

Hurt & Comfort



by MultiMapper

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Elusive Comfort

Hurt & Comfort - X

MultiMapper

Hurt & Comfort

Book 10: Elusive Comfort

Chapter 1: Slivers and Shards

"Bobby, please talk to me. Tell me what happened." Warren asked helplessly.

"He killed himself." Bobby said into Warren's shoulder through his tears.

Warren held Bobby firmly and waited for more.

"I don't know what I did wrong. I tried to be a friend. I... I wasn't enough." Bobby said in despair.

"Shhh. I know. This isn't something you could have prevented. I know how much you cared for Peter, but this was his choice, not yours. It's not your fault." Warren soothed.

"I should have seen some kind of sign... something to let me know he was thinking of it. I should have been able to stop it." Bobby said in grief.

"Bobby." Warren said firmly and pulled out of the hug to look in his eyes.

Bobby looked hesitantly at Warren.

"It isn't your fault. You loved Peter as a friend. He knew that. You can either lose yourself in grief or choose to use this to see that it doesn't happen again." Warren said carefully.

Bobby stared at Warren in question.

"How many kids do you think have thought about doing the same thing?" Warren said in nearly a whisper.

Bobby thought about the conversation earlier and finally said, "I think most of us have thought about it."

"Use Peter's death as an inspiration to help them. Make sure no other kids give into the dark thoughts. Peter gave you the chance to know what it feels like to lose a friend. Let other people know. If they aren't concerned about their own lives, lead them to think of the people around them." Warren said with tears starting to form in his own eyes.

Bobby nodded.

"Who cares about you the most Bobby?" Warren asked in a whisper.

"Robert, Ronny, John... you." Bobby said in a diminishing voice.

"Then you need to let us help you. Bobby, you're hurting, but everyone who cares for you is hurting too. Hurting for Peter and hurting for you. Share this. Let us help you and you'll be helping us. " Warren said steadily.

Bobby got a look of dawning realization and suddenly said, "Robert."

"What?" Warren asked curiously.

"I've been pushing him away all day. He's been trying to help me and I wouldn't let him." Bobby said with a look of horror.

"Shhh. It's not too late. Tell him you need him and let him help you now." Warren said quietly.

Bobby nodded and hurried to the kitchen door.

Before opening the door, he stopped and said over his shoulder, "Thanks Warren, thanks for letting me know how to deal with this."

"Anytime Bobby, and I mean that. If you EVER need me, I'm always available to you." Warren said as he scrubbed a sleeve across his eyes to dry them.

Bobby hurried out the door to find Robert.

* * * * *

"So what are you doing here Wesley?" Xander asked with a smile of welcome.

"I met Mr. Worthington on the plane and he invited me to Thanksgiving dinner." Wesley said hesitantly.

"That's great! Come on and get some food. You've got to try the sweet potatoes, they're wonderful." Xander said as he led Wesley to the serving line.

"Xander, you don't get to hog Wesley all to yourself. Share." Dawn said in a mock stern tone.

Wesley looked at Dawn with surprise.

"We'll sit at the head table and there'll be plenty of room for everyone to join us." Xander said firmly.

"Alright then." Dawn said seriously and picked up a plate

Wesley reached for some Jell-O when Xander stopped him.

"You don't want that Wes, that's Borg food. There's some other Jell-O over here." Xander said quickly.

"Borg food?" Wesley asked curiously.

"Yeah, for the non-humans. It won't hurt you, but it tastes really bland." Xander said as he scooped a double portion of sweet potatoes onto his plate.

"It hadn't occurred to me that their nutritional requirements might be different..." Wesley trailed off in thought.

"Not as much nutrition as taste. They don't **need** to eat at all, but they enjoy it sometimes. But our food is too strongly flavored for them to tolerate, so it has to be diluted quite a bit." Xander said absently.

"Quite interesting." Wesley said as he stepped away from the serving line and waited for Xander to lead him to a table.

"You'll get used to it." Xander said, then pointed to the big table at the front of the room.

* * * * *

"Robert." Bobby said shyly as he walked up behind him.

Robert turned and looked at Bobby with concern.

"I need you." Bobby whispered and opened his arms.

Robert got a smile of relief and fell into Bobby's hug.

The two stood silently in the dining room holding each other, not knowing or caring if anyone was watching.

* * * * *

Warren walked out of the kitchen and gave a gentle smile as he saw Bobby and Robert hugging.

He turned at movement and saw Clark, Trey, John and Scott walk in from the hallway.

Warren walked to Scott with purpose and quietly said, "I've got some business to discuss with you."

"Important?" Scott asked with immediate concern.

"Time sensitive..." Warren trailed off and looked around.

"Do we need to speak privately?" Scott asked, now fully in his professional persona.

"No, I think we could discuss it here. I'll just need a few minutes of your time." Warren said in thought.

"Let's grab some food and then we'll talk." Scott said and walked to the serving line.

"Good idea. It looks wonderful." Warren said as he glanced over the serving line.

"It is, Mom made some kind of sauerkraut salad that you have to try. It's incredible." Scott said as he led the way.

"Mom?" Warren asked curiously, knowing that Scott had NEVER spoken of his parents before.

"Yeah, I've been adopted into Clark's family. Long story." Scott said happily as he selected small portions of various food items.

"That's great Scott. I'll look forward to hearing it sometime." Warren said warmly.

"Maybe after we've discussed our business." Scott said and walked away from the food.

Warren nodded and followed Scott.

* * * * *

Logan walked into the dining room and saw Ororo sitting at the head table with a group of people, but from the distant look on her face, she was sitting alone.

"Mind if I join you?" Matt asked carefully.

A gentle smile fell over Ororo's face as she answered, "Please, I would enjoy the company."

Logan took the seat beside Ororo and tried to think of what to say next.

"Matt, I must tell you something, but I am not sure how to begin." Ororo said carefully.

"Just say it Stormy, ya know I can handle just about anything." Matt said warmly.

"I have noticed your romantic interest in me." Ororo said quietly.

"Yeah, and the ocean is a little damp." Matt said ironically.

Ororo gave a pained smile and continued, "I have interest in Hank. I do not wish to harm you, but I feel it would cause most harm to mislead you into thinking I might return your interest."

Logan sat silently, thinking over Ororo's words.

"I hope this does not effect your relationship with Hank, I know you have become friends." Ororo continued in a pained voice.

"Naw, I knew he was hot for you... he told me. I never had a chance, did I?" Logan asked as he looked deeply into her eyes.

"No. I have been admiring Hank since his arrival. I enjoy your company but feel no romantic interest toward you... I'm sorry." Storm said as her eyes began to glisten with tears.

"Don't worry Stormy. It hurts. But if I had to lose out to someone, at least it was the dust mop. You'll never find a better guy... 'cept me, of course." Logan finished with a grin.

"Of course." Ororo said with a chuckle of relief.

"Just make me one promise." Logan asked quietly.

"Anything, my friend." Storm said intensely.

"If it don't work out with blue boy, think about it." Logan said with a sad, hopeful look.

"Yes, I promise." Storm said in a whisper.

"Then that's the last that I'm goin ta say bout it. If you and Hank ever need me for anything, I'll be there for ya. I'll do whatever I can to help you two." Logan said with assurance.

"Thank you Matt, that's... thank you." Ororo said with a joyful smile.

* * * * *

A taxi pulled up in front of the mansion.

"Someone's here." Janine called out.

"Who is it?" Alan said curiously.

Alan and William walked to the front door as Janine opened it to go outside.

"It's Professor Xavier!" Janine said happily as she ran out to the car.

"William, go tell Scott that the Professor is here." Alan said as he hurried out the door.

William turned and walked quickly to the dining room.

* * * * *

"I need to hire some of your students to help me at the Wagner Institute." Warren said as they settled into their chairs.

"For what?" Scott asked curiously.

"We have five high-school aged students who will be ready to begin classes on Monday. I need some students their age to help them integrate into the mainstream. I thought I could hire a few of your students to attend classes and... basically ease the way." Warren said between bites of food.

"Okay, I guess that's a good idea. I mean, I can see how it would be scary for a high school aged kid to show up at a college. Some people their own age to relate to would be a big help." Scott said in thought.

"I thought you might have an idea of who is in need of the money... or maybe a change of scenery." Warren said in an almost leading tone.

"You're thinking of Bobby, aren't you?" Scott asked as he met Warren's eyes.

"Yes. I don't know what reminder's of Peter he's going to have to face around here, but maybe something new to distract him would... keep him from being overwhelmed by it all. He seems to be overloaded by his own emotions and at a loss for how to deal with them all." Warren said with concern.

"A very astute observation Warren. Until recently, Bobby was very closed off emotionally. He basically wore a friendly mask around everyone, but didn't let anyone get to know him. Peter was the first person to see behind that mask..." Scott trailed off in sadness.

"I see. I didn't know that part." Warren said darkly.

A moment of silence fell between the two.

"Uncle Scott, the Professor's back!" William said as he hurried into the room.

Scott and Warren stood simultaneously and followed William into the hall.

* * * * *

"Professor! How are you doing?" Scott asked with a happy smile as he rushed to the Taxi.

"Very well Scott. I was able to convince Eric to shorten our vacation so I could celebrate Thanksgiving with you all." Charles said happily as he got himself settled into his wheelchair.

"You look good Professor. Did you get enough rest?" Warren asked, noticing that Charles had a tan.

"Yes, exquisite rest." Charles said and cast a loving look at Erik.

"That's great. Almost everyone is in the dining room. I'll get your luggage and meet you there." Scott said with a smile.

"I need to speak to you in my office first." Charles said with a serious look.

"Um. Okay... William, would you get some people to help you with the Professor's luggage?" Scott asked with a feeling of concern filling him.

"We can get it." Alan said and looked at William to see if he agreed.

William nodded and began to pick up suitcases.

Erik pushed Charles' wheelchair up the ramp and into the mansion.

They were followed immediately by Scott and Warren.

* * * * *

"Mystique sent word that Peter committed suicide." The professor said as soon as the door closed.

"Yes." Scott said darkly.

"How is everyone handling it?" Charles asked in his no nonsense tone.

"As well as they can. Alan, Logan and I have been seeing to the kids who were closest to Peter. It's tough, but I think they're doing as well as can be expected." Scott said seriously, then took a seat before the Professor's desk.

Charles got a vacant look, then said, "I see. Well done."

"Charles?" Erik asked from the Professor's side.

The Professor looked up at Erik and his determined expression gave way to a gentle smile.

"Right." The Professor said, then he turned to face Scott and Warren and continued, "I'd like to have a meeting with both of you, Ororo, Hank, Logan, Alan and Xander as soon as you can gather them. We're going to be making some changes."

"I'll get them now." Scott said and got up.

"While you're doing that, I would like to hear about the preparations for the new college." The Professor said, directing the statement to Warren.

Scott left the room as Warren said, "We're ready to open the college on Monday. We already have five new students ready to enroll as soon as the changeover becomes official."

"How do you think the current students are going to react to the mutant invasion?" Charles asked without a spark of humor.

"I'm a little worried about that. I was talking to Scott about hiring a few of your students to attend the Wagner Institute to ease their way." Warren said in his business tone.

"Good thinking. Who did you have in mind?" The Professor asked in thought.

"We haven't gone that far. Bobby is the only one we've discussed... because he probably needs a change of scenery after Peter's death." Warren said with a note of sadness.

"I see. Yes, I agree that he should be given the option." Charles said absently.

The door opened and all the individuals named earlier walked into the room.

"Everyone, take a seat." Charles said forcefully.

Everyone took a seat and waited with apprehension.

"My insistence on doing everything myself has adversely affected my health, so some changes need to be made. I am going to delegate my responsibilities to you all if you are willing to take on the additional burden." Charles said assertively.

"Professor, we have always been willing." Ororo said in a quiet but self assured voice.

Charles smiled at the statement and continued, "Scott will be in charge of the academic needs of the younger students, through high school."

Scott nodded.

"Ororo will be in charge of the student accommodations, meal preparation schedules... basically the non-academic aspects of the student's needs." Charles said as he looked at her.

"Of course Professor." Ororo said with a gentle smile.

"Alan will be in charge of administration." The Professor said and looked at Alan.

"Yes Professor." Alan said quietly.

"Hank will be in charge of our college level students, including the student teachers." The Professor said firmly.

Hank nodded.

"Logan will be in charge of the X-men. Training, equipment and the like. Scott and Ororo will still be team leaders as before, but Logan will be in charge of the day-to-day needs of the team." The Professor said, looking at Logan to see if he had any objection.

"I'm not him." Logan said with an unreadable look.

"Pardon?" The Professor asked in confusion.

"I'm not the Logan you know. I'm the other one." Logan said with a look that might be interpreted as impatience.

"I see." The Professor said in a tone of voice that said he really didn't.

"Matt is the Logan from my world. The Logan from this world left with Jean." Alan said quietly.

"Yes... well then..." The Professor said, at a loss for what to do next.

"Professor? I think Matt would be excellent in the position." Scott said and smiled at his friend.

Charles looked at Scott curiously, knowing that Scott and Logan never got along.

"I agree." Alan said next.

"He's got my vote." Xander said with a shrug.

"Very well, Matt, would you like to take the position?" The Professor asked, sounding less sure than before.

"Yeah, I just wanted you to know what you'd be getting." Matt said in a low voice.

Charles nodded, then looked to Xander.

"Xander, if you'd be willing, I'd like for you to be liaison with the Wagner Institute. You'd be responsible for recruiting alpha and omega level mutants to this facility and keeping both facilities abreast of events that might be of concern." The Professor said with renewed assuredness.

"Excuse me Professor, but he can't." Warren said quickly, before Xander could agree.

"Why not?" Xander asked curiously.

"One of the reasons I came here was to talk to you about Wainright Enterprises. The board of directors are beginning to make some questionable decisions and you may need to step in and take control of the company before it gets out of hand." Warren said in full business mode.

"But... I mean... I don't know anything about running a company. It's just a cover story." Xander said helplessly.

"The Professor was very thorough about your cover story. I've hired an investigator to find out all that he can about you... just to see if there was any indication that you weren't who the Professor claims you are." Warren said professionally.

"And?" Xander asked cautiously.

"And, he confirmed that you *are* Alexander Wainright, the adopted child of Robert and Felicity Wainright and the one and only heir to the Wainright estate, including a controlling interest in Wainright Enterprises. As a side note, I was surprised to find out that we were college roommates at the Xavier Institute where we both attained our Masters degrees in Business Administration." Warren ended with a smile.

"It would explain why you know each other, in case someone should ask." Professor Xavier said with a smile.

"Okay... But I... I don't know what to do." Xander said helplessly.

"That's one of the reasons that I'm here. The board of directors of your company have made a few decisions contrary to mutant interests that you should be aware of." Warren said with concern.

"Like?" Xander asked hesitantly.

"I don't know any specifics. I was lucky to find out as much as I did. All I can tell you is that it's a government defense contract and is codenamed 'Sentinel'."

* * * * *

"I'm sorry Robert. I'm sorry I didn't let you help me when I was hurting... I love you." Bobby whispered.

"I understand Bobby. My own emotions sometimes overwhelm me. Thank you for letting me help you now." Robert said into Bobby's chest.

"Are you guys okay?" Clark asked with concern.

"Fine Clark. How are you?" Bobby asked as he loosened his grip on Robert.

"Me? Oh, let's see..." Clark said with a contented smile and held up his hand to display his ring.

"What's that?" Bobby asked curiously.

"My promise ring from Trey and John." Clark said with joy.

"What's that?" Bobby asked in confusion.

Robert looked at Clark and received a nod to proceed.

"The ring is a symbol of commitment among Clark, Trey and John to show that they are promised to each other. This symbol means that they are not available for intimacy with anyone else and will one day make a formal commitment to become life partners." Robert said reverently.

"Thanks Robert. It's still hard for me to put it into words." Clark said quietly.

"You mean you three? Are together?" Bobby asked with wide eyes.

"Yes. I love them." Clark said with peace.

Bobby recognized the look and moved from surprise to acceptance.

"I need to congratulate John. This is great." Bobby said as he pulled Clark into a one armed hug, still holding Robert with the other.

"Thanks Bobby. John's over there." Clark said as he motioned to the table where John was sitting next to Trey.

"Come on." Bobby said quietly and guided Robert and Clark, still gently holding both of them.

* * * * *

"Any suggestions for a liaison between the Xavier Institute and the Wagner Institute?" Professor Xavier asked the group.

"What about Alex?" Scott asked quickly.

"I believe Alex will be quite busy between his teaching duties and his college studies. The liaison position is likely to be time consuming, though not necessarily difficult." The Professor said in thought.

"Perhaps Tara might be able to do it. I could resume the duties she has taken up in MedLab. Then she should have free time." Hank said in thought.

"I'm afraid not Hank. Though I believe she would be excellent in the liaison position, both you and she would likely be overburdened by the addition of the responsibility." Professor Xavier said with apology.

"Um. Professor? What kind of experience would the liaison have to have... I mean, does it have to be someone with an academic background?" Alan asked hesitantly.

"No, the position has more of a human interest than an academic focus." Charles said with a curious look at Alan.

"How about Lee?" Alan asked the group.

"I'm afraid I don't know him." The Professor said with confusion.

"He's Andrew's father. He doesn't have a job right now and he's really a good person. I think it would be perfect for him." Alan said with enthusiasm.

"Scott, what do you think?" The Professor asked as he shifted his focus.

"Honestly, I don't know him that well. He seems nice enough, but I haven't had an opportunity to sit down and talk with him." Scott said seriously.

"I have." Xander said in thought.

Everyone turned to Xander, waiting for him to continue.

"He'd be great. That guy's been through hell, and coming from me, that's saying a lot." Xander said with a small smirk, then continued, "He's been clean and sober for five years. He's been trying to find a place to fit in, but his mutation keeps him moving from place to place. I think with a little training, he'd be perfect for the job."

"What is his mutation?" The Professor asked seriously.

"He can create portals like Andrew, but he hasn't learned to target them... And he doesn't age." Alan said in a preoccupied voice.

"Doesn't age?" The Professor prompted.

"He looks like he's about sixteen... like Andrew." Alan said seriously.

"I see... actually, that could work to our benefit." Professor Xavier said in thought.

"How so?" Scott asked curiously.

"He could observe situations first hand that one of us might not be able to. Students sometimes behave differently when an adult is present." The Professor said with a nod.

"Sometimes?" Xander asked with an incredulous look.

"Usually." Scott said with a smile.

"Usually." The Professor conceded.

"We can ask him, but it will have to be his choice. I wouldn't want him to feel pressured to pretend to be a teenager... he needs to know it's a choice, not a job requirement." Alan said firmly.

Charles looked at Alan curiously.

"Xander was right, he's been through hell. I just want him to understand that we want *him* for the job, not his mutant ability." Alan said, begging for understanding with his eyes.

"Agreed." Charles said, without expression.

Chapter 2: New Beginnings and Remembered Endings

"Alan, would you invite Lee to join us? I'd like to meet him and offer him the position as soon as possible so he'll be ready for Monday." The Professor asked professionally.

"I think he's at the boathouse. I'll call him from the outer office." Alan said quickly.

Charles nodded, then asked, "Scott, have you implemented any of the plans we discussed before I left?"

"No Professor. We had several new students and... it slipped my mind." Scott said shyly.

"Quite alright. Do you still believe it is a good idea?" Charles asked casually.

"Yes." Scott said immediately.

"Then I will ask Trey Summers to see to Cerebro's maintenance. Matt, if you agree, you can invite Icheb Summers to see to the maintenance of the Blackbird and put Alex in charge of the junior X-men's training." The Professor said seriously.

"When you say 'invite' do you mean 'hire'?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Yes, as a part-time job. Not to be scheduled over twenty hours a week." Charles said in full administrator mode.

"I'll need to talk to them. I don't know either of 'em. But if I think they're up to it, yeah." Matt said seriously.

"Warren was wanting to hire some of our students to go to the Wagner Institute... to ease the way for the first class of mutants to be enrolled." Charles said to the group.

"Who should we send?" Ororo asked with concern.

"The only one we've discussed is Bobby." Warren said in thought.

"John." Scott said immediately.

Everyone looked to Scott curiously.

"Money is a big issue in his case. I don't know how much you'll be paying him, but anything would help." Scott said with concern.

"The dollar amount hasn't been set up yet. But if he's in need, I'll see to it that he's taken care of." Warren said with assurance.

Scott smiled weakly and nodded.

"Who else?" Charles asked the group as Alan walked back into the room.

"What did I miss?" Alan asked in a whisper to Scott, but everyone heard.

"We were discussing which students should be hired to go to the Wagner Institute to ease the way for their first mutant students." Charles said quickly to catch Alan up.

"So who have we got?" Alan asked casually.

"Bobby and John." Scott answered.

"Then you'll need Clark and Ronny at least." Alan said with confidence.

"Why?" Charles asked curiously.

"Because they'll need support. They'll be among college age students and will need to have someone to depend on." Alan said with certainty.

"Actually that fits in with the financial need too. Clark and Ronny could both use the money." Scott said in thought.

"What about Robert?" Matt asked hesitantly.

"He's closer to Ronny's age. He's close to Bobby. Yes I think he'd do well." Alan said with a nod.

"Is that enough?" Charles asked, directing his question to Warren.

"Yes, more than enough at the moment. We only have five new students waiting to enroll, but I'm hoping for more when the news becomes generally known. We're holding off on the official announcement till Monday." Warren said seriously.

"Very well, then we'll talk with them at the conclusion of this meeting." Professor Xavier said in thought.

"Charles, we will be having Thanksgiving dinner at the conclusion of this meeting... delegate." Erik said firmly.

Professor Xavier turned to look over his shoulder at Magneto with an impatient glare, but when he saw the honest concern in Erik's eyes, he just said, "Would you mind Scott and Warren?"

"I'd be glad to Professor but I had one question first. How did Mystique know about Peter?" Scott asked curiously.

"It seems one of your X-men has become enamored of one of my associates and needed consolation after Colossus' death." Erik said in a cool voice.

Several people looked curiously at each other, trying to make sense of the vague statement.

"Kitty." Ororo said quietly, to stop their speculation.

"Are there any other situations we need to discuss before we adjourn?" Professor Xavier asked the group.

"Nothing big. I've enrolled a few new students, hired a few new teachers and reorganized the curriculum a little since you've been gone." Scott said timidly.

"I haven't been gone a week." Professor Xavier said with a helpless and disbelieving expression.

"If you'll adjourn the meeting, I'll introduce you to the new people. They'll probably be in the dining room at some point during our meal." Scott said quietly.

"Excuse me?" A voice said from the office door.

"Come in Lee, this is Professor Xavier." Alan said happily.

Lee walked in hesitantly and extended his hand to the Professor.

"Nice to meet you Lee." Professor Xavier said carefully as he shook Lee's hand.

"Alan said you wanted to talk with me?" Lee said with a note of fear in his voice.

"Yes, if no one objects, we'll adjourn to the dining room and I'll talk to you over dinner." Professor Xavier said hopefully.

Lee looked around and could see that no one was going to object to that.

Alan moved to one side of Lee as Xander walked to the other and walked with him out of the room.

"You didn't need to be a telepath to know that he's scared half to death, what do you suppose that's all about?" Erik asked casually as he moved Professor Xavier's chair from behind the desk.

"He thinks I'm going to ask him to leave." Charles said in thought.

"Why would he think that?" Scott asked in confusion.

"I can't be sure without scanning him. But his fear was projecting so strongly, I couldn't help but pick it up." Charles said as Erik pushed him out of the room.

* * * * *

Scott walked into the dining room and noticed Bobby, Robert, Clark, John and Trey sitting at a table.

"You ready to talk to them Warren?" Scott asked and tilted his head in the direction of the boys.

"No time like the present." Warren said and diverted from his original course.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" Scott asked the table as he approached.

"We were just telling Bobby about our promise ceremony." John said with a peaceful smile.

Warren looked at John with question.

"It was to let our families know that we're going steady." Clark said with a look of complete joy.

"Was everyone okay with it?" Warren asked with immediate concern.

"Yeah, they were all great. Even my dad was okay with it, and I never would have guessed that." John said in an impressed voice.

"Good, I'm glad to hear it." Warren said, still not looking at ease.

"I think Dad left with Remy a while ago, I need to find him." John said with uncharacteristic concern.

"I think they're out at the rocks smoking." Scott said in a mock whisper, like he was telling a secret.

John got a surprised look, then smiled.

"Guys, we need to talk to you... and Ronny." Scott said and looked around the room.

"Ronny and Chris are engaged in a killing simulation." Trey said simply.

Scott and Warren looked at each other with wide eyes.

"They're playing 'Resident Evil' on the PlayStation in the common room." John said with laughter in his voice.

Trey shot a look of question at John.

John responded by reaching under the table and taking a firm hold of Trey's hand to express his affection.

Trey's curious expression melted into a content smile.

"Would someone go get him? We need to ask all of you a question." Scott asked hopefully.

"We'll do it." Bobby said, and led Robert from the room.

"What's up with those two?" Warren asked as he watched Bobby leave.

"They're a couple." Clark said without concern as one of his hands also disappeared under the table.

"Guys, I just wanted to thank you for not being too obvious, especially with the parents around. I really appreciate the effort." Scott said warmly.

"We do not wish to cause you hardship, Uncle Scott. We will attempt to refrain from displays of affection within the public areas of the mansion." Trey said simply.

"Found 'em." Bobby said and returned to the table leading Robert, Ronny and Chris.

Warren and Scott settled into chairs as the boys did the same.

Scott looked around and said, "Warren has a job offer for some of you."

John and Ronny immediately perked up at that statement.

"I'd like to hire some students to attend the Wagner Institute to help the new students settle in." Warren said as he looked around the group.

"What would we have to do?" John asked immediately.

"I'm concerned that the new students will feel out of place and adrift if they arrive without a peer group where they can fit in." Warren said in thought.

"So you're hiring us to be their friends?" Ronny asked in confusion.

"Not exactly. You would attend classes with them and be... like an example." Warren said carefully.

Ronny fought to conceal a laugh.

"What's wrong?" Bobby asked in confusion.

"Me? An example?" Ronny asked through a chuckle.

