

Preludes to Comfort

Hurt & Comfort - IX

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[Chapter 1: Seth]

"You've got to come out of your room sometime." Junior said through the door.

"No. I don't." Seth said from his bed.

"If you don't come out, I'm coming in." Junior said as an angry tone came into his voice.

"Whatever." Seth said and pulled his blanket tighter around him.

The door opened and the large barrel-chested form of Junior, Seth's older brother, came into the room.

"What's up with you? Mom's really worried. If you don't get out of bed for Thanksgiving tomorrow, she'll freak. She's talking about taking you to a doctor." Junior said with concern.

Seth drew in a deep breath and readied himself. He knew this was coming and braced himself for what he'd have to do.

"Come on. We've always been able to tell each other anything. Remember when you superglued those feathers to your dick? I helped you and never told no one." Junior said with a smile.

"But you haven't been able to let a day pass without mentioning it." Seth said as he tried to sound gruff.

"Well, it was funny..." Junior said as he pulled the chair from Seth's desk and sat beside the bed.

"I guess." Seth said gravely as the reality of his situation came crashing back.

"Will you tell me?" Junior asked in a whisper.

"Yeah, close the door." Seth said in a voice of resignation.

"Why, no one's home. Mom and Dad are both at work." Junior asked, not moving from the chair.

"Just... Just do it." Seth said, trying to work up his nerve.

Junior reluctantly got up and closed the door and found himself in almost complete darkness. Seth had blacked out his windows. Only a sliver of light from under the door shown in the room.

"Your bulb's burnt out." Junior said as he flipped the switch by the door off and on, somehow expecting the result to be different the sixth time from the first.

"I took it out, turn on the desk lamp." Seth said grimly.

Junior felt across the desk in the dark and finally found the switch at the base of the lamp.

As dim light barely lit the room, Junior went back to the chair and waited.

"Before I show you... you've got to promise not to freak out." Seth said, keeping his blanket pulled tight.

"What is it? Did you glue something else to your dick?" Junior asked weakly, feeling the seriousness in his brother's voice.

"I wish..." Seth trailed off.

"Come on, whatever it is, you can tell me." Junior said with assurance.

With shaking hands, Seth turned over and faced his brother.

Silence.

"What... What the fuck happened?" Junior finally asked in horror.

"I don't know. It started about a week ago, I felt these bumps itching on my temples... I thought they were pimples or something... That's why I was wearing the hat last week." Seth said quietly.

"Um, okay... what are you?" Junior asked as he hesitantly reached up to touch one of the horns protruding two inches from his brother's head.

"A mutant, I think." Seth said in a pained voice.

"Is that... the horns, is that all?" Junior asked as he pulled his hand back slowly.

"No." Seth answered in a whisper, then cleared his throat and continued in a more normal voice. "My skin is changing."

Seth drew in a shaky breath and closed his watery eyes which caused a tear to fall.

"Changing how?" Junior asked with a note of fear.

"It's getting thinner... and you can see through it." Seth said weakly.

Junior looked closely at Seth's face and couldn't see any difference.

Seth fumbled with his blanket and revealed his arm.

Junior looked in wonder as he could see the veins clearly and almost make out the striated muscle tissue in the dim light.

"How?" Was all that Junior could think to say.

"I don't know... but I can't go to school like this. I... I can't do anything." Seth said in agony.

Junior looked at the pain in his brother's face and thought.

Seth recognized the pensive expression on his brother's face and waited.

"Does it hurt?" Junior asked with concern.

"It did when the horns broke through the skin, but now it's just a little tender." Seth said carefully.

Junior nodded and went silent.

"I'm sorry." Seth whispered to his brother.

"For what?" Junior asked as he pulled his distant gaze back to his brother.

"I don't know... For letting you down. For being a freak. I don't know... I just... I'm sorry..." Seth said as the tears freely fell.

Junior looked at his brother and a look of resolve came over his face.

"Mom and Dad will be gone all day. Let me check some things out. We'll come up with something." Junior finally said in a determined voice.

"Something? What?" Seth asked, not really believing anything could be done.

