperwork that you'll need to fill out at the desk to sign him out." the Doctor said, beginning to sound impatient.

"Will it be okay if Lisa stays here with Mark while I do that?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yes. Fine." The Doctor said with barely a glance at Lisa. "If you'll excuse me now.."

Andrew nodded and watched as the doctor rushed out of the room.

"I'm going to the front desk to fill out some paperwork, then we're going to take Mark someplace where he'll receive the best possible care." Andrew said assuringly.

"Thank you, Andrew." Lisa said sincerely, then walked to Mark's bedside and took hold of his hand...

Andrew watched for a moment, then went to the front desk to work on paperwork.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What happened? How are all of you?" Julia asked as she and Angel rushed up the stairs, meeting the group on the second floor.

"Mark was shot. Lisa and Andrew are at the hospital with him now." Slash answered immediately.

"Andrew?" Julia asked cautiously.

"My um... nephew. Andrew Summers." Slash said a bit shyly.

"Of course. I remember him now." Julia said with a smile at Slash, then looked around the group and asked, "How are all of you?"

"I think we're fine, Dr. Hoffman. Lee is just going to take us to his house so we won't be in the police's way while they figure this out." Seth said calmly.

"Maybe we should hurry and get them out of here. It looks like there's quite a crowd forming out front." Angel said gently to Julia.

"Right. Let's get you out of here so we can get this mess all taken care of." Julia said and ushered the group to walk with her.

"When we get to the entry hall, let's wait for the detective and Kurt to come get us." Lee said decisively.

At Julia's look of question, Lee explained, "We have a ride on the way. The Detective, Ray, said that he was going to clear it so she could get up to the building."

\* \* \* \* \*

As the group reached the entry hall, they found Kurt waiting on them.

"This is not going to be easy." Kurt said frankly.

"What's wrong?" Julia asked with concern.

"There is quite a crowd of people assembled, and there are news reporters." Kurt said apologetically.

"What do you want to do?" Julia asked Kurt quietly.

Before Kurt could answer, Slash said, "When I got kicked out of my home for being a mutant, at first I tried to hide."

Everyone looked at Slash with question, wondering what this had to do with their current situation.

"After a while, I realized that it didn't help. Acting scared and trying to hide didn't make anything one bit better. If they're going to look, they're going to look."

"So vahat are you saying?" Kurt asked hesitantly.

"We're mutants. Stuff like this is going to happen. I know it sucks, but we just have to do it and get it over with." Slash said frankly.

"As much as I would like to protect you and shield you from this, I think maybe Slash is right." Julia said regretfully.

Slash looked around the group, then his gaze stopped on Seth.

"It's okay if you want to put your hood up. Just think of it as depriving the infotainment industry of one more sensational mutant picture." Slash said frankly.

"Thanks." Seth muttered, then pulled up his hood to hide his horns.

"We ready?" Slash asked as he looked around. "I guess I'll go first."

"Not without me." Lee said immediately. "Brothers need to stick together."

Slash smiled at Lee, then stepped forward to open the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you ready to go?" Andrew asked Lisa as he walked into the recovery room.

"Yes. Do you really think he'll be okay to travel?" Lisa asked with concern.

Andrew's gaze became distant and unfocused for a moment, then he smiled and said, "Yes. I think so."

Lisa looked at him curiously, then realized that they were standing in a different room.

She was still holding Mark's hand, but he was on a different type of medical bed.

"What happened?" Lisa asked as she looked at the brushed steel walls of the Xavier Institute's MedLab.

"I used my portal ability to relocate us." Andrew said frankly.

Lisa looked at Andrew with concern, then hesitantly asked, "Why couldn't you have done that before? When Mark was shot?"

"I could have. But by the time I got there, the ambulance had already been called." Andrew said frankly.

At Lisa's anxious look, he continued, "If Mark's life were ever in danger, I promise you that I would have ported him here or anywhere on the planet where he could have received the care that he needed."

Lisa gasped as she saw what appeared to be a large blue furry animal walk into the room.

"Dr. Hank McCoy, this is Mark and his girlfriend Lisa." Andrew said pleasantly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lisa." Hank said gently. "The professor already filled me in on Mark's condition. You need not worry. Mark is going to receive the best of care."

"Thank you." Lisa said, as she looked up at Hank with wonder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything that Slash had gone through as a homeless mutant kid on the streets hadn't prepared him for the experience of stepping out of the front door of the dorm building.

Within two steps from the building, six spotlights from television cameras flared and blinded him.

He heard a terrified cry and turned to see Seth clutching Louie close to his side, shielding his face with one hand.

There was a clamor of voices yelling, all trying to gain their attention. Mostly they were reporters trying to scream questions at them from behind the police barricade.



"Komen ze, Storm is over zhis vey." Kurt said as he moved to Slash's side.

//Calm down, Louie.// Jesus said into their minds. //You need to breathe.//

Slash felt a mix of anger and frustration well up in him at the humiliation they were being forced to endure just to get to safety.

He also felt responsible for encouraging everyone to go outside with him. He never imagined that it could be this bad.

One of the camera lights blinded Slash and he instinctively brought up a hand to shield his eyes.

"STOP IT!" Slash screamed in frustration and without thought, his mutant power welled up and flowed out toward the people massed behind the barricade.

"Come on, Slash." Julia encouraged a moment later, snapping him out of the shock of what he had just done.

"You need to move." Julia said more insistently as she took one of his arms.

Lee took hold of the other as they half encouraged/half dragged him toward the waiting van.

Slash looked back at the huge cloud of blackness that was slowly dissipating over the crowd of people.

"Step up." Julia said, finally drawing Slash's attention.

Slash looked forward and blinked, then realized that she was telling him to get into the van.

"Aren't you coming with us?" Louie asked, still huddled under Seth's arm.

"No, Louie. This is my college and I'm going to stay here and find out what happened tonight so we can make sure that it never happens again." Julia said seriously.

"Do you zhink zhat you vill be safe to travel to Xavier's alone?" Kurt asked with concern.

"Yes Kurt. I promise you that we'll be fine." Storm said from the driver's seat.

"Zhen you should go." Kurt said with concern, then closed the door of the van.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you see what I did?" Slash asked Lee in a whisper.

"Yeah, Slash. That was really great." Lee said as he hugged his adopted brother to his side.

"I'm really sorry guys." Lee said from the seat beside Storm.

"For what?" Seth asked as he continued to hold Louie close.

"If I'd learned my ability better, I might have been able to get you out of there without you having to go through all of that." Lee said despondently

"Lee, you can't know that it would have helped." Storm said gently. "The children are safe. Take consolation in that. And use this experience to inspire you in your future training to learn your ability."

"Thanks, Storm." Lee said weakly.

Seth felt an unusual movement under his arm and realized that it was Louie holding Jesus in his arms between them.

"How are you doing, Jesus?" Seth asked quietly. "Do you need anything."

After a moment to consider, Jesus responded, //Well, there is one thing you could do for me.//

"What's that?" Seth asked immediately.

//One word: Deodorant.//

***To Be Continued...***