Scott remembered Ronny as he was when he arrived and smiled as he said, "You'd be a fine example Ronny. You've made a complete turn around since I've known you and I'd be proud to tell anyone that you're the kind of person that goes to our school."

Ronny sobered at the words and looked at Scott in wonder.

"Who you thinking of hiring?" John asked, breaking the silence.

"We thought we'd offer the job to John, Clark, Bobby, Ronny and Robert." Warren said seriously.

"What about Trey?" Clark asked immediately.

"The Professor was going to offer him a job working on Cerebro." Scott said with a look of apology.

"Then I won't do it." Clark said firmly.

"What?" Scott asked in surprise.

"I won't leave Trey." Clark said in a definite voice.

"Clark, think about this, it's a job. Money." John said with a pleading tone.

"I know, and I want to take it too, but not without Trey. When we move, the only time I'll be able to see him is at school. I won't give up that time with him." Clark said in return.

John sat silently with a look of turmoil on his face.

"Excuse me, before you refuse the offer, allow me to talk with the Professor. Perhaps there is an alternative." Trey said with a look of love directed at Clark and John.

"Good idea, you go talk to him and we'll wait." Scott said with a tone of relief.

Trey nodded, then hurried to the Professor's table.

"What about the rest of you?" Scott asked, looking at Bobby, Ronny and Robert.

Bobby looked at Robert and received a nod.

"We're in." Bobby said as he took Robert's hand and held it firmly.

"Me too." Ronny said in thought.

Trey walked to the table and said, "The Professor said that I may perform maintenance on Cerebro on Saturdays and will be available to accompany you."

"Great!" Clark said with a glorious smile and stood. He pulled Trey into a hug and immediately felt John join the hug from behind him.

"Well, it looks like you have your students Warren." Scott said warmly.

Warren looked at the group of boys and said, "I couldn't have hoped for anyone better for the job."

"So when do we start?" Ronny asked curiously.

"All the students who've applied are going to arrive Sunday to fill out their paperwork and have their entrance interviews." Warren said before taking a bite of his food.

"We'll be ready." John said from his hug.

"You guys might want to tone it down with the new students... at least, at first." Warren said hesitantly.

Clark, John and Trey broke their hug and took their seats again.

"Yeah, we'll behave." John said seriously.

"I'm not saying you have to lie or anything, just remember that outside this school, people tend to be less accepting of what they don't understand." Warren said quickly.

"It's okay Mr. Worthington, we're going to save that stuff for when we're alone. Just sometimes when we're all excited, it slips out." Clark said with a blush.

Warren nodded with a smile.

"What are we going to do about their power training?" Scott asked suddenly.

"We'll work something out. Maybe before or after classes." Warren said in thought.

"Before. If these guys turn out to be okay, we'll probably want to do stuff after classes with them." Ronny said seriously.

"What do you say Scott? Can you manage that?" Warren asked with a peaceful smile.

"I think we can." Scott said with a look of pride at the group of boys.

"I want to go too." Chris said in a small voice.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible Chris." Scott said with apology.

"Why not?" Chris asked with a timid look.

"Your gifts are extremely dangerous and you don't have full control yet. I'm concerned that being around non-mutants, especially now, might cause a circumstance where your powers might manifest. It's just too dangerous." Scott said with regret.

"For how long?" Chris asked with worry.

"I don't think it will be too long. If you commit yourself to your training, I think you'll probably be able to attend whichever school you want next semester." Scott said softly.

Chris nodded.

"Don't worry buddy, we're going to be here for power training every morning and we'll probably be hanging around this place after school every day." Ronny said with assurance as he put a hand on Chris' shoulder.

Chris nodded again.

"Perhaps you could spend time with William. I know he enjoys your company." Robert suggested quietly.

Chris looked at Robert with surprise, then nodded with a happy smile.

"Yeah, he'll probably be feeling left behind too. I'll do that." Chris said with cheer.

"If only all life's problems could be resolved so easily." Scott said wistfully to Warren.

"Most of them can be, with friends." Warren said in peace.

* * * * *

After getting food, the Professor, Erik, Ororo, Alan and Lee sat in a row on one side of the table.

"I'm glad to see you again Mr. Wyndom-Price. How are you doing?" The Professor asked pleasantly.

"Honestly, I'm a little overwhelmed. I'm greeted with such enthusiasm and affection here that I hardly know how to react." Wesley said, then glanced at Xander, Dawn and Tara.

Remy and Rick walked to the table and casually sat down in the seats beside Xander.

"Missed you love." Xander whispered to Remy.

"Remy miss you too." Remy said back.

"I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met." Professor Xavier said to Rick.

"I'm sorry Professor. Rick, this is Professor Charles Xavier, Professor, this is Rick Allerdyce, John's father." Alan said pleasantly.

Charles sat in stunned shock to see this man, this monster, sitting at his table.

"A pleasure." Charles forced out, skillfully hiding his contempt for the man who'd hurt John for so many years.

//Scott? I am beyond surprised to find this man in my home. Please explain.// The Professor sent with no small amount of anger under the words.

"A pleasure for me too... this place is beautiful." Rick stammered.

//He's in therapy to deal with his anger and he's really trying to fix things with John.// Scott sent with a plea for understanding under his words.

"Thank you. I hope you enjoy your visit." Charles said pleasantly as he sent to Scott, //If he causes John one moment of grief while he's here, he'll be leaving with a migraine that he'll never forget.//

Scott smiled at the Professor and sent a simple wave of assurance through their link.

"Lee, I was discussing a job opening with the senior staff and Alan suggested you for the position." Professor Xavier said, turning his attention fully to Lee.

Lee froze like a deer in headlights before saying, "What?"

Professor Xavier smiled warmly, he was taking an instant liking to the man.

"I'm going to need someone to coordinate activities between the Xavier Institute and the Wagner Institute. Alan suggested that you might be well suited for the position." The Professor said a little more quietly, in deference to Lee's obvious terror.

"Why me?" Lee asked with wide eyes.

"I was just told by Alan, Scott and Xander that you would, most likely, do well in the job. Though I don't know you personally, I have learned to trust their judgment, especially in regards to people." The Professor said smoothly.

Lee looked off into the distance for a few seconds, then asked, "What would I be doing?"

"Several things. Mainly staying abreast of current events as they relate to mutant issues, relaying information between the two facilities, and identifying mutants who need assistance with their abilities." The Professor said, now in a more businesslike tone.

"Like what kind of assistance?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"Like Scott for instance. His optic blasts effectively made him blind. He couldn't open his eyes without destroying whatever he was looking at. All he needed were the special glasses to contain his power and now he is fully sighted." Professor Xavier said in thought.

"I'm sorry, but I'm still not sure I get it." Lee said quietly.

"Let's say that one of the new students has an ability... telepathy, for instance. If you recognize that the student is becoming distracted, having headaches from too many voices, is violating people's privacy, things of that nature, you could recommend that he or she receive training in telepathic control and shielding." The Professor said seriously.

"It sounds like a lot of responsibility." Lee said with worry.

"You won't be alone in this. The teachers, administrators, and even some of the students at both facilities will be able to pass along their observations to you, and you will be able to ask their advice. Your job will essentially be to help both schools by requesting assistance from one when the other needs it." The Professor said with difficulty.

"So if the new school was short a teacher, I would come to you and tell you?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"Well, you would get approval from Dr. Hoffman or Mr. Wagner first, but then, yes." The Professor said simply.

"And it was suggested that you could pass as a student if that's something you feel would be helpful." Alan said quietly.

"So you want me to do this because I look young?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"Not at all. That would be your choice and is in no way a requirement of your job. If you choose to take the position, how you represent yourself is entirely up to you." The Professor said with assurance.

"Can I think about it?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Of course, take all the time you need... Mr. Wells?" The Professor asked uncertainly.

"Yes. And thank you Professor." Lee said happily.

Chapter 3: Arrival

The cold huddled figure walked up the long drive and finally saw the mansion in the distance.

[What the fuck?] He thought to himself, but continued to walk.

Turning around was not an option, there was nothing but cold and isolation behind him anyway. And an eight mile walk.

The guy on the phone had said to come here... maybe they wouldn't treat him too bad.

A sudden gust of wind nearly knocked him off his feet, but he turned his body against the wind and kept moving.

That's the secret, the cold won't get you if you keep moving, gotta keep moving.

Finally he reached the door and it opened before he could knock.

"Hello?" the little girl said curiously.

"Hi." The boy said hesitantly.

"Come inside. It's cold." The girl said and grabbed his hand.

[She touched me. No one's touched me since... I can't remember.] Slash thought as he was led into the room that looked like a museum.

"Are you hungry? We're having Thanksgiving dinner." The little girl asked with excitement as she led the way.

Slash was overcome by the question. Hungry? He couldn't remember being anything other than hungry for months.

"Yeah." He said in nearly a whisper.

She led him into a huge room filled with dozens of people.

His first reaction was to turn and run. If he weren't so shocked by his surroundings and being pulled by the little girl, he might have. He felt ashamed. The coat he wore was worn out and second hand before he got it. He knew what he looked like, and didn't feel that he belonged here. These were probably some rich family celebrating their prosperity by eating till they were sick.

"The food's over here. Come on." The little girl said while still pulling his hand.

He couldn't help but follow as he was trying to see if anyone was watching him.

Suddenly he realized that she'd released his hand and he was standing before a serving line of about a hundred different kinds of food.

[Am I dreaming? Did I fall asleep on the bus and now I'm dreaming of food?] He thought in a daze as he carefully picked up a fine china plate and walked to the first pan of food.

"Hey, I don't think we've met." A voice said from behind him that nearly made him drop the plate.

Slash turned around and saw a pleasant looking guy, about his own age.

"Hey." He said hesitantly, then went back to dishing up food.

"I'm Clark." The boy said, sounding a little more hesitant.

"Slash."

"Okay Slash, do you have anyone to sit with?" Clark asked, sounding friendly again.

"No." Slash said in a gruff whisper.

"You probably don't want that. The food on that table is... special." Clark said with difficulty.

Slash turned to look at Clark in question, maybe a little hurt.

"I mean, some of the people here can't eat regular food. It's for them." Clark said hurriedly, not wanting Slash to get the wrong idea... whatever it was.

Slash nodded and moved on down the line.

"That sweet potato stuff is really good, and my mom made the sauerkraut salad." Clark said, pointing out the dishes.

Slash took a small portion of each.

The plate was starting to mound over and Clark noticed.

"You can come back as many times as you want. They said they're going to keep the food out till nine tonight." Clark said softly.

Slash nodded and turned to look around the room.

"Over here, I'll introduce you to the guys." Clark said and led the way without hesitation.

Slash was feeling overwhelmed, but followed and took the seat that was offered to him.

"Guys, this is Slash. Slash, this is John, Trey, Chris, Ronny, Bobby and Robert." Clark said as he pointed to each one.

"Hi." Slash said quickly before taking a big bite of sweet potatoes.

"I can take your coat for you if you'd like." Clark offered helpfully.

Slash froze and thought about that.

If he took off his coat, they'd see, they'd know.

But if he didn't, they might ask questions and figure out he didn't belong here.

"Kay." Slash said and took off his coat.

He tried not to look at their reactions to his appearance as he removed his coat, hat and gloves.

"Be right back." Clark said and took his coat out of the room.

Slash took another bite of food, then tried to casually look around to see if they were staring at him.

To his surprise, Robert, Chris and Bobby were talking with each other while Trey and John were watching Clark walk out of the room.

Slash took another bite of food and nearly choked when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Hi, I don't think we've met." The man said in a friendly voice.

Slash turned around in his chair and saw the man towering over him.

"This is Slash." John said from the other side of the table.

"Nice to meet you Slash. How did you come to be here?" The man asked curiously.

"I talked to this German guy on the phone and he said if I got into town before Sunday, I was supposed to come here." Slash said in a hurried and frightened voice.

"Oh, you must have been talking to Kurt. So are you going to be going to the Wagner school?" the man asked as he took a seat.

"Yeah. Or at least I'm gonna try." Slash said timidly.

Clark sat back down in the seat the other side from the guy who was talking.

"Guys, would you take Slash up to the room across from Bobby's when he's ready? He'll be staying with us a few days." the man said to the group.

"We'll take care of him Mr. Summers." Ronny said firmly.

"Scott. I'm only Mr. Summers in class." Scott said with a genuine smile.

"Okay Scott. We'll help Slash find his way around." Ronny said in a softer voice.

"Thanks, I have to get back to the head table. And Slash, I'll let Warren know you're here." Scott said as he stood.

"Who was that?" Slash asked the group.

"He's kind of the second in charge around here." Ronny said simply.

"And a teacher." Bobby added.

"And my brother." Clark said happily.

"And my Uncle." Trey said with a smile.

"Wow. He sounds really important." Slash said in a thoughtful voice and realized that, somehow, he'd managed to finish off his plate of food.

"Yeah, I guess so. He's really cool though. He took some of us camping last weekend. He's a lot of fun." Bobby said with a smile.

"Cool." Slash said and stood with his empty plate.

"Hey Slash, if you want, we can show you your room, then you can come back for more if you're still hungry." Clark offered quickly.

Slash stopped and thought about it and finally nodded.

"I will take care of your plate." Robert said and took the plate from Slash's hand.

"Mind if we come?" John asked.

Clark looked at Slash and waited.

Slash gave a bewildered shake of his head.

The group of four walked out of the dining room and down the hall.

"It's up this way... oh yeah, and your coat is in that closet over there." Clark said as they walked toward the stairs.

"Thanks." Slash said in an absent voice.

* * * * *

"Who is that?" The Professor asked when Scott returned from talking to the pale boy. No, more than pale, his skin was completely white. The white skin was even more apparent given his deep raven black hair and eyebrows. He was sitting and talking with John and Ronny.

"His name is Slash, he's one of the students for the Wagner Institute. He just got into town... I think." Scott said as he sat down.

"You think?" Professor Xavier questioned.

"He was so nervous, I didn't want to interrogate him any more than necessary. Don't worry, the guys are going to take care of him." Scott said with confidence.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but since when do you let anyone take care of anything without your direct supervision?" The Professor asked curiously.

"Since I spent some time with the guys and realized that they are all capable, responsible young men. If I try to do everything myself, I only cause more strain on me and take away another chance for them to contribute." Scott said simply.

"A lesson I have yet to learn, apparently." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"You're getting there Charles." Erik said with a smile.

Charles smiled back, then watched as Slash, Clark, Trey and John left the room.

* * * * *

"Hank? Are you in here?" Ororo asked with concern.

"Yes Ro, I'm back here." Hank said from a small room.

"How are you?" Ororo asked, knowing that he was feeling some responsibility for Peter's death.

"Not too well. The incident with Peter has made me question my relationship with the students." Hank said and looked up from his work.

"How so?" Ororo said with interest as she casually leaned against his desk.

"I was taught in residence to maintain a certain detachment from my patients. Not to become involved in their personal lives beyond what is necessary for diagnostic purposes. They said that personal feelings could cloud objectivity." Hank said as he looked deeply into her eyes.

"I have to say that I disagree with that philosophy." Ororo said smoothly.

"I'm beginning to as well. I feel that if I had taken more of an interest in Peter's life, his emotional well being, I would have had some inkling that this was coming."

"Hank, you can't take responsibility for everyone else's actions and choices. Only your own. Come on, you need a break. Come walk with me." Ororo said hopefully.

"Yes, I suppose I do need a break, and a walk in the night air would be refreshing." Hank said with a smile.

"And as I recall, you still owe me a roaring fire and a cup of hot cocoa." Ororo said as she led him from the room.

"That I do." Hank said gently as he took hold of Ororo's hand.

Neither noticed the machine he had been monitoring was still running as they left.

* * * * *

"This place is awesome." Slash said in wonder.

"Yeah, it's really nice." Clark said and stopped in the hall.

"Just so you know, this is our room, Johns and mine... at least for a few more days. So if you need anything, you just come on over... but you'll probably want to knock first." Clark finished in a timid voice.

"We'll be locking the door from now on. Ronny's probably been permanently scarred from what he saw this morning." John said with a chuckle.

Slash looked from one to the other with question.

"Ronny kind of walked in on us while we were..." Clark trailed off helplessly.

"...Fucking." John finished with a chuckle at Clark's tone of voice.

"You two... were... each other?" Slash asked in wonder.

"Three actually." Clark said and pulled Trey into a casual hug.

"Three." Slash said without expression.

"Oh, I didn't ask if that was a problem. Does our being gay bother you?" John asked with concern.

"Um, no. Not at all. It's just that I wasn't expecting... I know a couple gay guys and they're all flamboyant and really... I don't know how to say it without sounding insulting." Slash ended weakly.

"I get it. We're just three guys in love. We don't march in parades, dress in drag, wear bondage gear or any of that stuff. But I figure that since we're having sex, they can't throw us out of the club." John said in a teasing voice.

"Anyway, that's Bobby and Ronny's room. If we're not here or... occupied, Bobby or Ronny should be able to help you." Clark said and started walking to the next door.

"Are they a couple too?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"No, they're brothers. Bobby's boyfriend is Robert, Trey's brother. Ronny isn't with anyone." Clark said as he opened the door.

"Here's your room." Clark said with a smile.

"It's fucking huge." Slash said with wide eyes.

"Yeah, that's about what I said." Clark said with a distant look.

"Except the 'fucking' part, you couldn't even say 'damn' without blushing." John said with a smile.

"I'm getting better." Clark said, then got a devious smile as he turned to John and said, "Let me prove it."

Clark put a hand on each of John's shoulders and looked deeply into his eyes.

"Fucking." He whispered with sultry intensity.

"Don't get the motor running if your not going to take it out for a drive." John said in warning.

"Oh, I'm gonna drive it..."

"Excuse me?" Trey said and glanced at Slash.

"Sorry, we get carried away. Do you have any luggage or anything you need hauled?" Clark asked as he released John.

"Um, no. Got everything here." Slash said and held up his backpack.

"I guess that's the grand tour, you ready to go back to the dining room?" Clark asked with a friendly smile.

"Just a second." John said and walked into the bathroom.

"Actually, I really need a cigarette after that meal." Slash said with intensity.

"Well, there's no smoking in the mansion. But I think the 'unofficial' designated smoking area is the rocks down the hill from the South door. We can show you where." Clark said helpfully.

"No shampoo or soap." John said as he walked back into the room.

"I guess he could borrow ours." Clark said in thought.

"Or Peter's." John said hesitantly.

"Yeah. I guess he won't be needing it." Clark said darkly.

"What's up?" Slash asked curiously at the change in mood.

"A friend of ours, he killed himself... yesterday." John said and looked away.

"Ouch. I know how that is. I've lost a few. Sorry guys." Slash said with sympathy.

Clark nodded as John walked out into the hallway.

"So are you guys all mutants too?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"John is. Trey and I are... something else." Clark said with a helpless look at Trey.

"I'm guessing that's code for 'don't go there'." Slash said without offense.

"It's more like code for 'you probably wouldn't believe me and I don't want you to think I'm nuts'." Clark said honestly.

"Fair enough. Maybe later." Slash said without concern.

"Yeah, I promise." Clark said with a smile.

John walked back into the room carrying soap and shampoo and walked into the bathroom.

"So is your whole mutation being black and white?" Clark asked casually.

"Well, I put the black there. I'm totally white. My hair is almost transparent if I don't color it and my eyebrows and eyelashes, they blend in with my skin color." Slash said uncomfortably.

"Isn't that like, an albino or something?" John asked as he walked out of the bathroom.

"Not really. I'm more white than that, albinos usually have *some* color, it's just very, very pale. I'm totally white, even my eyes. The pupil is black so... honestly, most people get creeped out by them." Slash said honestly.

"I think they're cool. Do you have any mutant abilities?" Clark asked as he absently put an arm loosely around Trey's waist.

"Yeah, let me show you." Slash said and picked up a maroon vase with dried flowers.

"This is my big bad mutant power." Slash said in a self mocking voice and firmly held the vase in his hand.

Slowly, all the color seemed to drain out of the vase and the flowers.

Within a minute, they were both solid black.

"So you can drain color?" Trey asked, seemingly impressed.

"Yeah, that's it. The God's themselves should tremble at my power." Slash said and sat the vase back on the dresser.

"It is one more power than I have." Trey said honestly.

"Except that you could probably kick all our asses if you wanted to." John said frankly.

At Slash's inquiring gaze, Clark clarified, "He's been trained to fight. He's really good."

"Is that how you got that metal thing on your face?" Slash asked.

"Come on, let's go out the South door so you can smoke. We'll talk along the way." John said and headed for the door.

"The metal you see is part of a much larger structure. I have many machines in my body." Trey said simply.

"And this one's my favorite." John said and gave a whisper of a touch to the skin around Trey's occipital implant.

John smiled as Trey gave an involuntary shudder.

Clark couldn't help but join in.

"This one's mine." Clark said and moved his hand under the back of Trey's shirt to give the same feathery touch to the skin surrounding Trey's spinal clamp.

"Guys, you're doing it again." Slash said with a smile as they descended the stairs.

Both John and Clark withdrew their hands and looked apologetic.

"I can't help it, they're so cute." John said helplessly.

"I can see that. To tell you the truth, I've never been around anyone who's as open as you three. I mean, straight couples too. It's really cool that you can be yourselves." Slash said as they walked to the coat closet.

"Well, we're best friends before we're anything else. When the three of us first started talking, we agreed that we'll always tell each other the truth. That kind of opened the honesty floodgates and we've been this way ever since." Clark said as he pulled on his coat.

"This way." John said and led the way down the hallway.

"So if you all aren't mutants, why are you here?" Slash asked curiously, glancing around the hallway.

"Well, I have an ability, a lot like a mutant ability, so I came here to learn how to control it." Clark said frankly.

"That's that stuff I wouldn't believe, huh?" Slash asked curiously.

"Yeah. that stuff." Clark said with a smile.

"My fathers are both mutants and teach here." Trey said into the silence.

"Fathers?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"Yes." Trey confirmed.

"I'm sorry, but... fathers?" Slash asked again.

"Trey's adopted." Clark said as he realized Slash's difficulty.

"Correct, only two of my brothers are the biological children of my fathers, the remainder were adopted." Trey said without emotion.

"Not getting any clearer guys." Slash said as he pushed open the door at the end of the hall.

"I know. Let's try again, story of Trey, take two." John said as he put an arm casually around Trey's waist.

"My fathers adopted my siblings and I, there are six of us. Sunday, my brothers Thomas and Chakotay were born." Trey said with a tone of accomplishment for keeping it brief and understandable.

"I think you're missing the part that I'm confused about. How can two men produce a child?" Slash asked slowly, trying to make Trey understand.

"Oh, of course, my dad had an artificial womb implanted in his abdomen. The doctor took the DNA of one of my parents and put it in a donor egg. The DNA of my other parent was introduced in sperm... then the egg split." Trey said, then stopped.

"Hi guys." Lee said, sitting on a rock and smoking.

"Grandfather, this activity is unhealthy." Trey said in a chastising voice.

"I know Trey. But I probably won't be smoking again for a very long time. I only smoke when I get extremely nervous or upset." Lee said, then closed his eyes as he took a deep drag off his cigarette.

"Of course you are of sufficient age to make such decisions, but I am concerned." Trey said quietly.

"I know Trey, and that means a lot to me." Lee said with a smile.

Slash lit his cigarette, then after enjoying a deep drag, asked, "Grandfather?"

"Let me handle this one Trey?" Clark asked hopefully.

Trey nodded with a smile as John pulled him into a hug.

"Andrew is Trey's father, Lee is Andrew's father. Neither one of them age." Clark said, then looked at Trey with question.

Trey nodded happily, then smiled as John began to kiss his neck.

"Actually, maybe you guys could help me with something. I've been offered a job. Kind of like a go-between for the two schools. Alan said I could pass as a student, I guess so I could see things another adult wouldn't be able to. What do you guys think about that?" Lee asked seriously.

"It would be lying." Trey said immediately.

Everyone was silent for a minute, deciding how they felt about that.

"Yeah, but it could help." John said in thought.

"How so?" Trey asked curiously.

"Lee could watch out for the new guys without being obvious. There are a lot of temptations out there, drinking, drugs, stuff like that. If he was around, he might be able to, I dunno, help them to see reason, or warn them about consequences or something." John said seriously.

"But we can do that as well... without lying." Trey interjected.

"Yeah, but not the same way." John said distantly.

"I do not understand." Trey said, looking lost.

"Lee, please don't get mad at me, but didn't you have a problem with drugs?" John asked timidly.

"Yeah, a big problem. How did you know?" Lee asked quietly.

"I overheard some stuff. Nothing bad. Andrew was saying how proud he was that you're clean now. I was just thinking that if you've been through all that and... bottomed out. You've got a way different point of view than any of us. You can talk about consequences from personal experience instead of third hand accounts." John said with difficulty.

"He's got a point." Slash said distantly.

"I'm sorry, I don't think we've met." Lee said, looking at Slash.

"This is Slash, he's going to be going to the Wagner school." Trey said in introduction.

"Nice to meet you." Lee said quietly and extended a hand.

Slash leaned forward to shake hands, then rested back on the rocks.

"What they're saying, it makes sense. I think I'd be more likely to listen to you than someone who looks adult... I've kind of got used to not listening to them." Slash said with a little smile.

Lee nodded.

"And since you've been through it... It just brings it home. I mean, makes it real. You wouldn't be talking about a friend of a friend." Slash finished with a shrug.

"Trey, what do you think?" Lee asked in thought.

"I confess that they make valid points, but I still have reservations about lying." Trey said seriously.

Lee nodded again.

"Must you decide this today? Perhaps you could proceed and make the decision on a case by case basis." Trey suggested.

"I guess I could. I usually make things up as I go along, why should this be any different?" Lee asked with a smile.

"Are we all finished? I'm getting cold." Clark said as he hugged himself for warmth.

"Yeah, I'm ready for some dessert." Slash said as he crushed out his cigarette in a can hidden between the rocks.

"Me too." Lee said and followed the group.

Chapter 4: What Needs To Be Done

"Do you have some time to talk?" Warren asked Xander quietly.

"If you don't mind coming to the boathouse. I'm going to watch the kids for a while so Andrew can enjoy some family time." Xander said as he settled back in his chair.

"That would be fine. I just want to discuss some business about the school and talk to you about your company." Warren said seriously.