"Let me check some stuff out on my computer... go get something to eat... and take a shower, you smell like cheese." Junior said as he got up from the chair.

Seth stared at his brother, who waited by the door.

"Well?" Junior asked, waiting for a response.

"Yeah." Seth said and started to get out of bed.

"Good. Come to my room when you're done and I'll tell you what I've found." Junior said and walked out of the room.

Seth sat on the edge of the bed and puzzled at his brother's reaction.

Finally he smiled and stood.

* * * * *

Seth walked into the bathroom wearing only a robe. For the first time in days he was confronted by his own image in the mirror.

Horns.

Two black slender slightly curved horns grew right out of his head.

The bangs of his black hair fell around the horns, hiding the tender flesh where they had forced their way through his skin.

Before he could put himself off the idea, he shucked off the robe and stood naked before the mirror to stare at his new body.

It was hideous. Muscles, tendons, veins and arteries were clearly visible over his entire body. His hands, feet, face and genitals were the only parts of his body where his skin was still opaque.

Seth tore his gaze from the grotesque image before him and got into the shower.

After adjusting the water to the correct temperature, he cleaned himself as his mind drifted.

[Why me? What did I ever do? Why did I have to be a freak of nature?] Seth thought with pain as the water sluiced over his body.

[I was going to be a paramedic, I was going to make a difference... now... there's nothing. I'm nothing. I should die.] He thought and finally turned off the water.

Seth got out of the shower and toweled off his body, making sure not to look in the mirror.

He pulled on his robe and went to his brother's room to find out what he'd found.

* * * * *

"What'd you find?" Seth asked with a spark of hope in his voice.

"One thing." Junior said and pointed at the paper printing out.

"What is it?" Seth asked warily.

"A new school... for mutants. It's called the Wagner Institute and it's in New York." Junior said as Seth read the computer's screen over his shoulder.

"It's opening next Monday." Seth said in surprise.

"Yeah, talk about timing. Huh?" Junior said with a forced smile.

"Do you think... Will Mom and Dad let me?" Seth asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. The horns alone should do it." Junior said weakly.

Seth smiled at his brother and said, "Thanks for not freaking on me. I didn't know what I was going to do. I thought my life was over."

Junior stood and pulled his younger brother into a hug.

"Don't worry. This will be a good place. They say that it will be a 'mutant friendly' environment. You can go and no one will even think twice that you look... horney." Junior said with an impish grin as he pulled out of the hug.

"Oh God. That's going to be my nickname isn't it?" Seth said with horror.

"Probably." Junior said with a smile and a barely suppressed chuckle.

Seth went silent as he reread the information on the school.

"I think I'm going to go ahead and call them now." Seth finally said.

"Don't you want to talk to the 'rents first?" Junior asked hesitantly.

"I won't commit to anything, I just want to get my name on the waiting list if there is one." Seth said seriously.

"Yeah, I hadn't thought of that." Junior said with a nod.

"And you're supposed to be the smart one." Seth said with a touch of his recently absent humor.

"Oh, I am? And what does that make you?" Junior asked with a smile.

"The pretty one." Seth said as he batted his eyelashes garishly.

"Horney." Junior said as he grabbed the printout and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

"Hello? I'd like to talk to someone about registering... What? Um, fourteen... Yes, I'll hold." Seth said and waited nervously.

Junior walked over with a spiral bound notebook and a pencil and sat them beside Seth.

"Thanks." Seth whispered as he waited.

"Yes. I'm here. I'd like to talk to someone about registering at your school." Seth said in his 'telephone courtesy' voice.

"Fourteen." Seth said, his voice beginning to sound impatient.

"Um... no, I'm not having any trouble. I just... I can't go to school... or out in public... or anywhere." Seth fought to say.

"Yeah. I mean, I think so. I'm going to talk to my parents tonight, but I think they'll want me to go where I won't be looked at like a freak." Seth said in thought.

"Oh, okay. Seth... Raphael... Oronokos." Seth said slowly.

"New Philadelphia, Ohio." Seth said, and waited.

"Sure." Seth said then rattled off his phone number.