"Remy, do you want to come too? I'd really like it if you'd be involved in the business with me." Xander said warmly.

"Oui, mon cour." Remy said quietly.

Xander got a warm smile and stood.

"If you'll all excuse me, Warren and I have some business to discuss and some babies to watch after." Xander said and waited for Warren and Remy to join him.

"Call me if you need me to do some baby watching." Alan said gently.

"That's okay, I'll send Andrew your way as soon as I get to the boathouse." Xander said with a smile.

"Have a good evening." Wesley said quietly.

"You too Wes, it was good to see you." Xander said and started walking toward the door.

Just as the three men were about to reach the door, Clark, Trey, John, Lee and Slash walked into the room.

"Slash, I'm glad I caught you." Warren said warmly.

Slash looked at the large, handsome, winged man with question.

"I'm Warren Worthington the third, this is Alexander Wainwright and Remy LeBeau. We're providing the funding for the Wagner Institute and I wanted to welcome you personally." Warren said warmly and extended a hand to shake.

Slash shook Warren's hand, then Xander's.

"Xander and I have some business to discuss just now, but I hope we can get together and have a talk before I have to leave." Warren said pleasantly.

Slash nodded silently.

"Take good care of him guys." Warren said as he led the way out of the dining room.

* * * * *

"Worthington? Like the washing machine?" Slash asked in a quiet voice.

Clark chuckled and said, "One and the same."

"And who was the other guy?" Slash asked as the group moved to the serving line.

"If you watch television, listen to music, or use the phone, you've probably used some of his products. Wainwright Enterprises is one of the biggest electronics firms in the world."

Clark said as he put a piece of pie on his plate.

"That guy with the eye patch is rich?" Slash asked with surprise.

"He's beyond rich." John said and cut a piece of cake.

"Who was the other guy? Remy?" Slash asked as he grabbed some red Jell-O.

"That is Uncle Xander's life partner. He shares in the making of Uncle Xander's decisions and has access to all Uncle Xander's accounts." Trey said as he took a plate of orange Jell-O from the 'special' table.

"Clark said that food is for people who can't eat regular food." Slash said in warning.

"Correct. I am one such person." Trey said and walked with the group back to their table.

Slash turned to Clark and asked, "That 'wouldn't believe it' stuff?"

Clark just gave a nod and started to eat.

* * * * *

"I'm here to watch the kids for a while. Alan's in the dining room." Xander said happily.

"Thanks Xan, how are things at the mansion?" Andrew asked as he peacefully watched the children sleeping.

"Fine. The first Wagner student arrived. Trey and the guys are taking care of him." Xander said as he looked at his daughter with love.

"I can't wait to meet him. Hi Warren, how are things?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Good. I just need to discuss some things with Xander and Remy while we've got the time." Warren said in nearly a whisper.

"I'll leave you to it then. Call if you need anything." Andrew said quietly.

Xander and Remy both nodded as Andrew ported out of the room.

* * * * *

"This is wonderful. Everything I'd hoped it would be." Ororo said as she snuggled against Hank's side.

"I couldn't dare to believe we'd ever be here. You're so beautiful... I am unworthy." Hank said as he held her carefully.

"Nonsense. You are a genius with the strength of a dozen men. I can't imagine what else you could strive to accomplish in one lifetime." Ororo said as she stared into the fire.

"To appear human." Hank said longingly.

"To what purpose?" Ororo asked seriously and pulled away to look into Hank's eyes.

"I... I don't know. I never really thought about why. I'm respected among my peers for my writing. Everyone in the mansion has accepted me as I am. And now you're here... you're right. Changing my appearance wouldn't improve my life one bit. I suppose that change is frightening and I wanted to return to what was familiar and comfortable." Hank said in thought.

Ororo rested her head against Hank's chest and said, "It might be more productive to move forward and become comfortable with who you are than trying to become who you were."

Hank thought about the words for a long minute before saying, "And you call me a genius..."

* * * * *

"Excuse my interruption gentlemen." The Professor said as he approached the table.

"Good evening Professor. Please join us." Trey said in genuine invitation.

"Thank you, I just wanted to meet the new people and welcome John back." Professor Xavier said gently.

"Thank you Professor... I'm sorry... about before." John said shyly.

"Scott assures me you had your reasons, that's all I need to know. Welcome back." Professor Xavier said warmly.

John nodded in silence.

"And you must be Clark." Professor Xavier said hesitantly.

"Yes sir." Clark said shyly, then felt both John and Trey's hands take his under the table.

"I have to confess that no one's told me more than your name. Perhaps we could have a talk sometime soon to get to know each other." Professor Xavier said hopefully.

"I'm free now. What would you like to know?" Clark said with new found confidence.

"First of all, I'm interested to know about your mutation." Professor Xavier asked, as he tried to sort through the emotions coming from Clark, John and Trey.

"I'm not a mutant." Clark began, then looked at Slash with a smile and continued, "I'm a non-human."

Professor Xavier nodded in surprise as Slash asked, "What does that mean?"

"I wasn't born on Earth and my parents weren't human." Clark said hesitantly, looking carefully for Slash's reaction.

Slash thought about the statement and finally gave a hesitant, "Okay..."

"I can't prove it and I guess it doesn't really matter, at least to anyone but me." Clark finished with a shrug.

"So what brings you to Xavier's?" The Professor asked curiously.

"I didn't know it till last week but I have an ability, optic blasts. I blew up a brick wall in front of a bunch of people and had to get out of there. We heard about the Wagner school and came here. Alex has been helping me learn my ability." Clark said, feeling that he was babbling.

"How is your training coming?" The Professor asked with interest.

"Pretty good I guess. Alex says I've got good control." Clark said and squeezed John and Trey's hands for comfort.

"Has everyone been treating you well?" The Professor asked curiously, still not able to untangle the intertwined emotions of the three.

Clark laughed and said, "Well, considering that I'm going steady with John and Trey, I'd have to say 'Yes'. They've been treating me extremely well."

Professor Xavier's eyes went wide in surprise as Clark, Trey and John lifted their joined hands onto the table.

"You make friends quickly." The Professor said in astonishment.

"He is easy to like." Trey said in a loving voice.

"Yes, well. How about you Slash? How did you come to be here?" The Professor asked, obviously desperate to change the subject.

"Yesterday I was in the library surfing the Net, looking for 'mutant' news, and I found the Wagner Site. I called them and they said to come here." Slash said simply.

"Is your appearance the extent of your mutation?" The Professor asked curiously.

"No..." Slash said and looked around for something to demonstrate.

Trey handed his napkin to Slash with a gentle smile.

"Thanks Trey." Slash said and held up the white napkin.

The white color faded to gray and finally to black.

"Extraordinary." The Professor said in wonder.

"Not really. It's not really of any use." Slash said as he sat the napkin on the table.

"Perhaps not, but it doesn't fall into any existing classification of mutant ability that I'm aware of. Dr. McCoy is more knowledgeable on the subject, I could be mistaken." The Professor said in thought.

Slash stared in question at the Professor's excitement.

"Please excuse my enthusiasm. I just find your ability very interesting. Would you mind visiting Dr. McCoy tomorrow? I'm sure he'd like to see as well." The Professor asked hopefully.

"Doctor? I'm not too good with doctors." Slash said warily.

"He'll just ask you to demonstrate your ability and may ask for a blood sample. I promise that he won't treat you like a lab experiment." The Professor said as a vow.

"Okay." Slash said quietly.

"I need to go see him tomorrow too. We can go together." John said with a smile.

"Um, yeah." Slash said with surprise.

"Oh yeah, I'd forgotten about that. I guess you'd better enjoy your settled stomach while you can." Clark said weakly.

"Yeah, maybe it won't be too bad." John said hopefully.

"What's wrong?" Slash asked with concern.

"I got something, I forget what he called it but it's like a worm in my guts." John said uneasily.

"An intestinal parasite." Clark said quietly.

"The treatment will make me feel queasy and weak for a few days." John said with a sour look.

"That's why we waited till after Thanksgiving to treat it." Clark added.

"I'm sure you'll be fine. Dr. McCoy is an excellent physician." The Professor said assuringly.

"Yeah. I'm not worried, I'm just not looking forward to it." John said simply.

"Understandable." The Professor said then looked around the table to focus on Lee.

"And how did you come to be here?" The Professor asked curiously.

"Andrew hunted me down and brought me here. Since I didn't really have anything or anyone back there, I accepted his offer to stay." Lee said simply.

"Grandfather is a great help with my brothers and Marguerite." Trey said proudly.

The Professor looked at Lee in question, silently asking him for clarification.

"I was the one who took care of Andrew when he was born. I'm the only one at the boathouse who has any kind of baby experience, so I'm teaching everyone how to take care of the babies." Lee said with a gentle smile. He hadn't realized his own unique contribution to the family until now.

"They are fortunate to have you here. I haven't had the opportunity to see the babies yet... are they okay?" The Professor asked in concern.

"They're perfectly happy and healthy. Them being born with their mutant abilities active makes it a little bit challenging, but I think every child poses their own unique challenge." Lee said with a fond smile.

"Their abilities are active?" Charles asked with surprise.

"Yes, Chakotay has a variation of Dad's optic blasts and Thomas has a variation of Father's portal ability." Trey said proudly.

"I look forward to seeing them. They sound extraordinary." The Professor said happily.

"They have exceeded expectations." Trey said with a smile.

"All babies do Trey." Lee said warmly.

"Charles, are you discussing business?" Erik asked accusingly as he approached.

"No Erik, just getting to know the new students. Everyone, this is Erik. Erik, this is Clark, Trey, John, Lee and Slash." Charles said pleasantly.

"Nice to meet you all. If you don't mind too much, I'm going to steal Charles away from you." Erik asked in an almost playful tone.

"No problem, nice to meet you." Lee said with a smile.

"Nice to meet all of you. Good evening." Erik said and pushed Charles wheelchair out of the room.

"He seemed nice enough." Clark said absently.

"I kind of got a 'mad scientist' vibe off of him when he was talking about my ability." Slash said as he settled back into his chair.

"Wait till you meet Dr. McCoy. You'll expect Igor to come running out of the back room any minute." John said with a chuckle.

Slash got a look of worry.

"Dr. McCoy is a good person and very knowledgeable. He just becomes... extremely focused." Trey said in thought.

"That's Borg for 'obsessed'." Clark said with a smirk.

"Borg?" Slash asked curiously.

"Yeah, um, Trey? Do you want to explain it?" Clark asked hopefully.

"You are the one who introduced the subject. I am interested to hear your description." Trey said with a look of mischief.

"Oh, that's no pressure." Clark said with a roll of his eyes, then turned to Slash.

"Once upon a time..." Clark began and was interrupted by Lee and John's laughter.

"You want me to tell it, I'll do it my way." Clark said sternly.

Both suppressed their laughter and nodded for him to continue.

"Once upon a time, on a planet far far away, there was a boy living a normal boy's life." Clark stopped and looked around to see that the laughter had stopped and everyone was honestly paying attention.

"One day there was an attack and the boy was taken by strangers. They restrained the boy and put machines into him... he couldn't talk, or scream or cry."

Trey took up the narrative, "He felt himself shattering, his memories falling away as he lost his identity. There was a voice, one voice that controlled every thought..."

Robert broke in, "Resistance is futile..."

Clark looked up to see that Robert, Bobby, Andrew and Alan had joined them.

"...And it was." Trey finished in a hollow voice.

"We were part of everything, endless knowledge, perfection through order..." Robert said distantly.

"...Yet we were nothing." Trey said in a lost tone.

Silence fell over the table.

"They became separated from the collective and became individuals again. But they still carry the Borg with them, not just the machines, but the memories. Whatever else they choose to become, a part will always be Borg." Andrew said from behind Clark.

"Which is as it should be. You cannot learn by forgetting." Trey said quietly.

Andrew smiled at Trey's statement as he and Alan walked around the table to hug Trey.

Silence fell again until John leaned over to Slash.

"I bet you won't be asking *that* question again." John whispered with a smile.

A chuckle spread around the table as whatever spell had fallen over it was broken.

"Slash, this is my father, Andrew and my Dad, Alan. This is Slash." Trey said as he stood between his fathers being held by both.

"Nice to meet you." Alan said warmly.

"Yeah, you too." Slash said in a distant voice.

"I'm going for more food now. It was nice meeting you. Maybe the guys will bring you to the boathouse to visit sometime?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"How about for family time tomorrow?" Clark asked casually.

"Good idea. We'll see you then." Andrew said before leading Alan to the serving line.

"Family time?" Slash questioned.

"Yeah, every night they take some time to spend with the family. And family includes all their friends. It's a lot of fun." Lee said pleasantly.

"What will we do?" Slash asked curiously.

"Sit around and talk. Maybe watch some cartoons or a movie. The whole group of us just sit around and kick back. You just have to see it for yourself, I can't really describe it." John said in thought.

"Yeah, but it's great. I'd be so homesick right now if it wasn't for family time... it just makes this place 'home' to me." Clark said gently.

"Me too." Lee whispered.

* * * * *

"Dis soun like you need more information." Remy said in a considering voice.

"It would be nice, but I've done all that I can. The sentinel project was listed as 'homeland security' until the President signed the 'mutant rights' bill into law. Then the funding was shifted through about sixteen different sub-contractors but ultimately traces back to the department of defense. The group of scientists and engineers that your company has employed suggests that the project has a mutant focus of some kind. Put all that together and I believe we have reason to be concerned." Warren finished seriously.

"Can Warren watch le infants. Remy need to talk to Xander." Remy said in a low voice.

"Go ahead, I could watch them all day." Warren said with a tender smile.

Xander and Remy walked to the door as Xander asked, "There is, like, zero chance that I'm going to like what you're about to say, right?"

"Oui, zero chance."

* * * * *

"John, I'm going to leave now." Rick said quietly.

"Thanks for coming Dad, I'm glad you were here." John said as he looked his father in the eyes.

"Maybe you and your boyfriends could come to the mall with me next week?" Rick asked hopefully.

John was about to agree, but thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Dad, don't try so hard. I know you'd rather have your teeth pulled than spend time at the mall. Let's pick something we'd both like to do... how about you come over and watch wrestling with us on Thursday? We can just kick back and enjoy it." John asked with a tentative smile.

"Yeah, I'd like that." Rick said softly.

John pulled his father into a hug and quietly said, "I mean it Dad, I'm glad you came. Thanks."

"Thanks for giving me a chance." Rick said as he continued to hold tight to his son.

Finally the hug broke apart.

"Thursday." Rick said before he turned to leave.

"See ya then." John said as he watched him go.

* * * * *

"You know Remy be a teif." Remy said with distraction.

"He can't hear us. Please be **my** Remy. At least for a few minutes." Xander asked desperately.

"Oui, you know dat I'm a teif. I got some tricks, know some people, can get tings done my own way..." Remy trailed off.

"You want to go." Xander said in a hollow voice.

"Non. I want to help you. But dis be de bes way I can help."

"Why?" Xander asked helplessly.

"Xander, when you told me your story, you said you help Buffy 'cause it be de right ting to do. You don wan to go an risk your life, but you do what need to be done. Dis be de right ting to do, an no one else can do it." Remy said seriously.

Xander closed his eye and took in a deep shuddering breath before nodding.

"Remy be gone a few days, maybe a week." Remy said softly.

"Please be safe." Xander whispered.

"Bein safe don get de job done, cher. But I don take no chance dat don need takin." Remy said as he begged for understanding with his eyes.

"When will you go?" Xander asked weakly.

"Now. Sooner I start, de sooner I be done." Remy said seriously.

Xander was about to protest, but caught the words before they could escape and just nodded.

Remy got a proud and happy smile and moved in for a kiss.

Xander held Remy in a crushing grip, wanting with every fiber of his being to keep hold and not let him go.

But in the end, both men reluctantly let go of each other and Remy hurried upstairs.

Xander stared at the empty stairway for a minute before walking back to Andrew's room to check on Warren and the babies.

* * * * *

"Looks serious." Slash said, indicating John.

"Yeah. I have the feeling that there's a big long story, but I only know the short-short version." Clark said seriously.

Slash seemed to be surprised so Clark tried to explain.

"We're friends and lovers. John knows that I'm here to listen if he ever needs to talk, but he also knows that he's free to have his own life and privacy."

"Okay, that's cool." Slash said as he watched John approach.

"Filling him in?" John asked speculatively.

"Not really, I was sending up a 'don't go there' flare." Clark said with a smile.

John chuckled and said, "Good call."

"Since I do not sleep, I am unsure... Is it nearing bedtime?" Trey asked quietly.

"It's eight o'clock." Slash said dubiously.

Trey looked longingly at Clark, who finally caught the meaning.

John's eyebrows went up in surprise, then he stretched and yawned dramatically.

"Real subtle." Slash said with a laugh.

"It's been a long day..." Clark said as he quickly gathered his dishes.

"Early to bed, early to rise..." John said as he did the same.

"Have a good evening Slash, it has been a pleasure to meet you." Trey said as Clark grabbed the dishes from his hands.

"Have a good 'sleep' guys." Slash said with a smile.

He received no answer as the three nearly ran out of the room.

Chapter 5: Change of Venue

"Hey Slash, it's still early. If you would like, you could come to the boat house for a while." Lee said into the silence.

"What's that?" Slash asked curiously.

"It's where a lot of us live." Lee said as he stood from the table.

"Yeah, I guess so." Slash said hesitantly.

"Let's get our coats, then we'll take the short cut." Lee said as he led the way.

Slash followed, not knowing what he was agreeing to.

* * * * *

"The gathering seems to be breaking up." Wesley observed.

"Yeah. It had to happen sometime." Dawn said as she watched her family and friends fondly.

"What have you been up to Wesley?" Tara asked shyly.

"I have been pursuing some personal projects, mostly ones instigated by the watcher's journals you allowed me to read." Wesley said, turning his full attention to Tara.

"Find anything interesting?" Dawn asked curiously.

"Perhaps. I have traveled to the location of Sunnydale in this dimension and found the remnants of the hellmouth. There wasn't much to go on, but I believe a powerful shaman performed a binding on it more than a century ago." Wesley said seriously.

"Wow, that's incredible." Dawn said in wonder.

"Yes, although that is not the point of divergence between this reality and yours, it is a notable difference." Wesley said in thought.

"Yeah, I've wondered about that. As near as I can tell, the divergence point is somewhere near the sixteen hundreds." Dawn said and turned to face Wesley more fully.

"Perhaps. Without access to more of your world's history, I have little to go on to isolate the divergence." Wesley said distantly.

"Maybe you should talk to Angel, he's the oldest person I know of, maybe he's noticed something." Dawn said quickly.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Do you happen to know where he is?" Wesley asked hopefully.

"No, but Chris is right over there with William, he should know." Dawn said, pointing.

"Shall we ladies?" Wesley asked as he stood.

"We shall." Dawn said with a giggle as she stood and put an arm around Tara.

* * * * *

"Hey Andrew, could you port us over to the boat house. I want to show Slash around." Lee asked hopefully.

"Sure Dad. We'll probably be home before very much longer." Andrew said peacefully and opened the vortex.

"Come on Slash." Lee said, then walked into the swirling mist.

"How safe is this?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"Here." Andrew said and the mist cleared to show the living room of the boat house with Lee standing and waiting.

"Thanks." Slash said and walked hesitantly through.

* * * * *

"Do you think they noticed that we slipped out?" Alex asked as he held Spike tightly.

"If they did, they'll know we're together." Spike said as his hand drifted down to grip Alex's butt.

"Yeah." Alex said in a sigh.

"Mate, I've got something to say." Spike said in a voice of worry.

Alex immediately tensed and pulled back to look into Spike's eyes.

"If the phrases 'like a brother' or 'just friends' are about to come out of your mouth I may have to hurt you." Alex said seriously.

Spike smiled and said in a tender voice, "Nothing like that, I promise."

Alex nodded and rested his head against Spike's shoulder.

"We're both blokes." Spike began.

"I noticed." Alex said with a smile.

"I don't know how much you know about how men make love." Spike continued.

"I think I know what goes where." Alex said as he snuggled closer.

"There's more to it than that. It's the 'more' that I want to talk to you about." Spike said seriously.

"I don't understand." Alex said softly.

"When we make love, I want you to understand what's happening... inside." Spike said with difficulty.

"The prostate?" Alex asked with confusion.

"No mate. I'm not talking physically. On an emotional level men have needs, the need to dominate or submit, the need to be strong or vulnerable..." Spike trailed off in thought.

"Are you saying you want to tie me up?" Alex asked as he pulled back to look into Spike's eyes again.

"No. I mean, we may try that sometime, but that's not what I'm talking about. With a woman, a man is expected to be the strong one, in charge, the aggressor." Spike said as he watched Alex's reaction.

"But with two men, one has to take the submissive role..." Alex said softly.

"Maybe, and that works for some. But not for me." Spike said in a considering tone.

"I still don't understand." Alex said in confusion.

"When we make love, at least at first, I'll probably be dominant. But I don't want you to think that I want you to be submissive. It's just the only way I know to show you what I want." Spike said in frustration.

"What do you want?" Alex asked curiously.

"I want to be able to make love to you, to make you feel as loved and cherished as you are. I want to bring you pleasure and happiness by making you feel safe in my arms." Spike said with a loving smile.

"I have no problem with that." Alex said with a dreamy twinkle in his eyes.

"But I want you to be able to do that to me too. I want to be loved. I want to give up control and feel safe because you're the strong one. That's the part I'm worried about." Spike said seriously.

"You think I'm going to be the submissive one." Alex said, sounding a little hurt.

"I'm worried that you'll think that's what I want you to be. If I'm the one who initiates sex, directs our actions, sets the mood and all that, I'm afraid you'll take the opposing role as the one who follows along." Spike said, trying to make Alex understand.

"I think I'm getting it. Since you have experience, you'll be showing me how to make love. But you're afraid I'll go along with whatever you say and expect you to always be the one in charge." Alex said in thought.

"Right, you've got it." Spike said with a smile.

"And what you want is for me to take charge sometimes. To be... equal." Alex said in peace.

"Right mate. That's what I want. It ain't too hard to find a bloke to bend over for you. But finding a mate, that can be a bit of a challenge." Spike said seriously.

"I've got it Spike. And thank you for telling me. Now I know what you want." Alex said with a smile.

"And once you've had a little experience, I want to know what you want." Spike said honestly.

"I can tell you now." Alex said with a mischievous smile.

Spike raised an eyebrow in question.

"Sex. I love you, and all the romance and stuff is great. But if you aren't ready to make love to me yet, can we at least have sex? I need to get off really bad and I don't want to do it without you." Alex begged.

Spike nodded and walked to the door. He turned the lock and walked back to face Alex.

* * * * *

Dawn approached the table where William, Chris and Ronny were talking.

"Excuse me Chris. Wesley was wanting to talk to your father, do you know where he is?" Dawn asked hopefully.

"He's at Julia's. They wanted some private time." Chris said with a shy smile.

"Oh... um, when are you expecting him back?" Dawn asked with a slight blush.

"In the morning. I told him that I'd be fine by myself. He didn't want to but I told him that all the other kids are here without their parents so he finally said 'okay'." Chris said proudly.

"That's great Chris. I guess we'll talk to him then. Your usual room is still there if you want it Wesley." Dawn said quietly.

"Yes, thank you Miss Summers. That would be quite acceptable." Wesley said with a kind smile.

"Thanks Chris, enjoy your night." Dawn said happily as she led Wesley and Tara away.

"We will." Chris said with a smile as he looked at Ronny and William.

* * * * *

"Would you like to see the babies?" Lee asked quietly.

"Sure." Slash said as he looked around the cozy little home.

Lee gently knocked, then opened a door.

Slash followed Lee into a bedroom.

"Hey Slash, how you doing?" Mr. Wainwright asked pleasantly.

"Fine." Slash said, then followed Xander's gaze to two cribs.

"Hey Lee, would you mind watching the babies for a few minutes? I'd really like to talk with Warren and we can't talk in a normal voice with the babies sleeping." Xander asked hopefully.

"Go ahead. I've got it." Lee said as he looked fondly at the babies.

"Thanks Lee." Xander said quickly as he and Warren left the room.

"Who's babies?" Slash asked in a whisper.

"The smallest one is Marguerite. She's Xander and Remy's daughter." Lee said as he settled into one of the rocking chairs by the cribs.

Slash automatically settled into the other rocker.

"Okay, I'm still not getting how two guys are having these babies." Slash said seriously.

"Marguerite is kind of adopted." Lee said with a smile.

"Every time someone explains something around here, there seems to be a hitch. How is she 'kind of' adopted?" Slash asked, his voice rising slightly.

A little mewling cry came from Marguerite and both men silenced.

"Shhh. Okay, hold on a second and I'll tell you." Lee said hurriedly and left the room.

Slash watched the babies carefully, not knowing if he should do something.

Just a few seconds later, Lee walked back into the room.

"What was that all about?" Slash asked curiously.

"I wash my hands before I handle the babies, especially Marguerite. We need to be careful about germs until they're just a little older." Lee said seriously.

Lee picked up Marguerite and moved to the rocker.

"Where's the bathroom?" Slash asked quietly.

"Next door on the right." Lee said with a smile

Slash went and quickly washed his hands.

When he returned to the room, he sat in a rocking chair and said, "If you want, I can hold her."

Lee immediately placed Marguerite into Slash's arms.

"I'm going to get her bottle ready, she's due for a feeding anyway. If she gets fussy while I'm gone, just rub her back." Lee said and walked to the door.

"Where will you be?" Slash asked with a slight note of terror in his voice.

"In the kitchen, next door on the left. I'll only be gone for three minutes. If the boys start crying, just let them. I'll be right back." Lee said calmly as he left the room.

* * * * *

"So what do you want to do on your first night without parental supervision?" William asked curiously.

"I was thinking that if you guys wanted, you could stay in my room tonight, like a sleep-over." Chris asked hopefully.

"I got no problem with that." Ronny said and looked at William.

"Robert said that when he went camping that he was able to sleep and dream. I believe I would enjoy a 'sleep over'." William said seriously.

"Great. Then let's figure out what we're going to do." Chris said with excitement.

* * * * *

As the bedroom door closed, Robert stopped just inside the door.

"Bobby?" Robert said hesitantly.

Bobby looked carefully at Robert's worried expression.

"What's wrong?" Bobby asked with concern.