He wrote some stuff quickly on the paper, then said, "Yeah, I got it."

"No, I'm sure I'm okay." Seth said, then smiled.

"Thank you Dr. Hoffman. If everything goes well, I'll see you Sunday." Seth said in a pleasant voice.

"Goodbye." Seth said and hung up the phone.

"Well?" Junior asked as he read over what Seth had written.

"She said I'm first on the list. They only released the information this morning."

"Dude, your writing really sucks. No one's going to be able to read that." Junior said and sat back.

"No one has to but me. It's directions on how to find the school." Seth said as he stood and picked up the notebook.

* * * * *

The day had been endless. Junior had tried to distract Seth with video games and music, but it wasn't working.

Nothing could hold his interest for more than a few minutes, then he'd start pacing again.

"Is that them?" Seth asked quickly as he looked up from the school's printout for the thousandth time.

Junior looked away from his computer screen and out the window, then said, "It's Mom, that means Dad should be home any minute."

"I'm going to my room to wait. Can you get them in the living room then come and get me?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Yeah. You gonna be alright?" Junior asked with concern as he followed Seth to his room.

"We'll soon find out." Seth said and closed his door.

* * * * *

"How was your day off?" Melanie asked her son as she entered the house.

"Um, fine, I guess. How was work?" Junior asked with distraction.

"I thought it would never end. It wasn't even worth going in. Everyone else in the civilized world was out shopping or cooking and I was sitting at my desk waiting for clients that never came." She said as she settled into the couch.

"Well you didn't miss much here." Junior said and perched on the arm of the other end of the couch.

"I should become a teacher. This in-service day means they get a five day Thanksgiving weekend." Melanie said with a distant look.

"But they get to put up with us the rest of the time. They probably *need* a five day break every now and then." Junior said with a smile.

"Good point. How's Seth? Is he feeling any better?" She asked with concern.

"Um, yeah. When Dad gets home he's going to come out and talk to you." Junior said and looked away.

"What's wrong?" Melanie asked with worry as she started to get up.

"Please wait for Dad. Seth is really... please just wait." Junior said with difficulty.

"You're really worrying me, mister." Melanie said as she settled back into her seat.

"Sorry Mom." Junior said and walked to the front door.

"Is that your Dad?" Melanie asked. She hadn't heard anything.

"Yeah." Junior said and opened the door.

"Hey Sport, what's up?" Nick asked as he walked in the open door.

"Um, not a lot. Would you sit down? Seth needs to talk to you." Junior asked hesitantly.

Nick got a look of surprise but went to the couch and took a seat beside his wife.

"I'll go get him." Junior said in a quiet voice and hurried to Seth's room.

* * * * *

"They're waiting for you." Junior said to the closed door.

"Okay, here I go." Seth said and opened the door.

"Oh, *that's* subtle." Junior said as Seth walked out in a hooded sweatshirt with the hood pulled up to cover his horns.

"Do you have a better idea?" Seth asked as he forced himself to walk.

"Not really... but, face it. you look kinda weird." Junior said seriously.

"So do you." Seth said with a smile.

Junior stopped in his tracks and thumped his brother in the arm as he passed.

"Horney." Junior said and followed Seth into the living room.

* * * * *

"Seth?" Melanie asked hesitantly.

"Yeah Mom. Sorry about the get up, but... um, what do you know about mutants?" Seth asked slowly.

"Not much, just the stuff I heard on the news. And you know I only believe about half of that." Melanie said slowly.

"Well, I am." Seth forced out, feeling his knees trembling.

"You are what?" Nick asked his son, truly confused.

"A mutant." Seth said with a voice of shame.

Melanie got up and pulled Seth into a hug and said, "No sweetie, no you're not."

Seth soaked in the comfort for longer than he felt he should before he pulled away and said, "Yes, I am."

He pulled back the hood of his sweatshirt to reveal his horns.

"Oh my God!" Melanie gasped and took two steps back.

Nick stood and pulled his wife into his arms.

"Dad?" Seth said in a helpless whisper.

Nick looked at his son and tried to speak past the shock he was feeling, "How did... what... how did you?"

"He didn't do anything." Junior said and walked to stand beside his brother.

"How did this happen?" Nick asked with a tremble in his voice.

"I did some research, and..." Junior trailed off, trying to decide how best to explain it.

"And?" Melanie asked in a tearful voice.

"It just happened. It could happen to me too. It's genetic. It's no one's fault." Junior said, trying to make it sound like no big deal.

"Are you going to be a monster like we see on the news?" Melanie asked with wide, fearful eyes.

Before Seth could answer, Junior quickly said, "Those mutants cause destruction, that's why they make the news. There's a doctor, Hank McCoy, who wrote this big paper on the subject. All I

could make out of it was... mutants are people. They make choices like everyone else. The ones who make the wrong choices are more likely to get media attention than the ones who try to lead normal, productive lives."

Seth stood straight and announced, "I'll die before I'll become a monster like that."

Junior pulled his brother into a hug and said, "Don't talk like that. There's a place where you can go and no one will care. You'll feel normal there."

"What are you talking about?" Nick asked hesitantly.

"It's called the Wagner Institute, it's a school for mutants." Seth said quietly.

"It's a mutant friendly school. Anyone can go there, it's just that mutants don't have to worry about being harassed." Junior cut in.

"Where? You'd be leaving?" Melanie asked as she looked up from her embrace.

"Yeah, it's in New York." Seth said, watching closely for their reactions.

Melanie looked to her husband and after a moment of thought, he gave a nod.

"Okay, if that's what you want to do, we'll send you there. But I want to know everything about the place we'll be sending you." Melanie said firmly, as she gathered herself back into control.

"I've got a bunch of information. Seth called them this morning and they'll be expecting him on Sunday." Junior said nervously.

"I see you're serious about this. Let me see what you've got and we'll talk about it." Nick said, trying to remain calm.

"Thanks Dad." Seth whispered in a note of relief.

[Chapter 2: Lisa]

"Why do you love me?" Lisa asked quietly as she held close to her boyfriend.

"The same reason I've always loved you. You're a beautiful, wonderful, fantastic person." Marc said as he held her close.

"I'm a freak. I have fur. How can you stand to look at me?" She said darkly as she nuzzled her face into his shoulder.

"None of that matters. I love you, the person inside. And besides, you're still beautiful. You've been like this for nearly two years and I can't imagine you being any other way... I wouldn't want you to be any other way." Marc finished in a whisper.

"Maybe there's something wrong with you." Lisa said and pulled back to look Marc in the eyes.

"Maybe. Whatever the reason, you're the most important person in my life and nothing will ever change that. I love you." Marc said firmly, then leaned in to kiss her on the bridge of her nose.

"You keep doing that and you'll get a hairball." Lisa quipped, loving his attention.

"A small price to pay for the privilege of showing you how much I love you." Marc said softly.

"Kids, come up here! Your Aunt Jean found something!" Jan called down the stairs.

"Be right up, Mom." Lisa said and pulled out of Marc's embrace.

Lisa stood quickly, then put out a fur covered hand toward Marc.

"You are so beautiful." Marc said, making no move to stand.

"Hold that thought. They're excited about something." Lisa said with a warm smile.

Marc nodded and took her hand, then stood.

* * * * *

"What is it Mom?" Lisa asked as they walked into the living room.

"Jean was on the Internet and found this site." Jan said with excitement.

Lisa looked closely at the monitor and read as Marc rested his chin on her shoulder to do the same.

"You can't be serious." Lisa finally said and stood.

"Come on honey, you've been cooped up in this house for nearly two years. I don't mind doing the home schooling, but you need to be around people." Jean said in an imploring voice.

"Mom, I'm not going to a mutant school." Lisa said firmly.

"We could both go." Marc said quietly into her ear.

Lisa turned and looked at him in question.

"It says that it's open to everyone, it's just mutant friendly. We could go to school together again." Marc said with excitement.

"You really miss me at school?" Lisa asked timidly.

"Every single day." Marc said absolutely.

"We could check it out. Nothing says we have to stay." Lisa said hesitantly.