"I love you so much, and I want to express my love to you..." Robert trailed off.

"I know, and I promised to wait." Bobby said softly.

"I do not wish to wait. I understand that we are not ready for all the aspects of adult sexuality. But I am ready to experience... Bobby, I need physical release and I wish for my first time to be with you." Robert said seriously.

"Oh Robert, that's, that's the most wonderful gift. But... I can't." Bobby said with regret.

Robert looked crestfallen and Bobby got a speculative look.

"Come on. I've got an idea." Bobby said as he opened the door again.

"What?" Robert asked in surprise.

"Let's find your fathers. I think I've got a way." Bobby said as he led the way down the hall.

* * * * *

"Ro, I needed to ask you something, but it may be none of my business..." Hank trailed off with worry.

"If that is the case, I will tell you so. Please just ask Hank." Ororo said softly.

"It's just... Matt... He has feelings... I wanted to... how do you feel?" Hank asked sporadically.

"For a college professor with three PhDs, your sentence structure leaves something to be desired. However, I believe I understand what you are asking. I cannot say if it is any of your business or not, but I am willing to share my feelings with you so it's a moot point." Ororo said, then noticed the look of fear and anticipation in Hank's eyes.

"Logan is a good man. I have more than a passing interest in him. I find him physically appealing and his actions with John and the others have shown me his heart. I have sensed that you feel threatened by his feelings toward me, but I assure you, there is no need to be. I have already told Matt that I do not wish to pursue a relationship with him." Ororo said in a serious voice.

"You chose me?" Hank asked in disbelief.

Ororo smiled at the look of wonder on Hank's face.

"Yes Hank, I chose you. Now kiss me before I change my mind." Ororo said teasingly.

Hank was only too happy to comply.

* * * * *

Lee walked into the bedroom carrying a bottle as Slash rubbed Marguerite's back.

"Here, just turn her a little and hold the bottle for her." Lee said as he helped Slash move Marguerite into position.

Slash finally got the position right and watched as Marguerite began to feed off the small bottle.

"I was going to tell you how she was 'sort of' adopted." Lee said as he settled back in a rocking chair.

"She's related to one of them." Slash said in thought.

"Right... sort of." Lee said with a teasing smile.

Slash got a look of frustration on his face.

"Some mutant haters captured Remy and cut out his eyes because they didn't look normal." Lee said quietly.

Slash got a look of surprise and glanced back to Marguerite to see how she was doing.

"He was put on a list and was given a live organ transplant. The donor of the eyes was Marguerite's mother, Margaret." Lee said softly.

Slash's eyes got big as he thought about that.

"Remy and Xander found out that Margaret and her husband were killed in a car crash and Marguerite was left an orphan. Monday the judge made it official, she's now legally Xander and Remy's daughter." Lee said as he looked lovingly at the little girl.

"So she's related to Remy's eyes?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"You met Remy earlier didn't you?" Lee asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah, just for a second." Slash said in thought.

"Look at her eyes." Lee said and inclined his head toward Marguerite.

"They're beautiful... and just like Remy's." Slash said in wonder.

"Yeah. No one is ever going to be able to deny that she's his daughter." Lee said, then turned at the sound of a fussy baby.

"I'll be right back. I think Chakotay is waking up." Lee said as he stood.

"We'll be fine." Slash said, gazing into Marguerite's eyes.

* * * * *

"Andrew?" Bobby asked as he hurried into the common room where Andrew and Alan were snuggled on the couch.

"Is something wrong?" Andrew asked with immediate concern.

"No. I just need to talk to you two for a minute." Bobby said quickly.

Andrew watched as Bobby looked around the room. There were five other people, but none of them were paying attention.

"Private huh?" Andrew asked, following Bobby's gaze.

"Yeah." Bobby said nervously.

The room felt like it tilted suddenly and Bobby grabbed the arm of the couch reflexively.

"Okay, no one can hear us now. What's up guys?" Andrew asked as he cuddled his husband.

"We need your advice about sex." Bobby said seriously.

"I advise no." Alan said firmly.

"Wait love, I think Bobby's about to explain." Andrew said as he watched Bobby's impatient expression.

"Yeah, I am. Robert needs sex. He's a guy. If he doesn't take care of it... it's got to go somewhere. I just wanted to know if you wanted me to help him out... Or let him figure it out the hard way or do you want him to go the shame and wet dreams route?" Bobby asked in a flustered voice.

Andrew and Alan shared a long look before Alan said, "I did Icheb and Trey's talk, this one is yours."

"Thanks love." Andrew said with a weak smile and looked at Robert's timid expression.

"Come here little man, tell me what's up with you." Andrew said quietly.

"I can't find the words." Robert said helplessly.

"Just try, if you can't find the right words, use wrong words that are close to the same feeling." Andrew said, hoping that made sense.

Robert nodded and thought. Finally he said, "I feel a need... It is coiled with tension in my abdomen. I wish to grind... to push... to thrust..."

"Oh yeah, I know that one. Okay guys, here's the deal. Bobby's right, you need to know how to deal with these urges and the healthiest way will be for Bobby to take care of you... and vice versa I suppose." Andrew said and glanced to find Alan in agreement.

"Guys, do what you need to do, just don't go too far." Andrew said seriously.

"Andrew? Could you please spell it out? Our definitions of 'too far' might be a little different." Bobby asked timidly.

"Yeah, um, how about hands only for now?" Andrew asked hopefully.

Bobby was about to agree when Robert said, "May we enjoy water sports?"

"What?" Andrew asked at the non sequitor wondering why Robert was asking about water skiing now.

"You want to play in piss?" Alan asked in disbelief.

Andrew looked suddenly at Alan, then at Robert in shock.

"I want to know if that is permitted." Robert said simply.

"Um, no, I don't think so... not for a little while." Andrew said with worry.

"Then may we enjoy bondage and discipline?" Robert asked without a trace of emotion.

At any other time, that question with that expression would be completely hilarious. However in the here and now it was horrifying to Andrew and Alan.

"No, that should be on the 'later' list too." Andrew said with wide eyes.

"Much later." Alan said with worry.

"Analingus?" Robert asked seriously.

"What's that?" Andrew asked helplessly as he looked at his sweet, innocent son.

"Rimming." Alan whispered.

"Um, no. Later." Andrew said, then hurriedly continued, "How about you two just use your hands for now and ask about the rest later?"

"Father, I would also like to perform oral sex with Bobby. Would you please permit that?" Robert asked with a pleading look.

Andrew thought about it and fell into the pleading eyes of his not-quite-so-innocent son.

"Okay, but leave the pissing and rimming and bondage alone for a while, agreed?" Andrew asked hopefully.

Robert looked inquiringly at Bobby and waited for Bobby's nod before saying, "Agreed."

Andrew phased them back to normal and watched silently as Robert and Bobby left the room.

"Our little boy is growing up." Alan said as he started to chuckle.

"Growing up to be kinkier than either of his fathers." Andrew said in disbelief and concern.

"Andy, think about this. They asked. They came to us and asked our advice and permission. They won't do any of that stuff without asking... as long as we don't freak on them and make them think they can't come to us... I think they'll be fine." Alan said with assurance.

"I hope so... he wants to do stuff that I haven't even tried." Andrew said in wonder.

"I haven't either, but... I'm open to new things." Alan said seductively into Andrew's ear.

Andrew felt the warm breath and a tingle started firing its way up his inner thighs.

* * * * *

Bobby and Robert hurried into the dining room where they found Chris, William and Ronny talking.

"Guys, I need your help." Bobby said quickly.

"What's up bro?" Ronny asked with concern.

"Robert and I need... some private time. Do you have any ideas where we could go?" Bobby asked with desperation.

"What's wrong with your room?" Ronny asked slowly.

"Nothing except, um, Robert will probably be spending the night." Bobby said with a blush.

"You're going to have sex." Chris said with a smile.

"Yes." Robert said simply.

"Oh, well, I'm planning to spend the night at Chris' room since his father is at Julia's so that's no problem." Ronny said with a knowing smile directed at his brother.

"Great... I mean, if you're sure. I don't want to chase you out of our room." Bobby stammered.

"We were just talking about the stuff we're going to do. You two go and have fun." Ronny said with a chuckle.

"Thanks. I mean really, thanks." Bobby said as he took Robert's hand.

"Just remember this when I want some privacy sometime." Ronny said firmly.

Bobby thought about that, then said, "Yeah, just say the word and you got it. I promise."

Ronny nodded and watched Bobby and Robert hurry out of the room.

Chapter 6: Spoken Secrets and Unknown Truths

Lee walked in to find Slash holding Marguerite and gently rocking.

"If you want, I can burp her while you feed Chakotay." Lee said as he walked to the cribs.

"Yeah, that sounds good." Slash said peacefully.

"Hand me Marguerite, then I'll hand you Chakotay." Lee said and held out his arms.

Slash reluctantly handed Marguerite to Lee.

A moment later, Slash received a much larger baby in his arms, then a bottle.

Lee picked up Marguerite and a towel, then sat in the chair to burp her.

Chakotay got a disgusted look on his face and began to cry.

"What the hell is that?" Slash asked as he saw the red glow shining out of the baby's mouth.

"His mutant ability. It's not powerful enough to hurt you yet." Lee said as he started rocking.

Slash held the bottle up and gently put it into Chakotay's mouth.

"Slash, I'd like you to meet my grandson, Chakotay." Lee said proudly.

"Wait, your son Andrew's son, right?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"That's right. And Thomas, his twin is in the crib over there." Lee said happily.

"God, it's hard to believe that you're a grandfather... but you're good at it." Slash finished quickly.

"Thanks. I went for a lot of years without any family at all. Now I have Andrew, Alan, all their kids, Spike, Scott, Alex, Dawn... I never could have imagined loving so many people." Lee said, overflowing with joy.

"I can only imagine." Slash said sadly as he shifted Chakotay for a more comfortable grip.

"Why is that?" Lee asked quietly, looking at Slash with concern.

"Look at me. Who could love a freak like me?" Slash asked with pain.

"That little guy in your arms." Lee said with a smile at his grandson.

"He'll hate me when he's old enough to know better." Slash said sadly.

"Tell me what happened to you." Lee said with imploring eyes.

"Not much. I was a normal kid, I had two parents... one male, one female..." Slash added with a smile.

Lee laughed and nodded for him to continue.

"We moved around a lot, so I didn't have a lot of friends. Then a few months ago I started getting pale, I mean really pale." Slash said with pain.

Lee stood to lay Marguerite in a crib as he picked up Thomas, then nodded for Slash to continue.

"My folks took me to a doctor and he said I was a mutant." Slash said as a crystal clear teardrop traveled down his white cheek.

"What did they do?" Lee asked with concern as he sat again.

"They called me a fucking freak, a mistake of nature, they said I wasn't their son anymore and threw me out in the street. I figured that their son, the person I was, died that day and Slash was born." Slash said as the tears began to flow.

"How did you survive?" Lee asked in a whisper.

"I found this house that was standing empty and I stayed there. I'd stay in during the day and come out at night to beg people for money. That got me food and on a good day, a pack of smokes." Slash said as he noticed that Chakotay was done with his bottle.

"At least you didn't have to live under the bridges. That was the worst for me." Lee said as he laid Thomas in Slash's right arm and picked up Chakotay from Slash's left.

"I did that a few days. The house was better. Quieter and warmer." Slash said with a distant look.

"It's good if you can find one. Usually I had to deal with wherever I woke up." Lee said darkly.

"You win man. Your low is a hell of a lot lower than my low." Slash said with a shake of his head.

"No Slash, it isn't." Lee said seriously.

Slash looked at Lee curiously.

"As low as I got, I knew that my parents loved me. I never lost that. Sometimes that was all that kept me human, knowing that somewhere, someone loved me." Lee said quietly.

"If you're trying to make me feel better, you're missing the mark by quite a bit." Slash said with weak, forced humor.

"No. I'm not trying to make you feel better. I'm actually building up to ask you something." Lee said hesitantly.

"What's that?" Slash asked suspiciously.

"I don't know how to ask, there's no way of saying it that doesn't sound really pathetic." Lee said with a creased brow.

Slash smiled despite himself.

"All the people you met are my family, but none of them are really my friends." Lee said in thought.

Slash turned to look into Lee's eyes and found them full of pain.

"I'm the father, the grandfather or some other relation like that but... I'm so alone." Lee trailed off.

"I know that feeling." Slash admitted.

"If you'd be willing, I'd like to be that for you. A friend." Lee said seriously.

Slash thought about that for a minute before saying, "It doesn't work that way. Friendship happens, you can't just 'decide' to be friends."

"Why not?" Lee asked honestly.

"I don't know. I never really had any close friends, I'm not sure how it works." Slash admitted with frustration.

"I'd be willing to try if you would." Lee said with hope in his eyes.

"What would I have to do?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"It's pretty simple. We talk to each other when one of us needs to. We go and do stuff together sometimes and hang out. That's about it." Lee said seriously.

"So, if I tell you something, you'll never tell anyone else?" Slash asked carefully.

"Yeah, if you don't want me to. And same goes for you. I'll tell you stuff and you won't tell anyone." Lee said firmly.

"Yeah, that sounds cool." Slash said as he nodded.

"And one more thing, the most important part." Lee said and looked deeply into Slash's eyes.

"What?" Slash asked, surprised at the new level of seriousness.

"It's forever." Lee said without blinking.

"What!?" Slash asked with surprise.

"What we share. What we tell. It's between us forever. Even if you piss me off one day and decide never to talk to me again, I'll keep any secret you tell me forever. There is nothing you can ever do that will make me go back on my word." Lee said firmly.

"Wait, so you're saying that if I tell you that I murdered my parents and buried their bodies in the back yard, that you'd never tell anyone." Slash asked dubiously.

"That's what I'm saying. But if I told you that I murdered twenty-seven people and framed an innocent man for the murders, then you couldn't say anything either." Lee said seriously.

Slash nodded.

"Did you?" Lee asked quietly.

Slash looked up with a raised eyebrow.

"Murder your parents." Lee prompted.

"No. Did you?" Slash asked, looking deeply into Lee's eyes.

"No." Lee said with a shy smile.

Lee stood and put Chakotay back into his crib, then took Thomas from Slash.

"So did you have something you needed to get off your chest?" Slash asked as he watched Lee burping Thomas.

"Yeah, but first I need to know that you won't freak out on me and go screaming my secrets to the whole family." Lee said seriously.

"I don't know what I can do but promise." Slash said seriously.

"A truth for a truth. If we each hold one of the other's secrets, then we both have something to lose if one of us breaks the promise." Lee said firmly.

Slash thought about that and finally nodded.

"Do you have one?" Lee asked as he gently placed Thomas back in the crib beside Chakotay.

"Yeah." Slash said in a whisper.

"I poisoned eleven people, three of them died." Lee said in an emotionless voice.

"How?" Slash asked as he rested back in his rocking chair.

"That was back when I was heavy into drugs. I was dealing. I cut it wrong. Really messed it up. Honestly, I don't know what I did. But the shit I sold was lethal. Three people died because of me." Lee said in a toneless voice.

"Are you sorry?" Slash asked, glancing at Lee.

"Now? Yeah. Back then? I didn't accept responsibility for anything. Somehow I thought that because I was wasted, it wasn't my fault." Lee said regretfully.

"Did you get in trouble?" Slash asked in a small voice.

"No. No one ever found out it was me. I never told anyone before." Lee said as he watched his grandchildren sleeping.

"I'm a hermaphrodite." Slash said weakly.

Lee nodded.

"The doctors said that I had enough testosterone to look like a guy, but I'd probably never grow much of a beard or get big muscles. And there's a chance that I'll grow breasts, but that hasn't happened... yet." Slash said quietly.

"How did you keep it a secret?" Lee asked as he kept his gaze on the babies.

"It doesn't show unless you get between my legs... I've never let anyone down there." Slash said in a shaking voice.

"So you didn't date." Lee said without inflection.

"No. I couldn't take the chance." Slash said in a whisper.

Lee nodded again.

"You know it doesn't bother me, right?" Lee asked and turned to look at Slash.

"I figured it wouldn't. And I'm okay with yours too." Slash said as he met Lee's eyes.

"Thanks Slash. That's what I was hoping. You're the only person in the world who knows this about me. Now you know that no matter what, you can come and talk to me and I'll listen without judging you." Lee said simply.

"I promise that I'll never tell. Not even if you piss me off." Slash said seriously.

"Same here." Lee said quietly.

* * * * *

As Matt walked into his room, he noticed that something was different... off.

"How's it goin bub?" Sounded from the darkness.

With a quick 'snick' of claws extending, Matt was ready for battle.

The lights came on and Matt was facing himself, leaning casually against the bathroom door frame.

"Thought I'd come for a visit to see how I'm doin'." Logan said with an irritating smirk.

"One eye said you were gone." Matt said as he let his claws recede.

"Yeah, like I said, a visit." Logan said, maintaining his gaze.

"You come to take your life back?" Matt asked suspiciously.

"Naw, you're doin' a better job with it than I ever did. Sit down, I brought beer." Logan said and walked to the table.

Matt cautiously walked and sat across from Logan.

Logan pulled two beers from under the table and handed one to Matt.

A long minute of silence fell over the room as both took a drink and waited.

"I brought somethin' for ya." Logan said and set a folded piece of paper on the table.

"What is it?" Matt asked suspiciously, not making a move to pick up the paper.

"A land deed. An old one." Logan said, then took another drink.

"Why are you giving me land?" Matt asked slowly.

"It's already yours... or mine. Whatever, it's deeded to Jonathan Matthew Logan." Logan said gruffly.

"So?" Matt asked, not letting his guard down for an instant.

"So. Yer doin' a good job takin' in the kid and treatin' Scott decent. Me an Jean thought we should do something for ya. That's all." Logan said and finished the beer.

"And?" Matt said, waiting for the punch line.

"And you deeded the land to yourself from your real name to the one your using." Logan said, then finished his beer in a long drink.

"What?" Matt said and grabbed the paper.

"You heard. That piece of paper can trace back to who you really are." Logan said with a hint of a smile.

Matt read the paper carefully, but couldn't find any other name on it.

"It ain't that easy. Never is for some reason. You need to get a lawyer to research the deed to find the name, but then you'll have your answers." Logan said and stood.

Matt looked up from the paper and asked, "That's it? You're just going to stop in to give me this and leave?"

"Yeah, that's it. We can't stay in one place too long. It'll draw the bad guys to ya, a lot badder than you can deal with." Logan said, then walked to the door.

"Thanks for this... and for letting me have your life." Matt said in nearly a mumble.

"Like I said, you're doin a good job. I ain't here ta give ya divine inspiration or nuthin. Just wanted ta give ya the one thing I never could get for myself, my name. Oh yeah, here's a key to a safety deposit box in Ottawa. That way you won't run short on money." Logan said as he tossed a key to Matt.

"Thanks again." Matt said as he caught the key easily.

"Yeah. Keep up the good work." Logan said and gave a brief smile before disappearing in a burst of light.

"You too." Matt said to the ceiling.

Chapter 7: Hesitation and Acceptance

As the door shut Bobby turned to Robert and asked, "What was all that with your parents? Are you really wanting to do all that stuff?"

Robert smiled as he pulled Bobby into a hug and said, "Jimmy told us about the art of negotiation. Sometimes in order to get what you truly want you have to ask for more than you want."

Bobby closed his eyes at the wonderful feeling of Robert's hug and said, "So you brought up the water sports and stuff so they'd agree to oral sex?"

"Yes. I did some research on the Internet to understand the various activities involved in sexuality. I came across many extreme examples of intimacy and chose three of them in hopes that my fathers would allow me to do what I really wanted." Robert said as he pulled back enough to look Bobby in the eyes.

"And what do you really want?" Bobby asked cautiously.

"To express my love for you in a physical manner." Robert said softly and began to nuzzle Bobby's neck.

"Robert. Hold on." Bobby said hesitantly.

Reluctantly, Robert pulled back to look into Bobby's eyes.

"I love you Robert, and I want to express my love to you too but I'm having a problem." Bobby said with regret in his voice.

"Is it my age?" Robert asked with a slight tremble in his voice.

"No Robert, since we have your fathers' permission I'm really okay with that." Bobby said honestly.

"Then what is it?" Robert asked, looking somewhat relieved.

"It's Pete. I feel like I'm being disrespectful to his memory or... I don't know how to say it exactly. It just feels wrong for us to do stuff so soon after his death." Bobby said with a distraught look.

"I believe I understand. You are in a period of mourning and to engage in a pleasurable activity seems inappropriate." Robert said in thought.

"Exactly. I'm sorry Robby. I really do love you and I want to be with you but I don't..." Bobby trailed off as he heard something.

Robert turned toward the wall and both heard another sound, like something being dropped or thrown in the next room.

"That's Pete's room." Bobby said as he hurried to the door.

* * * * *

"How do you want to do this?" Alex asked with shallow breaths.

"To tell you the truth mate, I'm not ready." Spike said with apology in his eyes.

"But I thought..." Alex drifted off with hurt.

"I love you, and I want us to both be ready, in our hearts, the first time we make love. If you need to get off, I can do that. But it'll have to be like a couple blokes, not like lovers, not yet." Spike said sadly.

"Can you tell me why?" Alex asked with desperation.

"Cause if we jump into this we can mess it up. Mess it up so bad it can't be fixed. I love you enough to wait till the time is right." Spike said quietly.

"How will we know when it's time?" Alex asked as he looked into Spike's eyes.

"We'll know luv. We've got some baggage to deal with, both of us. I've got me a past I have to sort through and deal with before I can come to you completely. And I think you've got the same." Spike finished softly.

"Me? I've never been with anyone." Alex said in confusion.

"I know. But you seem to be so desperate to be loved, to be held. Is it me you want or an end to the loneliness?" Spike asked with worry.

Alex froze at the words.

"Alex, I love you. I love you enough to wait till you know what you really want. And when we're both ready we'll make love. Is this enough for now?" Spike asked hesitantly.

"You said you'd help me get off, right?" Alex asked seriously.

"I could do with a good wank myself. I'd never leave you having to do without." Spike said softly.

"Then I can wait for the rest, how do you want to do it?" Alex asked unsurely.

Spike thought for a second, and then got a devilish grin.

"I think I should worry now." Alex said playfully.

"You have any playing cards laying about?" Spike asked, ignoring Alex's statement.

"Um, yeah, here." Alex said, bewildered by Spike's request as he pulled a deck of cards from the bedside stand.

Spike scooted away from Alex on the bed and left a space between them.

"What are you up to?" Alex asked warily.

"Strip poker, jokers wild, two draws. Pairs of things, socks and the like count as one item. Jewelry don't count." Spike said as he shuffled the cards.

"What happens when we get naked?" Alex asked with a smile.

"Then whoever is naked and loses the next hand has to do what the winner says... to himself. We'll see how this game goes and maybe next time we'll do each other." Spike said as his eyes glittered with mischief.

"Enough talking, deal." Alex said forcefully.

* * * * *

"Andrew, Alan, can I have a few minutes of your time?" A familiar voice asked.

"Jean?" Andrew said as he ran to greet her.

"Hi guys." Jean said as she accepted a hug from first Andrew, then Alan.

"How are you doing?" Andrew asked as he led Jean to have a seat in the common room.

"I can honestly say that every day is a new adventure." Jean said with a big smile.

"Have you had any Thanksgiving dinner? There's still plenty of food left." Andrew said quickly.

"Sorry guys, I don't have time. I really need to ask you a tremendous favor." Jean said with a serious look.

"Go ahead Jean, you know you can ask us anything." Alan said firmly.

"Thanks... I need to explain a few things before I get to the favor." Jean said and looked to see that both men were listening.

Andrew nodded and Jean continued, "When the virus changed my body and increased my mutant abilities and the power of the Phoenix I had the potential to cause destruction on a scale that you can't comprehend. An uncontrolled outburst of my power could disrupt time and space to the point that the damage to the multiverse could never be undone."

Andrew and Alan didn't fully understand what she was saying, but could tell that she was leading to something more.

"My increasing power attracted the attention of a species called the 'Q'. They are multidimensional creatures that exist outside the time/space continuum. They had the choice to either kill me or make me one of them. For whatever reason, they chose to make me 'Q'." Jean said in thought.

"Now to the favor. My mentor in the Q continuum got the idea that he wanted to have a child. He approached Captain Janeway with... less than successful results. Eventually he found another member of the continuum to mate with him and they produced a child, a son." Jean said and her look changed from thoughtful to sad.

"Q has grown quickly and honestly isn't a bad child but..." Jean trailed off and looked away as tears began to form in her eyes.

"What is it?" Andrew asked with concern.

"When my mentor decided he wanted a child, it was a whim, a passing fancy. Now he's faced with the reality of having a child, even when it's not fun and not what he wants. Their fights have been escalating until my mentor finally did something that did irreparable damage to their relationship." Jean said darkly.

"Did he hurt the boy?" Alan asked with concern.

"What about the mother?" Andrew asked at the same time.

"The mother had the child as an indulgence for the father. She had no interest in being a mother and still doesn't. And he didn't hurt the boy physically, in his true form he is nearly indestructible." Jean said as her tears began to fall.

"What did he do?" Alan asked in a whisper.

"Q had a friend. His first and only friend. During their last fight, my mentor attacked Q's friend in a fit of rage. Q's friend was 'unmade'. My mentor sent a surge of energy into the past and prevented the conception of Q's friend... he never existed. Only Q, his father, Logan and I even remember that he ever was. To the rest of his timeline, no such person was ever born. The Q are extremely powerful and capable of almost anything with just a thought, but when someone is 'unmade' there is no way to undo it." Jean said quietly.

"I think I have an idea of what favor you're going to ask, but please, go ahead." Andrew said in an emotionally drained voice.

"My mentor wanted to destroy Q, calling him a mistake and too dangerous to be allowed to exist. Logan and I convinced him to allow us to take Q someplace where he would be out of his father's way. This Earth in this dimension belongs unofficially to Logan and I. No other members of the Q come here and no one will interfere. Q has had his powers

negated and has been given human form. What I'm asking is if you'll take him in and raise him as one of your children." Jean asked in a pleading voice.

"Jean, we have eight kids and one on the way..." Andrew began.

"Yes." Alan said firmly.

Andrew looked at Alan with surprise.