"That's right." Jan said quickly, then moved to stand in front of her daughter.

"You really want me to do this?" Lisa asked in a small voice.

"Yes honey, I really do. I've been watching you withdraw more and more from the world ever since this... mutation... started. If it weren't for Marc, I think we might have lost you." Jan said and glanced lovingly at her daughter's boyfriend.

Lisa nodded. She'd thought about it... every day she thought about it. But she couldn't do that to Marc.

"There's a phone number here. Let's see if anyone is there today." Jean said hopefully.

"Which one are you?" Marc asked teasingly to Jean.

"It's not funny anymore Marc. I know very well that you can tell us apart." Jean said mock sternly.

"I guess so... Jan's the one with a sense of humor." Marc said, trying to keep from smiling.

"Do you think your parents will let you go?" Jan asked seriously.

"Yeah, they sent Cody and Leeann off to schools out of state, I don't see why not." Marc said frankly.

Jan nodded then turned her full attention to her sister.

"Hello, I'm calling for some information about your school." Jean said pleasantly.

"She's sixteen... I'll hold." Jean said, then rolled her eyes.

"Yes, she's sixteen. No, no, we just found your information on the Internet and want to find out more." Jean said in concentration.

"No, she's not in any danger... but thank you for asking." Jean said with a worried look.

"Yes, I understand. Lisa Lynette Brogan." Jean said, then waited.

"Roanoke, Virginia." She said, then gave the phone number.

"Give me a second." Jean said, then made a writing motion to her sister.

Jan quickly got a pen and pulled a sheet of paper from the printer.

"Yes, I've got it." Jean said as she wrote.

"Yes, actually there is one more thing." Jean said and handed the phone to Marc.

"Hello?" Marc asked hesitantly.

"Um, I'd like to go to your school too." Marc said unsurely and flashed an aggravated glare at Jean.

The glare made Jean smile gloriously.

"I'm sixteen. Marcus Donatello Stanton." He said, then flashed a loving look at Lisa.

"You can just get in touch with me here at Lisa's house, I'm usually here anyway." Marc said, then got a curious look on his face.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" Marc asked with a note of apology.

"Oh, no, we'll be there Sunday, but thanks for asking." Marc said quickly.

"Yes, thank you Mr. Vagner. I'll look forward to meeting you too. Goodbye." Marc said and handed the phone to Jean to hang up.

"What did he say?" Lisa asked with a little excitement.

"Well, he asked if... how did he say it? 'Do you haf any immediate need for assistance?'" Jean said, trying to imitate Mr. Wagner's voice.

"I had a little trouble understanding what he was saying." Marc said softly.

"But do you realize who that was?" Jean asked with wide eyes.

"He said his name was Kurt Vagner." Marc said hesitantly.

"Of the Vagner.. Wagner Institute. You were talking to the man himself. Look at this." Jean said with excitement as she brought up his biography.

"Look at that Lisa." Jan said with wonder.

"He looks like a demon." Lisa said in disbelief.

"And it says here that he was born with his mutation. He's always looked like this." Jean said as she read on.

"Can you imagine what his childhood was like?" Jan said with a shake of her head.

"He worked in a circus as an acrobat. People thought it was a costume I guess." Jean said and looked at Lisa expectantly.

"I guess I'll have someone who'll know what it's like to be different." Lisa said in a shocked, absent voice.

"By the looks of it, I may be the 'different' one when we get there." Marc said speculatively.

"I don't know, look at this." Jean said and pulled up another picture.

"What? She looks pretty average to me." Jan said as she looked at the picture.

"Dr. Julia Hoffman is an M.D. specializing in psychiatry and social anxiety disorders. Her interests include biochemistry, genetics and... needlepoint." Jean read aloud, finishing with a chuckle.

"Do you think she's a mutant?" Marc asked, looking closer at the picture.

"It doesn't come right out and say it, but I'm guessing that she isn't. She has over a decade of teaching and administrative experience." Jean said in thought.

"Then I guess neither one of us will be the 'different' one." Lisa said as she took hold of Marc's arm gently.

"I think this is going to be cool." Marc said as he reread the details of Dr. Julia Hoffman.

"I think so too." Lisa said as she put her head on his shoulder.

[Chapter 3: Louie]

"Hello? Could I speak to someone about... could I just speak to someone in charge?" Mr. Kenyon asked hesitantly.

"Of course, please hold." The woman's voice said professionally.

"Hello, this is Dr. Hoffman, may I help you?" Julia asked pleasantly.

"I hope so. My name is Paul Kenyon. I just came across your Web site and wanted to ask some questions." Paul asked nervously.

"Certainly, I'll do my best to answer." Julia said in a relaxed voice.

"I am an administrator in a state run facility. An orphanage for lack of a better term. I have a student that I'd like to send to your school if that's possible." Paul said in a rambling tone.

"I get the sense that this student is of some concern to you." Julia asked carefully.

"You could say that. Louie is a good boy, he has a kind and loving heart but... he hasn't been able to integrate into mainstream classes. He's special and I can't accommodate his needs. It kills me to see him sequestered from other students but I have to try and keep the peace." Paul trailed off helplessly.

"I see. Mr. Kenyon, do you think we might speak frankly? Avoiding the word 'mutant' is going to make conversation much more difficult than need be." Julia said seriously.

"Yes, that's a good idea." Paul said quietly.

"Does Louie need any special accommodation to deal with his mutation?" Julia asked softly, trying to be gentle.

"No... Well yes, maybe." Paul said in thought.

There was a pause, then with an amused chuckle, Julia said, *"You covered all the bases with that one, could you just tell me?"*

Paul smiled, her humor and casual nature put him at ease.

"The only special accommodation you would need to make is to allow him to keep his pet rat." Paul said hesitantly, hoping it wouldn't be a deal breaker.

"Would you care to explain further?" Julia asked, curious.

"I don't know much about mutant abilities and I confess that I don't understand exactly what Louie does with his." Paul said, trying to find the right words.

"Could you hold on for just a moment? I'm going to get Mr. Wagner to join us on the other line. I have to admit that my own knowledge of mutant abilities is not what it should be." Julia asked hopefully.

"Of course." Paul said and waited.

Less than a minute later there was a faint click and Kurt's voice said, *"Guten morgen, Herr Kenyon."*

Paul was surprised by the greeting, but answered in kind, "Guten morgen, Herr Wagner."

"Please continue, you were saying something about Louie's mutant abilities and a rat?" Julia asked curiously.

"Yes. Well, I guess I should start by saying that Louie's parents were a little... extreme... when it came to religion. From a young age all their kids were indoctrinated with extreme religious views." Paul said disjointedly.

"Forgive me Herr Kenyon, but could you explain what you mean by extreme?" Kurt asked slowly.

"They spent no less than six hours a day, every day in bible study. One example of their beliefs was that women were lesser creatures, tainted by original sin and were to be treated accordingly. Women were expected to attend the church every time

the doors were opened, but not to participate or even speak. Louie was almost unreachable when he first arrived, but after a lot of work, he's finally opening up to the world around him." Paul said in a disturbed tone.

"I see." Kurt said quietly.

"When Louie's mutant abilities began to manifest, they were sure that an evil spirit had possessed him. They nearly killed him trying to perform a home based exorcism. He was in the hospital for weeks... I've never found out how long they were torturing him." Paul said with pain.

"My God." Julia whispered.

"I'm telling you this because... I'm not sure, but I think it warped him, or fragmented his personality or something." Paul said with difficulty.

"How so?" Kurt asked curiously.

"He has a pet rat, he calls him Jesus. To my knowledge, Louie has never manifested his mutant ability except through the rat. I think somehow, his subconscious projects an alternate personality through the rat to do the things that Louie would never do." Paul said slowly.

"So the child was subjected to such abuse that he developed multiple personalities?" Julia asked in confirmation.

"That's the theory. But it's been impossible to tell exactly how much is the psychological damage from his extreme childhood and how much is the effects of his mutation." Paul said seriously.

"If the child is in such a state, he needs professional counseling. We're just a small school, we don't have the resources to provide such as that." Julia said with apology.