"Andy, Jean knows about our kids. She feels that this is the best place for him or she wouldn't ask. How could we sleep at night knowing that we said no to a child in need?" Alan asked with a plea for understanding in his eyes.

Andrew held Alan's gaze for a moment, and then looked at Jean.

"Alan's right. Of course we'll take him in." Andrew said softly.

"I'll introduce you, and then I'll leave. I can't stay too long." Jean said quickly.

"Jean, please don't leave until I've had a chance to talk to him. I know you think you're doing what's best for him, but if this isn't what he wants, it won't work." Andrew said simply.

Jean stopped, then nodded.

There was a flash of light and a teenage boy, maybe fourteen appeared.

"Q, I'd like for you to meet Andrew and Alan, these are the guys I was telling you about." Jean said with a gentle smile.

"Nice to meet you." The boy mumbled, not looking into anyone's eyes.

"Q, please come over here. I need to talk to you for a minute." Andrew said quietly.

The boy walked to stand in front of Andrew.

"Sit down with me, I just need to ask you a few questions." Andrew said and patted the cushion beside him.

Q hesitantly sat beside Andrew.

"Jean told me a little about you. But I just need to know that you're here because you want to be." Andrew said in as gentle a voice as he could manage.

"Yes, please sir, I promise I'll do anything you say, I'll be good! I promise! Please let me stay!" The boy said in panic.

Alan automatically pulled Q into a hug and whispered comforting words into his ear as Andrew said, "Q, as long as you're here because you want to be, then we'll be happy to have you."

Jean walked to Andrew and Alan with a look of relief.

"I don't know how we'll explain him being here. I mean, from what you said, he doesn't 'officially' exist on this world." Andrew said with concern.

"Not a problem. There's a folder of birth certificates and social security cards on the Professor's desk that Scott forgot to distribute yesterday when it arrived. All Q's paperwork is in there and he has a complete history of existence in the official files, as do the rest of your family." Jean said with a happy smile.

"Thanks Jean." Alan said as he lifted his head from beside Q's ear.

"I didn't do much. Mr. Howlett did most of it; I just did the things he couldn't. All your family's official records are settled, you'll never have to worry about that." Jean said in peace.

"Um, what is Q's name in the paperwork?" Andrew asked as he looked at the boy who was soaking in the love and comfort from Alan.

"Quaid Summers." Jean said with a giggle.

"Is that alright with you Q?" Andrew asked as he tried to hold Q's gaze.

"Yes sir. I'm not Q anymore since they put me here. I'm human now. I *should* have a human name." Q said in barely more than a mumble.

"Guys, I really have to go now. Logan and I will check in with you as often as we can." Jean said warmly.

"Jean?" Andrew said quickly.

"Yes?" Jean responded.

"Thanks." Andrew said, then turned a loving look toward Q.

Jean nodded and vanished in a flash of light.

"Andy, let's take Q home." Alan said as he held tightly to the young boy.

Andrew smiled and gestured to the portal forming in front of them.

* * * * *

Bobby entered the room and froze in place.

It looked as though the place had been ransacked. Books were thrown from the shelves and were scattered around the room.

"Who would do this?" Robert asked as he walked to stand beside Bobby.

"No one." Bobby said in confusion.

Robert looked at Bobby curiously.

"No one could have gotten out of this room without passing us in the hall." Bobby said as he looked around.

"Give me a moment." Robert said and began to press some buttons on his personal data node and his ocular implant.

He slowly looked around the room and finally said, "There is no indication that another person has been in this room in the past two hours. I am capable of seeing thermal variations and any warm-blooded being would have left residual thermal traces in the room."

Bobby smiled and said, "I didn't think of that. I can sense heat too. You're right. No one's been in here. But that doesn't explain what happened to the room."

"Look at this." Robert said as he pointed to a sketchbook opened at their feet.

"It's one of Pete's drawings. I've seen him working on them a few times, but he never felt comfortable showing them to me." Bobby said as he looked at the beautiful picture of Ms. Munroe.

"He was quite talented." Robert said quietly.

"He had so much to live for." Bobby said as he knelt down to look at the book.

"Robby, look at this." Bobby said as he stared at the next page in the sketchbook.

"It is us." Robert said in wonder.

"He captured our love." Bobby said in a whisper as he looked at the picture of him and Robert hugging.

Bobby turned the page, and then quickly turned it back before Robert could see.

"What is it?" Robert asked with concern.

"Um, I guess Peter wasn't just talented, but also had a dirty mind." Bobby said with a chuckle.

"I do not understand." Robert said hesitantly.

"Look." Bobby said as he turned the page.

Robert stared in wonder at the picture of the two of them, Bobby and Robert, completely nude and engaged in passionate sex.

"I didn't know he thought about stuff like this." Bobby said as a blush crept up his face.

"Bobby." Robert said with a serious tone in his voice.

Bobby stood quickly at the sound and looked into Robert's eyes.

"Peter loved you and wanted you to be happy. The picture was an expression of his desire for you to be happy. If we make love, we will not be disrespecting his memory, we will be granting his wish." Robert said seriously.

"I think you're right. Let's go take care of that now, we'll come back later and tidy up." Bobby said warmly.

"I love you." Robert said as he held Bobby's gaze.

"I love you too Robby. Let's go to bed." Bobby said and put an arm around Robert to guide him out of the room.

* * * * *

As the three emerged from the portal Q asked, "What was that?"

Andrew looked at Q and followed his eyes to the vanishing portal.

"It's a portal, that's my mutant ability." Andrew said in a fatherly tone.

"You're a mutant?" Q asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, Alan and I are both mutants. That doesn't bother you does it?" Andrew asked with a note of concern.

"No, I mean, no sir. I just, I never met any mutants before. The last time I visited a material dimension there weren't any mutants at all." Q said with excitement.

All three turned as Lee and Slash walked out of the bedroom.

"Hi Dad, I'd like you to meet your new grandson." Andrew said with an impish grin.

Lee looked at his son in surprise, then noticed the frightened look on the boy's face.

"What's your name little fella?" Lee asked as he walked closer to Q.

"Q... I mean Quaid." Q said in a trembling voice.

"Are you my grandson?" Lee asked as he squatted to look into Quaid's eyes.

Quaid looked up to Andrew with question.

"Since Jean named you Summers, I'm assuming that you are going to be my son. If you're my son and he's my father, that makes him your grandfather and you his grandson." Andrew said gently.

Quaid had a look of confusion on his face as he looked from Andrew to Lee. When he met Lee's eyes he nodded hesitantly.

"Good. You can't have too many grandkids." Lee said with a smile and held open his arms.

"How you doing Slash?" Andrew asked as Lee pulled Quaid into a hug.

"Um, okay. Where'd you get the kid?" Slash asked curiously.

"He needed a family, and we appear to have one empty couch." Andrew said with a shrug.

"Sir?" Quaid said as he pulled out of his hug with Lee.

"You can call me Father if you like." Andrew said gently.

"Father. Q said that she fixed all the new rooms you were building. She knew you'd need a place for me to sleep." Quaid said quickly.

Andrew and Alan looked at each other, then walked to the door that separated the existing house from the new wing.

Lee took hold of Quaid's hand and began to walk, taking hold of Slash's shoulder along the way.

"Who's with the babies?" Andrew thought to ask.

"Xander and Warren are watching them." Lee said immediately.

"Okay, let's go." Andrew said happily.

* * * * *

"Full house, kings high" Alex said proudly.

"Bugger! I thought I had you with two pairs." Spike said as he dropped his cards.

"What's it going to be?" Alex asked with delight.

"Socks. If you want to see the good stuff, you're going to have to earn it." Spike said with playful gruffness as he pulled his socks off.

"My deal." Alex said happily as he gathered the cards to shuffle.

"Wow, it's really all done." Alan said as they walked into the first room.

"It's beautiful. I didn't think the rooms would be this big." Andrew said as he looked at the comfortable, fully furnished room.

"Look at that." Andrew said in astonishment.

"What is it?" Alan asked curiously.

"It's Spike's duster. It was destroyed in Sunnydale when he closed the hellmouth." Andrew said as he carefully glided his fingers over the leather.

"And this is Alex's uniform." Alan said from the open closet door.

"Let's check out the other rooms." Lee said with excitement.

Chapter 8: The Lair of the Fairy Princess

"Who's the fairy princess?" Slash asked as they looked around the next room.

"Marguerite. I don't know why but I just think of her when I walk in here." Alan said as he looked at the delicate fabrics and beautiful fairy dolls that all blended to create an almost unreal atmosphere.

"She won't be able to stay in here for a while, but when she does... I can't imagine her not loving it." Lee said as he followed the others to the next room.

"Dad, I think this room is yours." Andrew said from inside the next room.

Lee walked in and the first thing that caught his eyes was the shade of blue that the curtains and carpet were.

Slash looked around and asked, "What is it?"

"I met a woman, a wonderful woman who I might actually have a chance with. The color scheme reminds me of her... she's blue." Lee finished quietly.

"FATHER! COME LOOK!" Quaid's voice called from the next room.

The others hurried out to see whatever the boy had stumbled across.

"Subtle." Alan said blankly.

"Um, yeah. Do you think he figured out who's it is?" Andrew chuckled.

The wall opposite the door had the letter 'Q' sunken in and filled with shelving from floor to ceiling. In the center of the Q was a plasma flat screen TV.

"It's mine? I mean, my very own room? All mine?" Quaid asked with excitement verging on hyperventilation.

"Well, I guess it's this or the fairy room." Lee said with a smile.

Quaid got a questioning look, and then smiled as he realized that Lee was teasing.

"She left him plenty of clothes." Alan said from the closet.

"Um, Andy?" Lee said with a note of concern.

"Yeah dad?" Andrew responded and walked to Lee's side.

"Look." Lee said and pointed into the bedside stands drawer.

Laying there was a bottle of lube and a supply of condoms.

"I hope she's just preparing for any eventuality." Andrew said, then turned to look at Quaid again.

"I love it. It's perfect." Quaid said in absolute joy.

"You'll have to thank your Aunt Jean the next time you see her." Andrew said with a smile.

Quaid got a look of confusion and asked, "Who?"

"Oh, um, the Q that brought you here." Alan said in thought.

"Oh yeah. I'll tell her." Quaid said quickly, then started looking in every nook and cranny to discover all his new treasures.

"I doubt that any of the other rooms will top this one." Lee said with a smile.

The group, minus Quaid walked on to explore the next room.

"This is one of the kid's room, but I don't know which." Lee said as he looked at the regeneration alcove set into one wall.

"It's Trey's." Andrew said with certainty.

"How can you tell?" Lee asked curiously.

"Because his spare Borg components are on display." Andrew said, pointing at an artistic display of equipment on the wall behind Plexiglas.

"Why does Trey have a bed? He doesn't sleep." Lee asked as he looked around.

"Sleeping isn't the only thing a bed is used for." Alan said and waggled his eyebrows.

Lee blushed and nodded.

"Who's room is this?" Quaid asked as he ran into the room.

"This is your brother Trey's room." Andrew said simply.

"He's Borg? I have a brother who's Borg?" Quaid asked with excitement.

"Yes, you have five Borg brothers and one Borg sister, you also have two mutant brothers." Alan said with a smile.

"My best friend ever is... was Borg." Quaid finished and the smile fell off his face.

Andrew and Alan immediately sandwiched Quaid between them in a hug.

"I think we need to take Quaid to meet his brothers and sister, the rest of this can wait." Andrew said seriously.

"Just a second." Slash said and moved to Quaid.

"Quaid, I'm Slash. I just got here today, same as you. If you get scared or need to talk to someone just let me know, okay?" Slash said gently.

"Yeah, you look really cool. I wish I looked like you." Quaid said as he cautiously reached out to touch Slash's cheek.

"You look just right the way you are Quaid. Don't change a thing." Slash said with a smile.

"Quaid, are you ready to meet your brothers and sister?" Andrew asked from the doorway.

Reluctantly, Quaid turned his attention from Slash and nodded to Andrew.

"Follow me." Andrew said and walked through the door.

* * * * *

"I think you got me." Alex said in defeat as he laid down his pair of queens.

"Bloody hell!" Spike said as he slammed down his pair of jacks.

"You thought you were going to beat me with that?" Alex asked in confusion.

"With the disappointed look you were wearing I thought you had nothing." Spike said as he pulled off his T-shirt.

"Looks like you'll be putting on a show for me." Alex said with a teasing smile.

Spike picked up the cards and began to shuffle.

"It ain't over yet mate, it ain't over till the last card gets played." Spike said seriously.

* * * * *

The group emerged in the common room of the mansion.

"Do you know where they are?" Lee asked curiously.

"I think the younger kids are with Theresa and Rachel. I'm not sure about the older kids." Andrew said in thought.

"Found one." Lee said from the divider that separated the game room from the common room.

Alan and Andrew led Quaid around the divider to meet his first new sibling.

* * * * *

"Three of a kind." Alex said proudly as he laid out his three nines.

"And all I've got is this pair of fives." Spike said sadly as he laid the fives of spades and clubs down before him.

Alex nearly bounced with anticipation.

"And this other pair of fives." Spike continued with a glorious smile as he laid out the red fives.

Alex looked at the cards in astonishment before saying, "But you drew three cards on the last draw, how lucky can one guy be?"

"I must have lead a virtuous life." Spike said with a rakish grin.

"Yeah, right." Alex said with a roll of his eyes and removed his socks.

"I think I feel a winning streak coming on." Spike said with a happy smile.

"You won one hand, that's not called a streak, it's called a fluke." Alex responded in a teasing voice.

"Just deal." Spike said intensely.

* * * * *

"Itchy!?" Quaid nearly exploded with excitement and threw himself into Icheb's lap.

"Itchy! I missed you. Are you okay?" Quaid asked in a rush as he hugged Icheb tightly.

"Quaid." Andrew said, trying to get his attention without sounding harsh.

Icheb was sitting stiffly, trying to understand what was happening to him.

"Quaid." Andrew said more loudly.

Quaid turned his tear filled eyes to look at Andrew.

It broke Andrew's heart to say the words but he had to get the message across.

"Quaid, I don't think he's the same person you remember." Andrew said softly.

Quaid quickly turned to look into Icheb's eyes.

"Itchy?" Quaid asked as he looked for any kind of response.

Icheb looked to his father in question.

Quaid broke down into uncontrolled sobbing as he clutched to the image of his best and only friend.

"Quaid, can you tell me about your friend? Why he was your friend?" Andrew asked as he sat beside Icheb and Quaid.

"He... he liked me. He... he said I was funny and we... we had fun." Quaid said through hitching breaths.

"He said all those things about you, what about him? What was he like?" Andrew pressed.

"Itchy was always more serious. When I wanted to do something, he'd usually say no, but I'd talk him into it and he'd have fun anyway... one time we took a shuttle craft and... okay, maybe that's not the best example..." Quaid trailed off.

"Icheb Summers, I'd like you to meet your new brother Quaid Summers." Alan said from their other side.

"My brother?" Both boys said simultaneously.

"That's right. And Quaid already has a room at the boat house." Lee said with a smile.

"Icheb, Quaid knew an Icheb in an alternate dimension and that Icheb was his best friend. You know I've always said I wouldn't tell you who to be friends with, and I still won't. But would you please try to get to know Quaid and maybe one day you can be his friend?" Andrew asked hopefully.

Icheb looked from his father's hopeful eyes to Quaid's and said, "I will be better than his friend, I will be his brother."

* * * * *

"Show 'em." Spike said in anticipation.

Alex slowly laid out his hand one card at a time.

"Bloody Hell! A full house again?" Spike said in wonder.

"I've never been this lucky before. You must be my good luck charm." Alex said with delight.

"Right, well, um, here it goes." Spike said and stood beside the bed.

Spike slowly undid each button of his jeans and began to pull them down.

"You're not wearing underwear?" Alex asked with surprise.

"I didn't know we'd be playing strip poker tonight, did I?" Spike asked as he stepped out of his black jeans.

"Um, no. I guess not." Alex said as his gaze was fixed on Spike's erect cock.

"Take a good look, luv. This is what you do to me." Spike said, then turned slowly around.

Alex was in awe of Spike's smooth, hairless ass. It even had the cutest dimples.

"You gonna shuffle or sit and look at me all night?" Spike asked, trying to sound gruff, but having the effect spoiled by his smile.

"Um, yeah. I guess one more should do it." Alex said as he fumbled to gather the cards without looking at them.

* * * * *

"Andrew, Alan, I'm glad I caught you." Scott said as he entered the common room.

"Scott, come here. There's someone I'd like for you to meet." Andrew said with a smile.

"Quaid, I'd like you to meet your Uncle Scott. Scott, this is our newest son, Quaid Summers." Alan said as he indicated the boy holding Icheb in a death grip.

"Nice to meet you." Scott said unsurely.

"You're my uncle?" Quaid asked hesitantly.

"Uncle Scott is *our* uncle." Icheb said with a tender smile toward Quaid.

"So since we're brothers, your family is my family?" Quaid asked in confirmation.

"That is correct. Andrew and Alan are *our* fathers, Scott, Alex and Spike are *our* uncles and Dawn is *our* aunt." Icheb said slowly.

"Thanks Itchy, being your brother is the best thing ever." Quaid said in delight as he pulled Icheb into another hug.

"If you call me Itchy, what do I call you?" Icheb asked curiously.

"You, I mean *he* always called me Q, but I'd like it if you had a special name for me. A name that only you get to call me." Quaid said seriously.

"May I call you Quay?" Icheb asked hopefully.

Quaid nodded enthusiastically.

* * * * *

"Three aces." Alex said with joy.

"You must really want me to put on a show for you... But not this time mate. Four threes, show me some skin." Spike said with a chuckle.

Alex grudgingly pulled off his T-shirt and smiled at Spike's appreciative look.

Spike reached down and gave his cock a single stroke, then picked up the cards to shuffle.

* * * * *

Scott turned his attention to Alan and Andrew, leaving the boys to their own conversation.

"This came yesterday and I forgot to give it to you, I got sidetracked." Scott said and thought about Peter.

"No problem, let's see what you've got." Andrew said as he took the large manila envelope from Scott.

"Go ahead, it's from Ken." Scott said and stood aside to watch Andrew pull out the contents.

Andrew opened the large envelope to find several smaller envelopes inside.

"This one has your name love." Andrew said as he handed an envelope to Alan.

After examining the contents, Alan said, "It's a birth certificate, social security card, even my teaching credentials."

"It looks like he made a mistake." Andrew said as he looked at the papers from one of the other envelopes.

"What's that?" Scott asked as he moved to read over Andrew's shoulder.

"We agreed on the ages of the children when Ken was here but he got them wrong." Andrew said with concern.

"Oh yeah, Ken told me about that. He said that since he got to know the children, he thought you might have underestimated their ages. He said it was an honest parental thing to do. No parent wants to admit that their children are growing up." Scott said with a smile.

"So Icheb's going to be seventeen?" Alan asked while looking over Andrew's other shoulder at the paperwork.

"Yes, and Trey's going to be sixteen." Andrew said, peeking into the next envelope.

"The twins are going to be fifteen and Jimmy's going to be twelve. Ken agreed with you about Janine's age." Scott finished.

"Okay, that shouldn't be too hard to remember." Andrew said in thought.

"Here's Quaid's paperwork. He's going to be fourteen on January seventh." Andrew said in surprise.

"I guess Jean figured out our birthday system." Alan said with a smile.

"Jean was here?" Scott asked with surprise.

"Yeah, she's the one who brought Quaid. She said she couldn't stay, but that she or Logan would check in as often as they could." Andrew said seriously.

"Next time you see her, tell her I said 'hi'." Scott said with a gentle smile.

"I will, I promise." Andrew said carefully.

"What's that?" Alan asked, pointing to the next envelope.

"That's Thomas and Chakotay's birth certificates." Andrew said and pulled one out of the envelope.

"Who does it list as mother?" Alan asked curiously.

"You." Andrew said in surprise.

"What?" Alan asked disbelievingly.

"It says right here Mother: Alan Sunshine Summers, Father: LeeAndrew Malachi Summers." Andrew said then looked at Scott in question.

"Don't look at me. Ken's the one who did it." Scott said with a shrug.

"I'm not going to fight it." Alan said with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah, I guess I'm so used to lying in the official records that it's a shock to tell the truth." Andrew said frankly.

"I know what you mean. What else did he send you?" Scott asked curiously.

"A big envelope for Xander and Remy, and here's one for Dawn. And here's one for Dad... and Slash?" Andrew looked at the envelope suspiciously.

"Ken couldn't have known that Slash was coming here." Scott said with a concerned look on his face.

"I think Jean did that, the same way she took care of Quaid's paperwork." Alan said speculatively.

"That makes sense. Where are they?" Andrew asked, looking around.

"I bet they're eating again. Slash looks like he could use a few extra meals." Alan said with concern.

"I think you're right." Andrew said with a pensive expression.

"One thing about Lee's paperwork, Ken said that since Lee Donald Wells is in prison, he created a parallel identity for your father and named him Lee Ronald Wells. It takes care of the problem in the unlikely event that someone recognizes him." Scott said seriously.

"I'm glad he thought of that. Dad gets to start out with a clean slate." Andrew said with a small smile.

"William has two envelopes." Alan said as he picked up two nearly identical envelopes.

"One is William Burroughs and the other is William Summers." Andrew said as he looked at them more closely.

"Spike." Scott said in realization.

"Oh, I forgot about Spike." Alan said as he took Spike's envelope.

"Don't let Alex hear you say that, he'll kick your ass." Andrew said seriously.

"Alex is a little protective of Spike, isn't he?" Scott asked with a fond smile.

"Just wait until you're in the line of fire of his protectiveness. I thought he was going to blast me." Andrew said with a chuckle.

"Look at this, Spike has two college degrees." Alan said as he peeked into Spike's envelope.

"Love, that's Spike's business. I've always suspected that he was more educated than he let on, but it's his choice to share that with us." Andrew said softly.

"Right Andy." Alan said and closed the envelope.

"I'm glad Alex found someone. Spike too." Scott said with a wistful sound in his voice.

"Feeling alone?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Yeah, a little." Scott admitted quietly.

"You want me to let you off the hook?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

"How do you mean?" Scott asked curiously.

"Well, I made you promise not to date anyone for a year. I'm willing to forget about that if you are." Andrew said slowly.

"Why?" Scott asked in thought.

"I asked you not to date so you could get to know yourself and develop your own self-image." Andrew said with difficulty.

"A self-image that didn't include anyone else." Scott said with a smile.

"Yeah." Andrew said, then continued, "You've done that. You've accomplished everything I had hoped that you would. You've made friends, developed interests that are your own. You've stopped trying to impress everyone and relaxed a lot."

Scott thought about the words and finally said, "Yeah, I guess I have."

"So don't worry about the promise. If you find someone, I'll be happy for you." Andrew said with caring in his voice.

"Thanks Andy, thanks both of you. Thanks for helping me out. I hate to imagine what my life would be like if I hadn't met you." Scott said seriously.

"That goes for us too Scott. You're still my best friend ever and that's never going to change." Andrew said with a dopey smile that threatened tears.

"And you're my brother, all you have to do is look at Icheb and Quaid to see what that means." Alan said with a smile.

All three turned their attention to Icheb and Quaid talking a mile a minute to each other.

* * * * *

"Dad, Slash, we have a surprise for you." Andrew said happily as he walked into the dining room accompanied by Alan, Scott, Icheb and Quaid.

"You're last surprise was a new grandson. I'm afraid to ask." Lee said with a smile.

"Here." Alan said, holding out an envelope to Lee and another to Slash.

"What is it?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Scott got his lawyer to prepare new ID for you." Andrew said with a smile.

Lee carefully opened the envelope and pulled out a New York driver's license.

"It should be everything you'll need to prove your identity to anyone who would ask." Scott said seriously.

"Is anyone else hungry? I'm going to get some more food before it's put away." Alan said to the group.

"Are you hungry Quay?" Icheb asked quietly.

"I don't know. I haven't eaten since last time I was in corporeal form." Quaid said uncertainly.

"Then you're probably long overdue. Come and get some food." Alan said as he led the boys away.

Scott looked at the boys, then the table and finally came to a decision. "Hold on guys." He said and followed Alan and the boys to the serving line.

"What did you get Slash?" Lee asked with interest.

Slash carefully opened the envelope and pulled out a letter.

Slash read the letter carefully, then looked back into the envelope.

"What is it?" Lee asked again.

"Someone named Jean said that she provided a new identity for me if I want it. She said I could leave my old name and old life completely behind me and start off with a clean slate." Slash said in a disbelieving voice.

"What are you going to do?" Lee asked quietly.

Slash looked at the new Driver's License in his hand and thought for a second before saying, "I'm going to do it. Josiah Andrew Haley-Keith wasn't wanted by his parents and doesn't exist anymore. I can finally let him go. I'll start at the new school as Josiah LeeAndrew Wells."

Andrew and Lee looked at each other with surprise.

"What?" Slash asked in concern.

Lee looked at Andrew and received a nod before saying, "Nothing. I mean, nothing bad. But before you decide to take that step, you should know that my last name is also Wells."

"Really?" Slash asked with wide eyes.

Andrew and Lee both nodded.

After a moment for that to sink in, Andrew pulled out his wallet and handed Slash his ID.

"Your name is LeeAndrew?" Slash asked in surprise.

"Yeah, I just go by Andrew. And before I married Alan my last name was Wells." Andrew said shyly.

"Why would she do that? I mean, give me your names?" Slash asked in confusion.

Before Andrew could answer he saw Icheb and Quaid sit their plates on the table side by side. The two boys were oblivious to everyone around them as they chattered, only briefly stopping to take bites of their respective foods.

"To make you brothers." Andrew said in realization.

"What?" Lee and Slash asked in unison.

"Dad, you and Slash have become close friends, right?" Andrew asked seriously.

"Yeah." Lee answered simply.

"And Slash, from what you just said, you don't have any family who you'd want to be associated with, right?" Andrew said in thought.

"Yeah." Slash said in a whisper.

"Our family is built on acceptance and choice. The majority of my family are here because they choose to be, not by a circumstance of their birth. The reality of our family is we are related because we say we are. Dad is my real dad, and Thomas and Chakotay are my real, birth children, but Icheb is just as much my child because he chose me as his father and I chose him as my son. I think that Jean gave you that identity to give you a family, and I think your place in my family is as my father's brother." Andrew finished quietly.

"Slash?" Lee asked to get his attention.

Slash turned to look into Lee's eyes.

"It's your choice to make, but I think having you for a brother would be perfect. Besides, when you get a break from school for the holidays, you could come here and spend time with *our* family instead of being at the school alone." Lee said hopefully.

"Are you guys sure you want me?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"Absolutely." Andrew said seriously.

"Completely." Alan said from beside Andrew with a plate of food.

"What do you say? Will you be my brother?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Brothers." Slash said with a smile.

"Great!" Andrew said with excitement.

"What is it father?" Icheb asked at the sound.

"Do you remember when Alan and I adopted you and your brothers and sister?" Andrew began.

Icheb nodded.

"Slash has just been adopted into our family." Andrew said happily.

"Is he going to be our brother?" Quaid asked hesitantly.

"No Quaid, he's going to be your great-uncle, Uncle Slash." Andrew said with a smile.

Slash got up from his seat and walked to Quaid and Icheb.

"No, that doesn't sound right. People outside our family can call me Slash. You guys can call me Uncle Josiah or Uncle Joe if you want." Slash said as he knelt between their chairs.

"So you got a new brother just like me!" Quaid said in delight.

"That's right. And I got a bunch of really cool nephews and a niece." Slash said with a happy smile.

"You've got to stay with us at the boat house tonight." Lee said firmly.

"That's right, the first night as part of our family you have to spend at home." Andrew said seriously.

Slash hesitated and looked at his new nephews.

"Please Uncle Joe, us new guys need to be together on our first night." Quaid asked with pleading in his voice.

"Okay, but just for you." Slash said with a smile.

"When you're ready to go, get your stuff and we'll head back to the house." Andrew said as he sneaked a chunk of sweet potato off Alan's plate.

"It looks like my nephews are about done, do you guys want to come with me?" Slash asked.

Quaid and Icheb quickly stood to follow Slash.

Alan, Andrew and Lee watched as the three walked away.

"He'll be a great addition to the family." Andrew said as he watched them leave.

"Quaid or Slash?" Lee asked curiously.

After a moment of thought Andrew said, "Both. I was thinking of Slash. It's funny, I already think of Quaid as our son... how did that happen?"

"The same way it happened with Icheb, Trey, William, Robert, Jimmy and Janine." Alan said with a chuckle.

"Do you realize that in less than nine months we're going to have *TEN* kids?" Andrew said with a pained look.

"Regrets?" Alan asked with a smile, already knowing the answer.

"Absolutely none." Andrew said in peace.

Chapter 9: Portents of Doom

"Hey one-eye, you got a minute?" Matt asked as he entered the dining room.

"Sure Matt, do you need some privacy for this?" Scott asked, looking at the others at the table.

"Naw, nuthin like that. Tha other Logan just showed up and gave me sumthin and I need ta talk to your lawyer." Matt said as he took a seat beside Scott.

"Jean just left something for us too." Alan said with a grin.

"I got a land deed, what'd you get?" Matt asked suspiciously.

"Go ahead and tell Scott what's up and we'll tell you ours in a minute." Andrew said with a sneaky smile.

Matt gave Andrew a wary look before turning back to Scott and saying, "Look at this."

Scott looked over the document carefully and finally said, "What do you need to see a lawyer for? It's already in your name."

"Cause the other Logan said I deeded the land to myself when I took the name Logan." Matt said gruffly.

Scott stopped and thought for a minute.

"So do you know any lawyers?" Matt asked impatiently.

Scott snapped out of his thoughts and said, "Um, yeah, in fact I know a really good one. He mentioned that he'd be visiting his family today, but if you wanted we could fax this to him right now and he could call us when he gets it." Scott said seriously.

"Sounds good." Matt said in thought.

"Then, once we've faxed this, what would you think about going into town and looking for an open pool table somewhere?" Scott asked casually.

Matt looked at Scott with surprise.

"I remember you saying you'd like to go shoot some pool when you got out of isolation. Well, I'm in the mood for a game right now. It's been a long day and I need to unwind." Scott said hopefully.

After a searching look into Scott's face, Matt said, "You got it Cyke."

"Great! Let's go fax this now, then I have one other stop to make before we leave." Scott said happily.

"Q? What happened? You aren't Q anymore?" Quaid said with worry as he ran from Icheb to stand before Matt.

All the adults looked in confusion as Quaid began to inspect Matt carefully, apparently looking for damage.

"Did they hurt you? Did they make you like me?" Quaid asked as he took Matt's hand, presumably to see if it was solid.

Andrew was the first to understand what Quaid was thinking and said, "Quaid, this is Matt, he's the brother of the Q we know as Logan."

Quaid stopped his frantic touching of Matt and looked up into his eyes, and timidly said, "Um, sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"No harm done kid. What's your name?" Matt asked as a smile came over his face.

"Quaid... Quaid Summers." He said quietly.

Matt bent down a little to look into Quaid's eyes on his own level and said, "You were worried about my brother, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I thought they did the same to him as they done to me." Quaid mumbled.

"What'd they do?" Matt asked quietly.

"Made me human." Quaid responded timidly.

"It ain't so bad bein human. And you got good people lookin out for you. You'll be alright." Matt said with a smile.

"Thanks, you're nice like your brother." Quaid said as he pulled Matt into a hug.

"I bet he just loves hearing that." Matt said sarcastically.

"The last time I told him he chased me across three dimensions." Quaid said with a giggle.

"Are you ready to send that fax?" Scott asked with a tender smile.

"Yeah Cyke, right behind'ja." Matt said and stood, then said to Quaid before he left the room, "Welcome to the family."

* * * * *

"What do you call it when they're all in a row?" Alex asked as he laid down his cards.

"It's called a straight luv. That's it... I'm yours to command." Spike said as he picked up the cards and placed the deck on the table beside the bed.

"Um, you said you'd do what I told you... but... I mean, I want to do stuff too." Alex said in frustration.

"I can see that." Spike said, looking at the straining cock trying to bore it's way out of Alex's jeans.

"Would you mind if we did each other? I mean, guys do it all the time. We don't have to kiss or anything if you don't want to." Alex said quickly.

"Luv. Don't think that I don't want to. I've got the proof throbbing right here that I do. I just don't want to go to fast and ruin this." Spike said with concern.

"How about this? I'll tell you what I want you to do, and if you think it's too much, Just say so." Alex asked hopefully.

"Sounds good... where do you want me?" Spike said with a grin.

"Lay down on the bed. I just want to hold you." Alex said in a breathy whisper.

* * * * *

"Icheb, do you know where the other kids are?" Andrew asked as Icheb moved to stand beside Quaid.

"Trey is spending the night with Clark and John, Robert is spending the night with Bobby, William is spending the night with Chris and Ronny. Jimmy is visiting with Artie and Clarissa. Janine is visiting with Theresa and Rachel. Jimmy and Janine will be here in eight minutes and I will accompany them home." Icheb said as he put an arm around Quaid.

"We'll wait with you. I'd like to introduce Quaid to Janine and Jimmy." Alan said and took a seat.

"Would you like some more food?" Icheb asked Quaid quietly.

"I'd like some more Jell-O. I like the way it feels." Quaid said with excitement.

Icheb led Quaid back to the serving line yet again.

"Everything is going to be fine Andy. Without Icheb, I don't think we could handle them all, but he's the perfect big brother." Alan said as he watched Icheb and Quaid in the serving line.

"I know love. God, we're so lucky." Andrew said with love as he watched his children.

* * * * *

Slash and Lee walked into the dining room as Quaid and Icheb were returning to the table.

"I wondered where you guys went. We turned around and you were gone." Lee said to the boys.

"Quaid became restless and wanted to return to Father and Dad." Icheb said seriously.

"I got my stuff, so I'm ready when you are." Slash said, holding up his backpack.

"Jimmy and Janine will be here in a few minutes, then we'll go. If you have any room left for a snack, now would be a good time to get it." Andrew said to Slash.

"Um, yeah. I guess." Slash said and walked to the serving line followed by Lee.

"You'd think they'd been brothers all their lives the way they get along." Alan said as he watched Slash and Lee.

"I think Slash is just what Dad needed. Dad's seemed sort of... apart. Like he's not one of us. Just hanging on the fringes of the family. I think Slash gives him someone to relate to that's... on his own level. He doesn't have to be the father or grandfather with Slash." Andrew said in speculation.

"And Slash has someone who wants him. I don't think he could accept someone trying to be his parent, not after the rejection he's suffered. But this way he's accepted as an equal and he still gets to have a family." Alan contributed.

"What are you guys talking about?" Slash asked as he sat back down at the table, followed by Lee.

"You." Andrew said with a grin.

"What about me?" Slash asked apprehensively.

"We were just discussing how perfect it is to have you as an Uncle." Alan said with a smile.

Slash gave a dubious look but finally accepted the statement and started to eat.

"Father! Dad!" Jimmy said with delight as he ran into the room, followed by Clarissa and Artie.

"Hey Squirt, what have you been up to?" Andrew asked as he accepted a hug from his son.

"Artie was telling me about his family. He has this big book that tells about all the people in his family for over four hundred years." Jimmy said with excitement.

"It has all kinds of stories about all those people. One of them was a real pirate!" Clarissa said happily.

"That sounds really interesting. Have you seen Janine lately?" Alan asked with a smile.

"She's right over there. She wanted to get some more Jell-O before we leave." Jimmy said, then noticed Quaid.

"Who's that?" Jimmy whispered to Andrew.

"Let's wait for Janine, then I'll tell you." Andrew whispered in reply.

Janine, Rachel and Theresa walked to the table, each carrying a plate of food... all desserts.

"Janine, Jimmy, I'd like for you to meet your new brother, Quaid Summers." Andrew said happily.

"Really?" Jimmy asked with surprise.

Janine studied Quaid for a moment before saying, "It's nice to meet you." Then started eating her Jell-O.

Andrew and Alan looked at each other curiously at Janine's cold reaction.

"Where are you from? Are you really my brother? I mean, like forever?" Jimmy asked quickly.

"Hold on Squirt, give him a chance to answer." Andrew said with a chuckle.

Quaid looked at Icheb with a helpless look of fear and indecision.

"Quaid is our brother forever. He was brought to us by Aunt Jean because she believed we needed just such a person to make our family complete." Icheb said carefully.

Alan and Andrew exchanged a look at the eloquent and thoughtful response.

"Wow." Jimmy said and ran to hug Quaid.

"If Icheb likes you, then I like you." Jimmy said from the hug.

"Thank you." Quaid said as he tentatively returned the hug.

"I think that's everyone who's going. Finish your food kids and we'll go home." Andrew said to the group.

"Ahem." Lee said to get Andrew's attention.

"Oh, sorry." Andrew said with a blush.

"Kids, I'd like for you to meet your new uncle. His name is Slash, but the members of the family can call him Uncle Joe." Lee said as he indicated Slash who looked like he wanted to crawl under the table.

Janine looked at Slash and got a big smile.

"I opened the door for you." Janine said with a smile as she moved to stand before Slash.

"Yeah, and you brought me in and showed me where the food was." Slash said as he pulled her into a gentle hug.

"I like you." Janine said as she rested her head on his abdomen and continued to hug him tightly.

Andrew looked at Alan and gave a shrug.

"Come on guys. Clear up your plates so we can go. It's getting late." Andrew said to the group.

Janine released the hug and hurried to gulp down her Jell-O.

Jimmy, Icheb and Quaid gathered all the empty plates and took them to the kitchen.

* * * * *

Alex climbed on top of Spike, pressing their cocks together between them.

"Everything okay so far?" Alex asked as he nuzzled Spike's neck.

"Oh love, much of that and it'll be over too soon." Spike said, then gasped as Alex bit the skin that joined the neck to the shoulder.

"You'd make a good vampire mate. You've got the instincts for it." Spike said, then realized that his hands were wandering down Alex's back of their own accord.

Alex lifted his head and forcefully kissed Spike, silencing him for a moment.

Tongues dueled as Alex gave a tentative thrust into the sweat and pre-cum lubricated space between their two bodies.

When the kiss finally broke, Alex whispered, "Wil, I know you're worried about us going too far, too fast. But where we are now is where I want to stay for a while. I can finally touch you, I can show you I love you, I can feel your love for me. This is it. We're here."

"Yes love, we're here. And this is where I want to be." Spike said in peace as he felt Alex begin a rhythm of thrusting.

As Spike was about to say something more, Alex moved in for another deep kiss.

"Hey Xander, how's it going?" Andrew asked as he entered his bedroom.

"Just fine, the babies have been up for a while now. I think they'll be ready for sleep before too much longer." Xander said from the rocking chair where he was holding Marguerite.

"I thought Warren was here." Andrew said as he carefully picked up Thomas.

"He left a few minutes ago... Andy, I'm worried." Xander said darkly.

"What's wrong Xan?" Andrew asked as he sat in the other rocker, holding his son.

"I've got to take control of my company. Warren has been telling me everything I need to know but... God Andy, this is scaring the hell out of me. I don't know what I'm supposed to do." Xander said quietly as he stroked Marguerite's belly.

"Have you told Warren this?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yeah. He says that he'll go with me to help me out. The whole college roommate thing is going to make that work, but Wainwright Enterprises isn't going to take too kindly to the competition being invited to one of their board meetings." Xander said seriously.

"Xan, think about how what you're going to do will effect Remy and Marguerite. If this is something that will make their life better in the long run, then do it for them. If you focus on that, it should get you through whatever you have to do." Andrew said with certainty.

Xander sat and stared off into space for a minute before saying, "Thanks Andy. I can do it now. How'd you figure that out so fast?"

"Because I do it every day. Anytime I'm not sure of the right thing to do, or having trouble doing something difficult, that's how I make myself keep going." Andrew said seriously.

"Who would have thought we'd end up like this back at Sunnydale High?" Xander asked as he watched his daughter sucking her fist.

"No one could have imagined it. Now come on, I have to introduce you to the newest members of the family." Andrew said as he got up from his rocker.

"More?" Xander asked helplessly.

"Just two... it's been a slow day." Andrew said with a chuckle.

Xander stood and waited for Andrew to pick up Chakotay.

"I still haven't figured out how you do that." Xander said as he watched Andrew get both babies cradled in his arms.

"What?" Andrew asked as he turned to look at Xander.

"Baby juggling." Xander said with a grin.

"It's just something you figure out when you have two at a time." Andrew said dismissively as he walked toward the door, then said, "But I still haven't figured out how to work a doorknob into my juggling act."

"I've got it." Xander said with a chuckle as he walked past Andrew to the door.

* * * * *

Xander and Andrew walked into the living room to see Alan, Slash, Lee, Icheb, Quaid, Jimmy and Janine sitting on the couches.

Alan stood as Andrew walked up and took Chakotay.

"How's daddy's little warrior doing today?" Alan said to the baby in baby talk.

Slash started laughing at the nickname.

"What's wrong with that? Chakotay is a warrior's name." Alan said defensively as he looked at Slash.

"Nothing wrong, it's just an unusual thing to call a baby." Slash said with a smile.

"I guess so, but when you've got nine kids, you've got to get creative with the nicknames." Alan said with a tender smile directed at Chakotay.

"Nine? Last I heard you had eight." Xander said as he settled into the couch.

"Xander, I'd like you to meet our son, Quaid Summers." Andrew said proudly as he put an arm around Quaid.

"Wow, that's like three in one week! That must be some kind of record." Xander said with surprise.

"No Xan, the record stands at six and we're not trying to break it." Alan said with a smile.

"Father, is this also my brother?" Quaid asked, looking at the baby in Andrew's arms.

"Yes son, this is your brother Thomas. Would you like to hold him?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Can I?" Quaid asked with wide eyes.

"Sure, just be sure to support his head... Icheb, will you help Quaid?" Andrew asked.

Icheb immediately helped shift Thomas to Quaid's arms and positioned Quaid to support Thomas' neck.

"What's Thomas' nickname?" Slash asked as he looked at the tender scene of Quaid holding his brother.

"That's daddy's little imp." Alan said with a smile.

"I can see it. That little guy has mischief to spare, doesn't he?" Slash asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah, he's a treasure." Andrew said warmly.

The sound of a door slamming drew everyone's attention.

Andrew looked around and saw that Janine was gone.

"Is that the smell of sibling rivalry in the air?" Lee asked the group.

"She used to be the baby. Now there are four new kids in the house in less than a week. I guess the reality is setting in." Xander observed.

"Uh oh. I guess we should have expected that... what should we do?" Andrew asked helplessly.

Silence fell over the room.

"I have an idea." Xander finally said into the silence.

"What's that?" Alan asked hopefully.

"Ask for help." Xander said with a grin.

"Ask who?" Andrew said in confusion.

"Aunt Vada. She's like a grandmother to all the kids and especially Janine. I can't think of anyone who'd be able to give better advice. I think we should call her tomorrow and ask her opinion." Xander said with a smile.

"If she's up to it, maybe you could take Marguerite and Janine to visit tomorrow." Alan said in thought.

"I'll see what she thinks when I call. It sounds like a good idea. Who wants to drive me down there?" Xander asked as he looked at Marguerite tenderly.

"Hold on Xan, I think I have an answer for you." Andrew said as he hurried back to the bedroom and picked up the large envelope that he carried for the better part of the evening.

"This is yours, I don't know if you've got a driver's license in there, but you might be able to drive yourself." Andrew said as he sat the envelope beside Xander.

"Could you look for me Andy, I don't want to disturb Marguerite." Xander asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Andrew said and opened the envelope to find three envelopes inside, he opened the envelope marked Xander and pulled out a driver's license.

"You're legal to drive." Andrew said as he held out the license for Xander's inspection.

"Maybe legal, but not comfortable. I'd rather not try it without depth perception. I've only driven my Uncle's car a few times and wasn't that good at it." Xander said seriously.

"Plan B." Andrew said as he pulled out Icheb's envelope.

"Do you think you'd be willing to teach Icheb to drive?" Andrew asked as he pulled a learner's permit out of Icheb's envelope.

"Um, yeah. I could do that." Xander said cautiously.

"What do you say son? Would you like to drive your Uncle Xander down to visit Aunt Vada tomorrow?" Andrew asked across the room.

"Yes... I would like to try." Icheb said nervously.

"Can I go too?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"We'll ask Aunt Vada what she thinks tomorrow. If she says it's better for Janine if you stay here, will you be alright with it?" Alan asked carefully.

"Yes Dad... can I call you Dad?" Quaid asked hesitantly.

"Yes son, I am your Dad." Alan said with a smile.

"If Aunt Vada says I should stay, then I'll stay with my other brothers." Quaid said, but glanced at Icheb with a look that showed he really didn't want to be away from his big brother.

"We still have a few new rooms to look through, we need to start thinking about sleeping arrangements for tonight." Andrew said as he looked around the group.

"New rooms?" Xander asked curiously.

"Yeah. The new wing is complete thanks to some divine intervention." Andrew said as he stood and held out his arms for Thomas.

"Huh?" Xander asked as he noticed everyone else was getting up.

"Q... Aunt Jean used her powers to finish the bedrooms." Quaid said as he stood and took Icheb's hand.

"Oh... Okay." Xander said as he hesitantly stood.

"Quaid, why don't you show Uncle Xander and Marguerite the fairy room?" Andrew asked as he led the way through the door.

Xander got a look of surprise as Quaid rushed past Andrew down the new hallway.

* * * * *

"This is Spike and Alex's room." Andrew said as they passed the closed door.

"Come on, come look." Quaid said impatiently from the next doorway.

"It's beautiful." Jimmy said as he entered the room.

"It's Marguerite's room." Xander said as he walked in.

"That's what we thought. It just feels like her." Alan said, carrying Chakotay.

"Itchy, Jimmy, come look. I want you to see my room." Quaid said and rushed out the door.

Icheb and Jimmy hurried out to follow.

"Itchy?" Xander asked with a grin.

"He doesn't seem to mind." Andrew said as they walked down the hall.

Xander, Alan and Andrew walked into the room to see Quaid pointing out every feature of the room with excitement and joy.

"The next room is Trey's." Andrew said as he walked back into the hallway, leaving three of his sons to explore the new bedroom.

"We passed mine, it's right there." Lee said, pointing at his bedroom door.

"So who's is this?" Xander asked as he approached the door across the hall from Trey's.

"I don't know. We didn't make it this far." Andrew said and followed.

As the group walked in, the color scheme immediately barked out the owner of the room.

"Slash. Unless I'm mistaken, you've got your own room." Lee said with a smile.

The stark black and white room was accented by the occasional red fixture or ornament.

"Are you sure?" Slash asked as he looked in wonder at the room.

"Who else do you think it could belong to?" Andrew asked as he noticed the black and white checkered tiled pattern in the carpet.

"Here's a note." Xander said, pointing with his free hand toward a note on the pillow.

Slash picked up the note and read it silently. He looked up to see everyone was watching him.

"It just says, 'Slash, Welcome to the family. Jean'." Slash said with a smile.

"I guess it's official. This is your home." Andrew said as he enjoyed Slash's happiness.

"Dad, Dad, come look." Quaid called from the hallway.

One by one the adults filed out of Slash's room and to the next bedroom.

"Itchy's room is across from mine." Quaid said with joy.

As the adults looked in the room, they couldn't help but smile.

With two exceptions, the room was identical to Quaid's. The exceptions being a regeneration alcove set into one wall and a giant, floor to ceiling number 2 instead of a Q.

"Is all your stuff in here already?" Andrew asked as he walked into the room.

"Yes. Everything of mine is here." Icheb said in wonder.

"I can't wait to see who's next." Alan said and hurried to the next room.

When he opened the door he stood stunned.

"What is it love?" Andrew asked, then froze when he saw the room.

"It's perfect." Alan said and hesitantly walked into the room.

Slash walked in and asked, "Who's room is this?"

"Tell me what you see." Andrew asked as he also walked slowly into the room.

"One side is different kinds of clocks... sundials, hourglasses, all kinds... but they're all stopped." Slash said as he walked in to look more carefully.

"And the other side?" Alan prompted Slash to continue.

"Fires, flames, lasers, heat." Slash said as he interpreted the abstract mural of red, orange and yellow.

"This is the twin's room." Andrew said quietly.

"Thomas' ability effects time and Chakotay's produces heat." Alan said with a smile.

"As soon as they're old enough to sleep through the night, this will be their room." Andrew said with a smile.

"Who do you suppose is next?" Lee asked as he walked back into the hall.

"If I were to guess, I'd say Xander." Andrew said speculatively.

"Why do you say that?" Xander asked curiously.

"Because Thomas and Chakotay's room is across from Dad's, Icheb's is across from Quaid's, it makes sense that your room will be across from Marguerite's." Andrew said as he waited for Xander to open the door.

"Let's see how good your powers of deduction really are." Xander said and opened the door.

"Pretty good." Xander said as he walked in.

"Look, the crib and changing table are already in here." Andrew said with surprise.

"I guess this means you get to stay in here tonight." Lee said with a smile.

"Yeah, all of us are going to get to use our new rooms tonight." Slash said happily.

"Now great, all knowing Andrew. There's one room left, who's is it?" Xander asked with a smile.

"Um... I haven't got a clue. I don't think Jimmy, Robert or William want to be broken up. Janine has a room that she's happy with... let's go find out." Andrew said and walked to the next door.

"I don't understand." Alan said as he looked around the room.

"It's got a crib." Andrew said with concern.

"And the room is decorated in white, shades of blue and metallic colors." Lee said as he looked around.

"Anyone have any ideas?" Andrew asked as he looked at the group.

"Just one." Xander said as he looked around.

"Spill it Xan." Andrew said, feeling strange about the room.

"It's for someone who isn't here yet." Xander said as he looked at the group.

"What?" Alan and Andrew asked as they looked at each other.

"We've known who each room belongs to immediately. There is almost an aura in each room that screams out who's it is... I don't know the person who lives here. This feeling isn't familiar." Xander said, then turned to leave.

"I've got a bad feeling about this Andy." Alan said with apprehension.

"I know love. It's crawling up my spine." Andrew said with worry.

"Q, I mean Aunt Jean wouldn't let anything bad happen, would she?" Quaid asked, worried by his new parents' attitude.

"Quaid, things happen. Sometimes good things, and sometimes bad things. Aunt Jean can help us deal with bad things that happen, but I don't think she can stop them from happening." Andrew said as he walked out of the room.

"Why not?" Quaid asked, truly curious.

"Quaid, I love you just the way you are, right?" Andrew asked.

Quaid nodded hesitantly.

"What if I decided that I didn't want you to change. I wanted you to be just like this, forever. You'd never grow up, never fall in love or have your own family, you'd always be my little boy, exactly the way you are today. What would you think of that?" Andrew asked as the group walked back into the living room.

"It would be bad." Quaid said uncertainly.

"Why would it be bad? I love you just the way you are. Why shouldn't I want you to always be that way?" Andrew pressed.

"Cause I'm s'posed to grow and get big. Someday I'm going to be a father like you. If I stayed like this... I'd never... there'd be no reason to learn anything." Quaid said with difficulty.

"Right. That's why things change. Some changes are good, like getting a wonderful new son. And some changes aren't so good. But they're all part of growing. When bad things happen, you have to do your best to get through them and be strong, and sometimes when you get to the other side of a bad thing, something good is waiting for you." Andrew said, trying to explain so Quaid could understand.

"So my dad made Itchy go away and wanted to make me go away too, so that was a bad thing. But now I'm here where you love me and I have another Itchy and lots of people

who love me, so that's a good thing. And if the bad thing didn't happen, the good thing wouldn't happen either." Quaid said in triumph.

"Yes son. You understand." Alan said with a smile.

"So anybody have a clue about what bad thing is about to happen?" Slash asked, breaking the moment.

"No, but I don't think we'll have to wait too long to find out." Andrew said darkly.

Chapter 10: Subconscious Infiltration

There was a quiet knock on the door.

"Mr. Summers?" Chris asked apprehensively when he answered it.

"We're outside class Chris. You can call me Scott." He said with a smile.

Chris nodded shyly and withdrew into the room inviting Scott and Matt in.

"Your father asked me to check in on you. How are you doing?" Scott asked casually.

"I'm fine Mr. Um, Scott." Chris quickly corrected before continuing, "William and Ronny are going to spend the night here with me."