"He's been receiving therapy for the past three years. He's been seen by some of the leading specialists in the state and they've more or less agreed that they've done all they can for him. I'm not an expert in such things, but going on what they've said, Louie's base personality is stable and is developing normally for his age. The way he is... is likely the way he will be for the remainder of his life. I was hoping that he might be able to... fit in there, I guess. Maybe he won't be so alone." Paul said hopefully.

"So what you're saying is that they've given up on him." Julia said carefully.

"Maybe. Maybe it's more that they've decided to leave Louie as he is rather than risking further damage by trying to integrate the alternate personality back into him." Paul said seriously.

"A valid point. I can't make any promises Mr. Kenyon, but we could interview Louie and see how that goes. We'll be having a special 'Open House' and registration for the new students on Sunday, would Louie be able to attend?" Julia asked carefully.

"Yes, I'll bring him myself. He's a wonderful boy and I know you'll like him." Paul said with hope.

"What happened to ze boy's parents, if I may ask." Kurt asked slowly.

"I don't know. When child protective services found out about what they were doing to him, they went in and took him into protective custody. Since then, the family have refused any attempts at any kind of contact. They won't accept our calls, acknowledge our letters, nothing. He was made a ward of the state about two and a half years ago." Paul said distantly.

"Which state would that be?" Julia asked curiously.

"Nevada." Paul said quietly.

"Will you have any need for accommodations while you're here, or will you be returning the same day?" Julia asked curiously.

"I have to be back to work on Monday so, if all goes well with our interview, I'll leave Louie with you on Sunday and return that same evening." Paul said seriously.

"I look forward to meeting Louie, and you too Mr. Kenyon. Do you need any directions to find us?" Julia asked curiously.

"No, everything I need is on the Web site. We'll take a cab from the airport and they'll know how to find you." Paul said with assurance.

*"Zat vill not be necessary Herr Kenyon. If you vill tell us when your flight is arriving, someone vill be zere to meet you."*Kurt said kindly.

"You don't need to go to that kind of trouble." Paul said, surprised by the offer.

"It is no trouble, ve vill be picking up and dropping off others as well." Kurt said with assurance.

"Okay, I'll call back later when I've confirmed my reservations." Paul said with a smile in his voice.

"I look forward to meeting you both. Guten morgen, Herr Kenyon, auft veidersein."

"Auft Veidersein Herr Wagner, Goodbye Dr. Hoffman." Paul said, feeling like a weight was lifting from his shoulders.

"Goodbye Mr. Kenyon." Dr. Hoffman said and hung up the phone.

Paul hung up and rested back in his chair.

He closed his eyes and thought about Louie, and prayed to a higher power that this would be a good thing for him.

[Chapter 4: Slash]

"Could I speak to someone about enrolling at your school?"

"Fifteen."

"Yeah, I'll wait."

"Fifteen."

"Yes, I want to come to your school."

"No. I'm good."

"Josiah Andrew Haley-Keith... yes, with a hyphen. But everyone calls me Slash."

"Yeah, like that."

"No. But, um, I don't know about financial stuff. I mean, I don't know how I'll pay for it."

"Albany, New York."

"Really? Completely?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't have a phone..."

"No, actually I don't. Okay, listen, I've been living in an abandoned house for a couple months and getting by the best that I can. If that's going to be a problem, I need to know now."

"No, no arrests or anything. I'm not an addict or anything like that. I'm just a mutant who can't pass as normal. I was at the library and saw your site. I figured that if I could go there, I could at least graduate high school."

"Yeah, I finished last school year. My mutant thing hit in July, I hit the streets in August."

"I, um, don't know when I'll be able to get there. I'm going to go to the bus station right now. I guess if I'm early, I'll hang around till Sunday."

"Really? Um, yeah. Just a second."

"I've got it. The Xavier Institute? What's that?"

"Oh. Okay, I'll go there and I'll see you on Sunday."

Slash hung up the phone and pulled his thin coat tightly around him.

[I hope they got some food. God it's cold.] He thought as he began walking for the bus station.