Scott gave a gentle nod and asked, "What kinds of plans do you three have for tonight?"

"Ronny wants to watch Godzilla movies, William's never seen any." Chris said happily.

"Hi Matt." Ronny said as he walked into the room.

"How ya doin kid?" Matt asked with a smile.

"I'm going to be staying here tonight, that's okay isn't it?" Ronny asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Matt said with assurance.

"Later William's going to show us how to play a new game." Chris said to Scott.

"Well you guys have fun. Do you have the office number downstairs?" Scott asked curiously.

"Yeah, right by the phone." Chris said and pointed to the pad sitting a few feet away.

"Okay, if you need anything, call me. I have the office number forwarded to my phone." Scott said seriously.

"You guys have fun." Scott said and turned for the door.

"Thank you, we will." Chris said as he watched Scott and Matt leave the room.

* * * * *

Bobby held Robert close as he whispered, "That was the most wonderful thing I've ever felt."

"I have no words." Robert responded.

"It's a good thing your fathers told us we can't go any farther, much more would kill me." Bobby said as he snuggled even closer to Robert.

"I never imagined the fulfillment I would experience by tasting your seed, knowing that a part of you is inside me, now a part of me." Robert said in a dreamy tone.

"And now you are forever a part of me too Robby. No matter what happens, I'll always have a part of you inside me." Bobby said in a quieter voice.

"I love you Bobby." Robert said in a whisper.

"I love you too Robby." Bobby said as he drifted into sleep.

* * * * *

"Can I talk to you guys about something?" Chris asked seriously.

"Sure, anything." Ronny said and looked to see agreement on William's face.

"You've got to promise not to tease me about it. I don't know if I can even say it." Chris trailed off.

"Is it about sex?" Ronny asked carefully.

"No." Chris said with surprise.

"Good. I've had enough of that with Bobby and John. So what's up Chris?" Ronny asked casually.

"You guys are going to think I'm a monster." Chris said and turned away.

"Chris, this subject is obviously causing you distress. I will promise not to judge you for what you are going to say." William said in a flat tone.

Chris looked cautiously at William and nodded.

"Whatever it is, I probably done worse." Ronny said frankly.

"I doubt it." Chris mumbled to the floor.

"Just tell us. It's eating you up and we ain't gonna mess with you about it. We're not like that." Ronny said, a bit forcefully.

"I killed my parents." Chris said in a mumble.

"Angel and Julia?" Ronny asked in shock as he looked quickly around the room.

"No, my real parents. My mutant power blasted them and they fell apart." Chris said quickly.

"Oh. Um. You win. But just so you know, I came in a close second." Ronny said shyly.

Chris looked at Ronny curiously.

"I killed my dad... pretty much the same way you killed your parents, I guess. My mutant thing kind of squished him." Ronny said with an uncomfortable look.

"Oh." Chris said in a whisper.

"I am sorry, but I have no emotional revelation to share with you. Andrew and Alan are the only parents I have ever known." William said shyly.

Ronny looked at William's sullen expression and couldn't help but smile.

"That's okay, you don't have to kill your parents to hang around with us." Ronny finished with a chuckle.

Chris began to laugh.

Ronny and William both looked at him with matching curious expressions.

"Sorry. It's just... I thought... You wouldn't want to hang around with me... if I told you." Chris said in almost hysterical laughter.

"Amusing." William said in his best Borg tone.

That made Ronny break into laughter too.

* * * * *

Bobby awoke to Robert's thrashing.

"Tavi!" Robert gasped in his sleep as he seemed to be struggling.

"Shhh. It's okay Robert, it's only a bad dream." Bobby soothed gently.

"No! TAVI!" Robert screamed in anguish as he sat upright still fighting his unseen attackers.

"NO! STOP! THEY'RE KILLING HIM!" Robert screamed and started hitting himself, seemingly trying to free himself from being restrained.

Bobby thought frantically, trying to decide what to do. Finally he called out mentally, //PROFESSOR! Robert's hurting himself and I can't wake him up! HE NEEDS HELP NOW!//

"It's okay Robby, I'm here. There's nothing to worry about now." Bobby said more loudly and with more panic in his voice.

"Tavi. They took Tavi! Stop them!" Robert screamed as tears started running down his cheeks.

"I'll try Robby, I promise." Bobby said as his own tears started to fall.

"NO! TAVI!" Robert screamed again and started fighting his unseen enemies with renewed vigor.

There was a knock on Bobby's door and he barely heard, "Unlock the door. It's Dr. McCoy."

Bobby ran to the door and released the lock as he heard Robert fall from the bed.

"He won't wake up. Help him. Please help him." Bobby said in hysteria.

Hank quickly surveyed the situation and said, "Call Andrew, Trey and John and have them meet me in MedLab immediately."

"You've got to help him. He can't wake up!" Bobby tried to explain.

"Bobby!" Hank barked as he picked Robert up.

Bobby looked at Hank with a blank expression.

"Do you want to help Robert?" Hank asked seriously.

"Yes. Please." Bobby whimpered.

"Put on some clothes. Call Andrew, Trey and John and tell them to come to MedLab."

Hank said firmly and adjusted his grip on Robert who was struggling in his arms.

"Clothes, Andrew, Trey, John, MedLab." Bobby said semi-coherently.

"When you've done all that, you can come down and check on Robert. Now get to it."

Hank said and carried his squirming and fighting patient out into the hall.

"Clothes, Andrew, Trey, John, MedLab." Bobby chanted as he pulled on some sweat pants.

* * * * *

"Hello?" Alan said groggily as he answered the phone.

"What!?" He asked and sat up in bed, startling Andrew awake.

"He's not here, try Clark and John's room." Alan said quickly.

"We'll be right there." Alan said and hung up the phone.

"What's wrong love?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Something's wrong with Robert. Bobby was too out of it to say much more than Hank needs you, Trey and John in MedLab immediately." Alan said as he grabbed his clothes from beside the bed.

"I'll grab my MedKit and port over." Andrew said and hit the floor running.

"I'm going to wake Icheb and let him know what's going on." Alan said as he pulled on his shirt.

"Why don't you ask Dad?" Andrew asked as he started pulling on his own clothes.

"He doesn't know the regeneration interrupt code." Alan said and waited for Andrew to finish getting dressed.

"You're right love, but could you wake Dad anyway? I'd like him to be there for Robert." Andrew asked hopefully.

"And for you?" Alan asked knowingly.

"Yeah, love you." Andrew said and moved in for a quick but earnest kiss.

"We'll be there soon." Alan said as he watched Andrew port directly to MedLab.

* * * * *

"Eyleish bolegg kah tah, neveree." Alan said forcefully as he walked into Icheb's bedroom. Icheb's eyes opened and he looked at his dad with concern.

"Something's wrong with Robert. He's in MedLab with your Father and Hank. Will you take care of the kids for us?" Alan asked desperately.

"Of course Dad. Do you know what is wrong with him?" Icheb asked as he stepped down from his alcove.

"No. But it's bad enough for Hank to call for your father and Trey in the middle of the night. I've got to go wake Lee, Andrew wants him there." Alan said quickly.

"William should also be present. He and Robert have a special bond which might be beneficial." Icheb said as he followed Alan into the hall.

"He's in Chris' room, can you call him?" Alan asked as he knocked on Lee's door.

"Right away." Icheb said as he hurried to the main part of the house.

"What's going on?" Slash asked sleepily from his doorway.

"Something happened to Robert. He's in the MedLab at the mansion." Alan said as Lee opened his door.

"Andrew needs you. One of the kids is hurt and he wants you to be there." Alan said quickly.

"Which one?" Lee asked as he rushed to grab his clothes.

"Robert. I'll tell you what little I know while I drive you over." Alan said quickly.

"Can I come too?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"If you can hurry." Alan said frantically.

Slash ran back into his room and came out less than a minute later, fully dressed.

"What happened to your hair?" Lee asked as they hurried down the hall.

"It's part of my body so it turns white again while I'm sleeping. I have to use my power on it to make it black again every morning when I wake up." Slash said, then pulled on his coat as they hurried out the door.

* * * * *

"Bobby?" Trey asked quietly as he opened the bedroom door.

"Trey, something's wrong with Robert, Dr. McCoy needs you and John in MedLab." Bobby said quickly.

"Why does he need John?" Trey asked in confusion.

"I don't know, he said he needed John, so he needs John. Get him and get down there now!" Bobby said and ran toward the elevator.

"What is it Trey?" Clark asked sleepily.

"Something is wrong with Robert. Would you wake John and accompany him to MedLab? I will go now." Trey said as he pulled on his clothes.

"We'll be down in just a minute." Clark said as he turned to shake John awake.

* * * * *

"Huh?" Chris asked blearily as he answered the phone.

"Um, yeah. William it's for you." Chris said and pitched the phone to William who was laying on the couch.

"Hello?" William said cautiously.

"I was not able to achieve sleep, I will be there immediately." William said and got up.

"What is it William?" Chris asked sleepily.

"I must go to MedLab. Something has happened to Robert, Icheb did not know any details." William said quickly.

"Do you want us to go with you?" Chris asked as he slowly sat up in his sleeping bag.

"No. If there is any way you can be of assistance, I will call you." William said with certainty.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Chris said and laid back down.

William hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Andrew, I need you to scan him and pull up his base readings. I don't know what's normal for him." Hank barked as soon as Andrew appeared.

"Right away." Andrew said as his Starfleet FieldMed training kicked in and took over.

"His blood pressure and heart rate are elevated, but not dangerously. His neural activity is all over the place." Andrew said as he looked at the readings.

"Any indication of a foreign substance or toxin in his system?" Hank asked quickly.

"No... I don't think so. His Borg physiology is so active that it's making it hard to tell with any degree of accuracy." Andrew said in frustration.

"I asked Bobby to call Trey. Hopefully he's on his way." Hank said as he watched his patient helplessly.

"Can I help?" The professor asked as he entered the room.

"I don't know, we haven't found a systemic cause for whatever this is. I suppose it could be psychological in nature." Hank said speculatively.

"Let me try." Professor Xavier said as he moved his chair to the head of the bed.

"It's Professor Xavier. I won't hurt you Robert, I'm here to help." Professor Xavier said in a soothing tone as he projected the same message into Robert's mind.

//TAVI! YOU'VE GOT TO HELP TAVI!// Robert's mind screamed.

"Do you know anyone named 'Tavi' in Robert's past. He seems to be fixated on the idea that Tavi needs help." Professor Xavier said, trying to shield himself from Robert's mental screams of terror.

"No, I don't know anyone by that name." Andrew said in thought.

"Father, how can I help?" Trey asked as he entered the room.

"Get what you need to check out Robert's Borg components, something's wrong and we can't find out what's causing it." Andrew said and gestured to a portal that formed to reveal the display of Trey's Borg equipment.

Trey looked at the display with question for an instant before grabbing three items and running to Robert's side.

There was a long moment of silence that was only interrupted by Roberts grunts as he struggled.

"He is generating new hardware... but the configuration is not familiar." Trey said as he tried to localize his scans.

"Can you tell **why** he's generating new hardware?" Andrew asked quickly.

"I would need to access his personal data node to do so, which I cannot do in his agitated state." Trey said seriously.

"How is he?" Bobby asked, out of breath, as he ran into the MedLab.

"He's no worse." Hank said carefully, then asked, "Is John on his way?"

"Yeah, he'll be here in a minute." Bobby said as he walked to Robert's side.

"Can I be of assistance?" William asked quietly as he walked into the room.

"TAVI!" Robert gasped at the sound of William's voice.

"Come here. Talk to him, tell him you're alright." Professor Xavier said as he sensed a calming in Robert.

"I am here. I am well. Can you talk to me?" William asked carefully.

"Tavi genustivus menchia bleggatook mnemetemai, chenchu Ki. Gustavishtavi, midrah e polen." Robert said as tears of relief started pouring down his face.

"What did he say?" Hank asked as he watched Robert calm into a normal dream state.

"He expressed his relief that I am well. Then said he thought I had been abducted." William said in confusion.

"What language is that? The translator in the tricorder didn't recognize it." Andrew asked curiously.

"It is Androkonese from our home world. I have no memory of that world, but my language skills seem to have been unaffected by my assimilation." William said speculatively.

"So you're Tavi?" Bobby asked.

"Perhaps." William said uncertainly.

"William, can you access his personal data node and determine the purpose of the hardware he is generating. His power is diminishing to an unhealthy level." Trey said firmly.

William nodded and injected his tubules into the personal data node on Robert's chest.

"What can I do Dr. McCoy?" John asked as he and Clark hurried into the room.

"Take care of Bobby." Hank said quickly.

"Come on Bobby, let's get out of Hank's way. He'll tell us when Robert's all better." John said as he put an arm around Bobby.

"Let's sit down for a minute Bobby." Clark suggested from his other side.

"I've got it." Professor Xavier said in concentration.

"What is it?" Andrew asked immediately.

"It's a memory fragment... no, it's more... . It's trying to override his conscious mind." Professor Xavier said with difficulty.

"Can you get rid of it?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Yes, but the question I must ask is, should I?" Professor Xavier asked slowly, obviously dividing his attention between conversation and Robert's mind.

"If it's hurting him, you should get rid of it." Andrew said with certainty.

"I believe this is the core of his identity from before he was assimilated. Knowing that, do you still want it destroyed?" Professor Xavier asked calmly.

"Andy, I think we need to discuss this." Alan said from the doorway.

Andrew nodded and watched as Alan and Lee walked to stand by him.

"Bobby, come here. You're part of this too." Alan said with authority.

Bobby walked to stand with Alan, Andrew and Lee. Slash walked to the chairs to sit with Clark and John.

"Anyone have any opinion?" Alan asked as he looked around the group.

"What are our options Professor?" Andrew asked seriously.

"First option: It is possible to destroy the core with little to no risk of injury to the personality we know as Robert. Second: It is possible to compartmentalize the personalities which would be a short term solution. The risk to Robert is moderate to serious because it could very well have the long term effect of a permanent multiple personality disorder if

the compartments are left in place too long. The third option is to attempt integration of the original core personality into Robert's existing personality, the risk is low to moderate since mnemo manipulation isn't my forte. I believe I can reattach enough mnemo triggers to allow the breach to seal without significant distress." Professor Xavier said as he focused even more deeply into Robert's mind.

"Alan, what do you think?" Andrew asked in thought.

"I don't know love. I think option two is too dangerous. We can either have Robert as he was and remove any chance of him recovering his lost identity from before or we can take the chance with memories." Alan said as he pondered his choice.

"William, you know Robert better than any of us, what do you think he would want?" Bobby asked as he looked helplessly at Robert's sleeping body.

"All of us, the former Borg, live with a void where our true selves used to be. If you ask Trey, Jimmy or Janine they would say the same thing. Any risk is acceptable to regain what was stolen from us." William said quietly, then in a voice of certainty he continued, "He would want the memories returned."

"How does that sound to you professor?" Andrew asked.

"I will begin the process immediately." Professor Xavier answered.

"Thanks Bobby. I was about to choose to destroy everything he was to protect who he is." Andrew said quietly.

"I know. After this is done, I don't even know if he'll still love me." Bobby said with pain. Silence fell over the room until Trey made an abrupt announcement. "His power level has fallen below a safe level."

"Should we put him in his regeneration alcove?" Andrew asked, clutching at anything that might help.

"Yes. That should stop the hardware generation, at the same time it would recharge his systems." Trey said in thought.

"No." William said as he looked up from Robert's personal data node.

"William, he needs to recharge." Andrew tried to explain.

"No. You cannot reset his system, or interrupt the hardware generation. It would harm the baby."

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"You said what?" Andrew said in a gasp.

"I cannot determine why the hardware began generating, but the hardware has already completed two stages of development and the cellular mass is now of sufficient complexity to be considered an embryo." William said as he maintained his connection to his brother.

"If it's a choice between Robert and the baby, we're saving Robert. Anyone have a problem with that?" Andrew asked forcefully.

"No. I agree." Bobby said quietly, as a tear fell down his cheek.

"Trey, what are our options to help Robert?" Andrew asked forcefully.

"I do not have adequate information." Trey said as he looked at his parents with regret.

"Will you allow me to share my findings? Time is short" William said with urgency.

"Yes, of course." Trey said and faced his brother.

William withdrew his tubules from Robert's data node, then injected Trey's data node.

Everyone watched for the half minute it took Trey to assimilate the new information.

"I believe we can sustain Robert without injury to him or his child if we begin immediately." Trey said in thought.

"Do what you need to do son." Alan said in a low voice.

"William, reconnect to Robert and start a new directive pathway to allow supplemental energy and nano-probes to be introduced. When the new directive is in place, begin the transfer. Discontinue when you have reached minimum safe levels. At that time, return home to regenerate and another of us will begin the transfer." Trey said in a commanding voice.

"For how long?" Andrew asked carefully.

Trey looked at Andrew curiously as William reconnected with Robert and closed his eyes in concentration.

"Will you all have to keep feeding him power for the next nine months? I mean, if that's the only way to keep them both alive, we'll do it. But I can foresee some problems."

Andrew said in explanation.

"No, the hardware generation should be complete within twelve hours. After that, Robert will need extended regeneration cycles to power his maturation pod, but otherwise will feel no ill effect." Trey said as he turned a studious gaze on William and Robert.

"Maturation pod?" Alan asked hesitantly.

"Can you start at the beginning for us? Tell us about his baby... who's is it? How did it get in there? Why did this happen?" Bobby asked weakly.

"Bobby asked some good questions, does anyone have any answers?" Lee asked the group as he put hand each on Andrew and Alan's shoulders.

"I may be able to answer the why, at least to some degree." Professor Xavier said from the head of the bed.

Everyone turned their attention toward Professor Xavier awaiting an explanation.

"His mind is in a state of flux, and quite alien... non-human, excuse me. I can't tell you much more than the alternate personality caused this to happen and is directing nearly all it's energies to coordinate the construction of the... device." Professor Xavier said in concentration.

"Professor, what is the status of his mind?" Hank asked with concern.

"I believe I can complete the necessary groundwork within an hour, that should be sufficient to allow him to regain consciousness. I can refine the pathways in follow-up sessions as needed." Professor Xavier said in thought.

"The baby is Robert and Bobby's." William said as he opened his eyes.

"How?" Bobby asked with confusion.

"An undifferentiated cell from Robert's primary stomach was harvested and the DNA was removed and replaced with some collected from Robert and some collected from Bobby's semen in Robert's pre-stomach." William began but was interrupted.

"Um, just how many stomachs does he have?" Clark asked as he and John joined the group.

"Including the pre-stomach, three. The prestomach holds the food and releases small amounts into the primary stomach for initial digestion. When the primary stomach is sufficiently filled, it empties into the secondary stomach where the absorption of nutrients takes place." William answered.

"The baby?" Bobby asked, dragging them back to the point.

"Yes, the genetic material was introduced into the undifferentiated cell, then the cell was stimulated to replicate. Once the cell mass was viable, it was fixed into a maturation pod which will complete maturing the embryo in three to four weeks depending on the supply of necessary building materials for the baby." William said in thought.

"Father, we will need Icheb, Jimmy and Janine to supply power for Robert. I would like to monitor the activities until the hardware is fully developed and Robert is out of danger." Trey said seriously.

"That's fine. Alan love, would you go get the kids? Quaid too, I don't want him to feel left out just because he's not Borg." Andrew said in thought.

"Do you want me to stay with the babies?" Lee asked quietly.

"No dad, if you wouldn't mind, I'd really like for them to be here too. I feel like Robert needs ALL his family here with him now." Andrew said with a helpless look at his father.

Lee nodded, then turned to Slash, "Would you help me get the babies things together Slash? I can juggle babies with the best of them, but I can't handle diaper bags and strollers too."

"Sure, ready when you are." Slash said with a warm smile, glad to be able to contribute.

Andrew created a portal and watched as Alan, Lee and Slash walked through.

"Trey, we'll be right back, we're going to help with the babies." John said and led Clark through the portal.

"Something is wrong." William said in concern.

Trey turned his attention back to Robert and began to scan again.

"What is it?" Andrew asked with a fresh wave of panic at the tone of William's voice.

"Father?" Quaid said in a sleepy voice as he walked through the portal, dressed in Pokémon pajamas.

Andrew walked to Quaid and pulled him into a hug.

"Hey buddy. I'm sorry we had to wake you up but one of your brothers is sick and I thought you'd want to be here with the family." Andrew said quietly.

"What's wrong with him?" Quaid asked as he looked at the boy on the exam table.

"Robert's Borg parts are trying to build a new machine, but it's taking all his energy to build it. William is trying to give him energy." Andrew said, trying to put it in words that Quaid could understand.

"Robert is accepting William's nano-probes and energy, but is also continuing to deplete his own. At the current rate of usage, Robert will exhaust his own energy reserve in less than one hour... I can see no way to prevent it." Trey said with defeat in his voice.

"Can you slow down his usage?" Hank asked with concern.

"It would be possible to reduce the flow of nano-probes, but the pod requires more energy than William can transfer." Trey said quietly.

"Um, can't you do that Borg thing?" Quaid asked the group.

Everyone turned their attention to the boy and tried to understand his vague comment.

"You know, the thing that makes Borg's strong... be a collective." Quaid said with difficulty.

"Shhh, don't worry. We're going to figure something out." Andrew said quietly to Quaid.

"Father, I believe his suggestion may work." Trey said as he scanned Robert, then William.

"Really?" Andrew asked with surprise.

"How may I be of assistance?" Icheb asked as he walked through the door, carrying Chakotay in his arms.

Quaid immediately walked to Icheb's side and gave him an affectionate hug, careful not to disturb Chakotay.

"If you will give Chakotay to Quaid, I would like for you to connect to William's personal data node and begin to inject power into his system." Trey said quickly.

Icheb handed Chakotay to Quaid, being careful to see that he was supporting his head correctly, before going to William's side and injecting his tubules into William's personal data node.

"Dad said you needed us to help Robert." Jimmy said as he and Janine entered the room.

"Yes. Ask Trey what you need to do." Andrew said as he began to feel hope.

"Jimmy, connect to Icheb's data node, Janine, connect to Jimmy's, I will connect to yours." Trey said as he moved around the table to take his place in line.

The children took their places and within a minute formed a chain to provide power for Robert.

"How's he doing?" Andrew asked hopefully.

Trey moved his scanning device which was connected to his free hand, over Robert and announced, "His power levels are increasing and the increased nano-probes are constructing the hardware faster than anticipated."

Andrew let out a sigh of relief and bent down to hug Quaid and Chakotay.

"Is Robert going to be okay?" Quaid asked in a whisper.

"I think so kiddo. And if he is, it's because of you." Andrew said and kissed Quaid on the forehead.

Quaid got a smile of pride that nearly glowed.

"What did we miss?" John asked as he carried a diaper bag through the portal.

"A turning point, I hope." Andrew said with a smile.

"Where do you want this stuff?" Clark asked as he pushed a double stroller with a diaper bag into the room.

"Through that door, in the waiting room. If the babies get fussy, we'll take them in there." Andrew said as he stood, keeping an arm around Quaid.

"How's he doing love?" Alan asked as he walked into the room.

"Trey?" Andrew asked, hopeful of a favorable response.

"If nothing unforeseen occurs, we should be able to discontinue the transfer in forty-three minutes and he will have sufficient energy to proceed twenty hours without regeneration if needed." Trey said with a small smile.

"Great." Lee said in relief as he walked into the room carrying Thomas and followed by Slash.

"I'm finished working on his memories for the time being. He is sleeping normally. I would recommend that we wake him so we can be sure that the integrated personality is stable." Professor Xavier said as he rested back in his chair.

"We don't want him to be overwhelmed when he wakes up, he is likely to be disoriented. Those who aren't feeding him power should move away until he's come fully awake." Professor Xavier said as he moved his chair away from the table.

"Okay, ready when you are." Andrew said as he moved Quaid back to lean against the nearest wall.

* * * * *

"Bobby?" Robert asked as his eyes fluttered open.

"I'm right here." Bobby said as he moved to Robert's side.

"I love you." Robert whispered with a tender smile.

"I love you too, you scared me." Bobby said weakly.

"I remember things... I have two yesterdays, which one is real?" Robert asked in confusion.

"The yesterday that was Thanksgiving at the mansion is the one that just happened. I think the other one is real too, it just happened a long time ago." Bobby said carefully.

"Tavi?" Robert asked with a look of panic, that turned to relief when he saw William.

"Is that William's real name?" Bobby asked quietly.

"Yes, he is Gustavishtavi, I am Gustavishki... Tavi and Ki is easier to remember." Robert said with a small smile.

"What do you want me to call you?" Bobby asked in a fearful voice.

Robert picked up on the tone of fear and lifted a hand to caress Bobby's cheek as he said, "I'm your Robby, just like before. I love you so much Bobby, I can't even tell you how much."

"I'm so glad. I was afraid you wouldn't know me... or wouldn't love me." Bobby trailed off with a whisper as tears began to flow down his face.

"That could never happen Bobby, you're my one true love. Do you have any idea how special you are?" Robert asked and waited.

Bobby couldn't do anything but shake his head.

"I came across space, time and dimensions to find you. I reassembled my memories and fought my way back from the edge of oblivion so I could fully be with you. And using the technology the Borg gave me, I found a way to bear your child. You are that special and I'd do every bit of it again to be here with you now." Robert said in a peaceful haze of love.

Bobby was speechless, but he moved in to give Robert a kiss filled with his love and all the words he couldn't think clearly enough to say.

"Um, I guess he's okay." John said hesitantly.

"Yeah. I hope Trey's done soon. We really need to... um... get some more... sleep." Clark said with a blush.

John put an arm around Clark to hold him close.

"How are you doing son?" Andrew asked as he walked to the other side of the bed from Bobby.

"Pretty good Pop. How are you?" Robert asked joyfully.

"Pop?" Andrew questioned.

"Yeah, 'Father' sounds a little formal, if you don't like 'Pop' I won't use it." Robert said quickly.

"No, 'Pop' is fine, I just wasn't expecting it. You seem a little... different now." Andrew said hesitantly.

"Yeah. I have memories and stuff now. It's really kewl, it's kind of like I was watching everything through a gauzy curtain before and I can see clearly now." Robert said cheerfully.

"If he starts to sing it, I'm outta here." Lee said to Slash.

Robert heard the comment and let out a full honest laugh.

"Please hold still until the energy transfer is complete." William said sternly.

"Okay. Sorry Tavi. And thanks, thank you, all of you for feeding me power. I didn't expect it to take as much power as it did." Robert said shyly.

"Your well being was our only concern." Trey said from the end of the Borg chain.

"Thanks big brother. I don't know what you were like before you were Borg, but I can't imagine that you could be a better brother than you are now." Robert said with a grand smile.

"Robert, you have a new brother too. Would you like to meet him?" Alan asked carefully.

"Really? Is he here?" Robert asked hopefully.

Alan nodded with a smile.

"Where is he? Can I meet him now?" Robert asked with excitement.

A boy, only slightly younger than Robert walked hesitantly to the table to meet Robert.

"Hey, I'm Robert. What's your name?" Robert asked curiously.

"Quaid." he said in a mumble.

"Nice to meet you." Robert said, then looked around his bed, then said, "There's room up here by me. Would you like to sit up here and talk to me?"

Quaid nodded.

Alan helped Quaid up to sit on the edge of the elevated bed.

"So how old are you?" Robert asked as everyone watched.

"Um... Dad? How old am I?" Quaid asked timidly.

"He'll be fourteen on January seventh." Alan said with a warm smile.

"We're going to be the same age for three and a half months. That's awesome!" Robert said in delight.

"I've got my own room at the boat house." Quaid said, being drawn into Robert's enthusiasm.

"I can't wait to see it. Dr. McCoy? When will I be done here?" Robert asked as he twisted to see Hank.

"As near as your father and I can tell, your organic parts are perfectly healthy. You'll need to ask the Professor and Trey about your other parts." Hank said, amazed by the difference in the boy.

"Professor? What do you say? How are my mental parts?" Robert asked with a teasing smile.

"I believe one or two of your mental parts have yet to fall into place, but I don't foresee any lasting consequences from that. You may experience some disorientation or confusion when something triggers a memory, it should pass after a few minutes, if it doesn't, let me know and we'll do a little detail work on your mnemo triggers." Professor Xavier said lightly.

"Thanks Professor, I'll let you know if it get's too weird for me." Robert said, then looked down the line of his siblings to Trey and raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Check the status of your maturation pod. It should be nearing completion and your energy reserves should soon be replenished." Trey said seriously.

Robert closed his eyes and concentrated on his internal Borg status.

"Yeppers, the robo womb is all done and my energy pool is good for about a day." Robert said happily.

"Then we will discontinue the transfer." Trey said and withdrew his tubules from Janine's data node.

Each of his siblings did the same and stood looking at Robert.

"Come here Tavi. I need a hug." Robert said as he sat up in the bed.

William walked cautiously to Robert and was engulfed in a firm hug.

"If I could only bring one thing from my former life with me, I would have chosen you. I love you Tavi." Robert said in a tearful voice into William's ear.

"Perhaps later you could tell me of our life before. I wish to know the person I used to be." William said in response.

Robert pulled back to look William in the eyes and said, "William, you are all the best parts of Tavi. You have his good heart, his gentle nature and his weird, dry humor."

William smiled at the statement.

"But, I'm still cuter than you." Robert said, breaking into a big smile.

"Not." William said in automatic response.

Robert laughed, then said, "Tomorrow we'll sit down and I'll tell you all about us... Jimmy?"

Jimmy looked up in surprise and walked to stand beside William.

"Tavi... William asked me to tell him about our past and I thought you should be there too." Robert said with a smile.

"For observation?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"No, because you're part of our past. Your family would come to visit about twice a year and while the adults were doing adult things, the three of us would run all over the palace grounds... I'll tell you all about it tomorrow." Robert said happily.

"What was my name?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"Your little name... nickname was Fray. I don't remember your big name. We never used it. If I remember it later, I'll tell you." Robert said with a shrug.

Trey completed his scans and announced, "Your Borg components are functioning within normal parameters and your power usage is acceptable."

"Does that mean I'm done?" Robert asked the room.

Dr. McCoy looked at Andrew, Professor Xavier and Trey before saying, "Yes, you're free to go."

"Do you want to come back to the house and regenerate?" Andrew asked from the bedside.

"No Pop. I want to stay here. Bobby and I need to talk about some stuff..." Robert said, then leaned in to whisper, "He just found out he's going to be a daddy. I think he'll need me there when it sinks in."

Andrew chuckled and said, "I think you're right. Don't run yourself short on energy. Make sure you regenerate early tonight... I love you little man."

"Thanks Pop. I love you too." Robert said as he sat on the edge of the bed beside Quaid.

"When you were talking before... I kinda heard... did you say 'palace'?" Quaid asked quietly.

"I sure did Q-boy, I guess I'm a prince and so is Tavi." Robert said with a smile.

"Why... why did you call me that?" Quaid asked with worry.

"What? Q-boy?" Robert asked carefully.

Quaid nodded slowly.

"I didn't mean anything. I thought it sounded cool because your name is Quaid. If you don't like it I won't call you that." Robert said, worried that he'd offended Quaid.

"It's okay if you call me that, but only you, and only if I get to have a special name that only I can call you." Quaid said, thinking of his special bond with Itchy.

"Hmmm. That's kind of tough. I mean, you can only do so many things with Robert. 'R-boy' doesn't sound right. Rob and Robby are already being used... do you have any ideas?" Robert asked as he hopped off the bed, then waited for Quaid to do the same.

"Your other name is Ki?" Quaid asked carefully.

"Yeah. It doesn't sound as cool as Tavi." Robert said as he coaxed Quaid to jump off the table.

"Can I call you Ki?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"Sure Q-boy. That'll be great. Now I think you'd better get over to the portal. Dad and Pop look like they're ready to go." Robert said with a smile.

"You're not coming with us?" Quaid asked with disappointment.

"Sorry Q-boy. I've got a boyfriend who really needs me to be here tonight. I'll see you tomorrow, I want to see your new room." Robert said with a grand smile.

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow Ki." Quaid said and hurried through the portal, followed by Andrew and Alan.

Bobby finally made his way back to Robert's side.

"You okay Robby?" Bobby asked with concern.

"Yeah, but I'm a little tired. Baby making really wears a guy out." Robert said, draping an arm around Bobby's waist.

"I don't think the baby making part is what wore you out. I think it's the robo-womb making that did you in." Bobby said with a chuckle.

"Maybe." Robert said, then got a serious expression.

"What is it Robby?" Bobby asked at Robert's sudden change in mood.

"I'll tell you when we get back to your room." Robert said seriously.

"C'mon." Bobby said and led the way.

Chapter 12: Before, After and In Between

"What is it Robby?" Bobby asked as soon as the door was closed.

"Do you want this baby?" Robert asked with a frightened voice.

Bobby looked into Robert's frightened eyes and said, "Yes. I absolutely want our baby. Honestly, I'm worried about a lot of things, but please don't think that my worrying means I don't want our baby. It means that I want to provide everything the baby needs and I'm worried I'll fail or won't be a good father... like mine." Bobby finished in a whisper.

"Thank you Bobby, I understand... and I think I know how we can take care of your worries about being a good father." Robert said seriously.

"How's that?" Bobby asked carefully.

"Who's the best father you've ever met... here's a hint, he's married to my Dad." Robert finished with a smile.

"Okay, so you think I should take 'daddy' lessons from Andrew?" Bobby asked carefully.

"I think **we** should take 'daddy' lessons from my parents. The life I've had with Andrew and Alan is the type of life I want for our child." Robert said seriously.

"I don't know if I can be like your fathers." Bobby said apprehensively.

"I don't think you can either, but neither can I. We can only be ourselves. But Dad and Pop can give us good advice on how to be good parents." Robert said, then looked into Bobby's eyes.

"Did you know that I love you?" Robert asked seriously.

"I think I remember you saying something about that earlier." Bobby said with a smile.

"Let's go back to bed." Robert said and started to undress.

"Good idea. I'm glad we don't have school tomorrow." Bobby said as he slipped out of his clothes.

Robert took his place cuddled against Bobby's side and his head resting on Bobby's shoulder.

"What would you think if I wasn't Borg anymore?" Robert asked carefully.

"What do you mean?" Bobby asked curiously.

"Pop said that the Doctor back on Voyager told him how to remove our Borg components. I don't know what's involved, but after the baby is born I was thinking about beginning the process." Robert said seriously.

"Robby, can you tell me why you want to stop being Borg?" Bobby asked in thought.

"This is why." Robert said as he drew his hand across Bobby's bare chest.

"So we can sleep together?" Bobby asked carefully.

"So we can share our lives. As long as I'm bound to the regeneration alcove I'm still a prisoner of the Borg. I want to be able to go to bed with you without worrying about my power reserves or electrolyte balance. I want to go to bed every night with you beside me and wake up every morning to the sight of your beautiful face." Robert said in a dreamy haze.

"Robby, I loved you the way you were yesterday, I love you the way you are today and I'm sure that whatever you decide, I'll love you the way you are tomorrow and forever." Bobby said and pulled Robert up to give him a kiss.

"Thank you Bobby. I'll love you forever too." Robert said peacefully.

"Now let's get some sleep. Sweet dreams." Bobby muttered.

Robert snuggled against Bobby's chest again and said, "I don't need to dream. You're here."

* * * * *

"I can't believe this." Clark said as he walked with Trey and John down the hallway toward their room.

"Yeah, just think about it Trey, your Dad and your brother are both pregnant." John said with a delighted smile as they entered the bedroom.

"Robert has provided an example of how we might be able to have our own child one day." Trey said seriously as he began to take off his clothes.

Clark and John froze at the statement.

Trey noticed their stunned expressions and continued, "It is not necessary to discuss the matter at this time."

"Actually, if you guys don't mind, I'd like to talk about it now." John said in thought.

"Me too." Clark said seriously.

When both Clark and John looked at Trey, he nodded in agreement.

"I didn't really think about it being possible before, but I like the idea... I mean, someday." Clark said in thought.

"Yeah, exactly." John said with a nod.

"I concur." Trey said in a more Borg tone than usual.

"Is it possible, I mean, I don't know much about genetics. Can we all three be fathers?" Clark asked in thought.

Trey got a considering look, then said, "The programming of the nano-probes would be extensive, but I believe it is possible to engineer the genetics to be a combination of the three of us."

"That sounds a little creepy. I mean, genetic engineering... would we be messing with something that's best left alone?" John asked as he finished undressing and crawled into bed.

"I thought the same thing as soon as he said it." Clark said as he followed John.

"Although the phrase has negative connotations, there is no other way to describe what would need to be done to combine the genetics of three distinct species." Trey said as he scooted into the bed beside Clark.

"We don't need to worry about it now. That's years away." Clark said as he enjoyed the sensation of being snuggled from both sides.

"Yeah, years." John said in a sigh as he drifted into sleep.

* * * * *

"How do you like your bigger room?" Andrew asked as he walked with Janine into her room.

"It was adequate before, but this is acceptable." Janine said in a very Borg tone.

Alan walked in and looked around.

"It must be nice to have more space though. Now you'll have enough room to invite your friends over to play if you want to." Alan said seriously.

Janine gave Alan a speculative look, then gave an involuntary smile as she said, "The additional space has that benefit."

"It's time to regenerate Pumpkin." Andrew said gently.

Janine hopped into her alcove and waited for the 'goodnight ritual'.

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go back to sleep?" Andrew asked as he tucked Quaid into his bed.

"Yeah." Quaid said with a glorious smile.

"You really made us proud tonight." Alan said quietly.

"Thanks Dad. I'm glad Robert is going to be okay. I never felt anything like this before... being a brother." Quaid said seriously.

"Well, you've done a good job of it so far. Now get to sleep. Tomorrow will hold new adventures for all of us." Andrew said as he leaned down to give Quaid a kiss on the cheek.

As Andrew stepped away, Alan took his turn to give Quaid a kiss, then said, "I'm glad you're here Quaid. I hope you like it here."

Quaid looked seriously at Alan and said, "Q... Aunt Jean said that this would be a good place for me. I just thought she was putting me someplace out of my father's way. But I like it here, I never want to leave."

"We want you to stay too. Now go to sleep." Andrew said with a gentle smile from just inside the door.

"Goodnight." Alan whispered as he joined Andrew by the door.

"Goodnight, I love you both." Quaid said as he closed his eyes.

"We love you too Quaid." Alan said as he held Andrew by his side.

* * * * *

"Are you going to be able to get back to sleep?" Lee asked while getting the twins settled into their cribs.

"Maybe later. I'm completely awake now so I'll probably be up for a while." Slash said quietly.

"When Andrew and Alan are done making their rounds, I was thinking about having a midnight snack. Would you like to join me?" Lee asked hopefully.

Slash smiled and said, "You know. I've eaten more food since I've been here than I've probably had in the last month."

"Is that a yes?" Lee asked with a smile.

"Yeah, it's a yes." Slash said happily.

"How are you with everything that happened William?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Robert has recovered himself. I feel... jealous?" William asked more than said.

"That's understandable. I can only imagine how you feel, knowing that you had a life before that was taken away from you." Andrew said as he pulled William into a gentle hug.

"Do you think we'll get our memories back too?" Jimmy asked from his embrace with Alan.

"There's no way of knowing Squirt. I hope they come back, but if they don't you'll have a lot of new memories to enjoy." Alan said as he snuggled Jimmy tighter to his side.

"Thanks Dad." Jimmy whispered happily.

"Okay guys. It's time to regenerate. Remember that you gave Robert a lot of power tonight. Extend your regeneration cycles if you need to." Andrew said as he released William from his hug.

"Yes Father. Have a pleasant sleep." William said as he stepped into his alcove.

As was their nightly routine now, Alan, then Andrew stepped forward and kissed William on the cheek before he started his regeneration cycle.

Once William was regenerating, Alan turned to Jimmy and asked, "So are you going to write about your experiences today?"

"Yes, but after I've regenerated. I think I need the time to get my thoughts in order." Jimmy said seriously.

"I think I do too Squirt. I'll see you in the morning." Alan said as he followed Jimmy to his alcove.

Jimmy stood and waited for Alan and Andrew to kiss him goodnight.

"I love you Jimmy, you know that don't you?" Alan asked seriously.

Jimmy smiled and said, "Yes Dad. I love you too."

Alan nodded and said, "I just wanted to be sure that I told you. Sometimes I pay extra attention to William and Robert and I don't want you to feel left out."

"I understand. In all the time I have known you and Father, I have never felt less than fully loved." Jimmy said seriously.

"I'm glad." Alan said and gave Jimmy a kiss on the cheek, then stepped away.

Andrew stepped forward and looked Jimmy in the eyes for a moment before saying, "I just remembered the look Six of Seven had on his face when we were in the shuttlecraft... that seems like a lifetime ago."

Jimmy smiled at the memory and said, "Perhaps it is because empty days pass without notice. Days of joy and fulfillment pass slowly, each one being filled with memories."

"That's probably it." Andrew said with a smile and gave Jimmy a kiss on the cheek.

"I love you Squirt." Andrew said as he smiled.

"I love you too Father." Jimmy said, then initiated his regeneration.

* * * * *

"When we were adding rooms, why couldn't we put all the kids rooms in a row? This is getting to be a real workout." Andrew said as they climbed the stairs.

"It keeps us healthy. There are people who pay good money to use a stair-stepper machine. We get the same workout every day for free." Alan said with a smile.

"Well, at least Icheb and Trey are on the ground floor now. No more attic trips." Andrew said as he walked with Alan to Icheb's new room.

"Don't give up on the attic yet love. The way we've been going, we could have all the rooms filled again in no time." Alan said with a smile.

Andrew stopped outside Icheb's door and said, "Considering all the happiness that we've gained from everyone living here, it's worth the price of climbing a few stairs."

* * * * *

"How do you like your new room son?" Alan asked as he and Andrew walked into Icheb's room.

"Trey was very respectful of my privacy and did not feel a need for my own room, however having this room that I can call my own is very satisfying." Icheb said happily.

"That's good Icheb. I was worried that you might be feeling a lack of privacy with Trey. I'm glad it wasn't a problem." Alan said honestly.

"I believe the cohabitation was beneficial for us both. We have had the opportunity to discuss many things and I now feel that Trey is not only my brother, but also my friend." Icheb said seriously.

Andrew smiled and said, "That's great Icheb. I'm glad it worked out that way."

"Yes. Scott and I are brothers and friends like that. It's a wonderful feeling." Alan said happily.

"It's getting late. Have a good regeneration." Andrew said as he kissed Icheb on the cheek. On impulse, Icheb pulled Andrew into a hug and said, "Thank you for being my father and my friend."

Andrew smiled and said, "Remember back on Voyager when I told you about living in the boathouse?"

Icheb smiled and said, "Yes. You said that you would invite me to live here with you... and you did."

"Regenerate now. Your energy has to be low." Andrew said with a smile.

Icheb nodded and stepped back into his alcove.

Alan stepped forward and gave Icheb a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"I love you Dad." Icheb said in a soft voice.

"I love you too son." Alan said in a matching tone.

Andrew and Alan watched as Icheb began his regeneration cycle.

* * * * *

"How are the little ones?" Alan asked as he walked into his bedroom.

"Just fine. Both sleeping." Lee said with a tender smile directed at the babies.

"Thanks for all your help tonight Lee. Andy really needed you to be there." Alan said seriously.

"I'm glad Alan. After not being needed by anyone for years, it's a wonderful feeling." Lee said honestly.

"And thank you too Slash. Even if you hadn't been helping with the babies, your just being there was a big help to us." Alan said honestly.

"Alan, it sounds wrong when you call me Slash. That's for people outside the family." Slash said seriously.

"What would you like us to call you? Uncle Joe?" Alan asked curiously as Andrew walked into the bedroom.

"No. That's for the kids. How about Joey?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"I like that." Andrew said with a smile.

"Then it's settled." Slash said with a nod.

"Okay Joey, come on so these guys can get to bed." Lee said as he walked toward the door.

"Yeah. You guys have a good sleep." Slash said as he followed.

"You too. And thanks again." Alan said with a smile.

"Any time." Lee said before leaving the room.

* * * * *

"I just can't believe how much my life has changed." Slash said introspectively. as he took a seat in the kitchen.

"I know what you mean. Just a few days ago I was alone and didn't have any hope for the future." Lee said as he carefully looked through the contents of the refrigerator.

"It's the future that's kind of bothering me right now." Slash said in thought.

"How do you mean?" Lee asked with interest as he sat across from Slash.

"Well, I have a family that wants me now... I don't want to leave them to go to school." Slash said in distant thought.

"Then don't." Lee said simply.

Slash looked at Lee with question.

"No one wants you to leave. You could go to school here if you wanted." Lee said seriously.

Slash shook his head and said, "As much as I would like that, I really need to go to the Wagner School. It's just starting out... like me. I feel like it's the right thing to do. That doesn't stop me from wanting to stay." Slash finished with a shrug.

"Okay, I guess I can understand that. Besides, I'm going to be working at the Wagner School so I'll be seeing you all the time." Lee said encouragingly.

Slash gave a hesitant nod of acceptance.

"And you'll be able to come home every weekend." Lee said with a peaceful smile.

"Home." Slash repeated with awe.

Lee understood the expression and said, "That's right my brother, home."

Chapter 13: Of Family

"Good morning Love." Alan said with a gentle smile as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Good morning." Andrew said peacefully.

"I love you." Alan whispered as he moved in for a gentle kiss.

"I love you too." Andrew said peacefully as he looked into his husband's eyes.

"What do you have planned today?" Alan asked as he snuggled into Andrew's side.

"No plans. After spending the majority of the day at the mansion yesterday, I think I'd like to spend today at home." Andrew said as he glanced to see that the babies were sleeping peacefully.

"That sounds good to me." Alan said in a dreamy voice.

"Have you been up long?" Andrew asked as he cuddled Alan close to his side.

"About half an hour. Everyone else is still asleep." Alan said in contentment.

"They'll probably be up anytime now. We'd better enjoy the peace and quiet while we can." Andrew said softly.

An almost imperceptible knock sounded on their bedroom door.

"And so it begins." Alan said with a fond smile.

"Come in." Andrew called, careful not to call too loudly and wake the babies.

Quaid timidly poked his head in the bedroom door and looked around, obviously unsure of his welcome.

"Come in Quaid, it's alright." Andrew said with assurance.

Quaid was still wearing his Pokémon pajamas. He rushed into the room, then stopped at the side of Andrew and Alan's bed.

"Did you need something?" Alan asked with a gentle smile.

"I got, um, kind of lonely. No one else is awake yet." Quaid said hesitantly.

"Well, if you want you can climb in here with us. There's plenty of room." Andrew said with a smile.

"Really? You wouldn't mind?" Quaid asked in disbelief.

"Sure. We were just sitting and talking. You're welcomed to join us." Alan said peacefully.

Quaid jumped up on the bed and quickly got under the covers.

"Love, would you hand me my sweats?" Andrew asked quietly.

Alan reached over the side of the bed and picked up the sweatpants where Andrew had left them the night before.

Andrew quickly pulled on the sweatpants as he remained under the covers.

Alan noticed Quaid's look of question and considered if he should try to explain or leave it be.

"Did you put on your pants because of me?" Quaid asked curiously.

"Yeah. I needed to anyway." Andrew said as he snuggled into Alan's side.

"Why?" Quaid asked cautiously.

"I just don't think it's right to be naked in bed with kids. That's all. If it were Icheb or Jimmy in here I would have done exactly the same thing." Andrew said seriously.

"Oh. Okay." Quaid said in thought.

"Come here." Andrew said and opened his arms for a hug.

Quaid happily moved into the waiting arms and enjoyed a long hug.

"So how do you like your new home?" Andrew asked as he shifted Quaid between him and Alan.

"I really like it here." Quaid said peacefully as Alan and Andrew shifted so Quaid could nestle between them.

"I'm glad. We like you being here. You really made us proud last night. Because of you, Robert and his baby are going to be fine." Andrew said in a soft, loving voice.

"Robert is really nice. I like him." Quaid said happily as he snuggled.

"Hopefully you'll get to be good friends. I hope you'll be happy here." Alan said gently.

"I'm already happier than I've ever been. Thanks for being my dads." Quaid said in peace.

* * * * *

Slash woke slowly and looked around his room in wonder. His very own room.

He laid in the bed and thought about how completely his life had changed in a day.

He went from being a throw away mutant kid on the streets to being a member of a family.

Lee was now legally his brother. Andrew and Spike were his nephews.

Even though he knew that they weren't his blood relations, somehow that didn't matter. His blood relatives didn't want him. They said he wasn't their son anymore. These people accepted him into their home and their family. They didn't want anything from him, they just want to share their lives with him. A sparkling ray of sunlight caught his attention as it glittered through the window. Slash smiled and slowly got up from his bed. He walked to the dresser and looked in the mirror. For the first time in months he didn't avoid looking at his own image. He looked at his white face and smiled. None of his new family cared that he looked different. Quaid even wanted to look like him. He opened the dresser, not knowing what to expect and found it filled with clothes. Next he walked to the closet and found a variety of shirts and pants. Slash picked out some clothes to wear and laid them out, then went to his bathroom to get ready for the day.

* * * * *

"Good morning." Bobby said in a whisper.

"Good morning." Robert said with a smile.

Bobby moved in to give Robert a gentle kiss.

"I love you so much." Robert said in a voice filled with awe.

"I love you just as much Robby." Bobby said as he gently moved a stray strand of hair off Robert's forehead.

"What do you want to do today?" Robert asked, coming more awake.

"The first thing I'd like to do is take you to the boathouse so you can get some regeneration." Bobby said seriously.

"I can continue until this evening with no ill effect." Robert said, allowing some of his Borg tone to creep into his voice.

"Just because you 'can' doesn't mean you 'should'. Please Robby, let me take care of you and our baby." Bobby asked as he let his hand slide down Robert's abdomen.

Robert smiled at the gesture and placed his own hand over Bobby's, right over the location of their child in the maturation pod.

"Is robo-womb working okay?" Bobby asked softly.

"All systems operating within normal parameters." Robert said in a fully Borg tone, then broke into a smile.

"That's good. You really scared me last night." Bobby said as he pulled Robert close to his chest.

"I'm sorry Bobby. I guess I didn't think everything through... but I didn't really have a conscious mind at the time... I was kind of floating in the subconscious." Robert said with difficulty.

"So are you Robert or Ki?" Bobby asked hesitantly.

Robert smiled and said, "I'm your Robby. Everything that was Robert is still here, some of Ki was just added. Please don't worry Bobby, I haven't lost anything of what I was before. I've only gained the core of the person I used to be."

"Okay, as long as my Robert is still in there, I guess it's okay." Bobby said in thought.

"I am right here. If it would cause you to be more comfortable, I could resume using my Borg mannerisms. It would be no inconvenience to me." Robert said in a very Borg tone.

"Um, no. Not unless you want to, I mean. I just want you to be yourself. You don't have to put on an act for me." Bobby said in thought.

"But I have two selves. At this point in time they are separate enough that I can choose which one I use. I'm sure that they will eventually integrate to the point where I will have only one self." Robert said distantly.

"Well, it sounds kind of selfish to say this, but I'd really like my Borg Robert back. Not all the time, but just at times like this. He's the one I fell in love with." Bobby said shyly.

"It gives me pleasure to know that you love me as I am. Please be assured that when the integration is complete, I will still be myself. Ki will just be one aspect of my personality." Robert said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks Robby. Ki is nice, but I don't really know him. It just feels wrong when we're like this to hear his voice coming out of your mouth." Bobby said with relief.

"We have the same voice." Robert said hesitantly.

"I mean the way he talks, it's different. He's nice and everything, it's just that I feel like I'm laying next to a stranger when I hear him talking." Bobby said with difficulty.

"I understand. But just so you know, Ki loves you too." Robert said softly.

"I think I'll probably love him once I get to know him, after all, he's another part of you." Bobby finished with a smile.

* * * * *

"Alex luv, all your clothes are gone." Spike said from the closet.

Alex opened his eyes and looked around the room to find that other things were missing.

"It looks like most of my stuff is gone, not that I had that much to begin with." Alex said in confusion as he got out of the bed.

"If someone broke in here and stole everything while we were sleeping, they deserve to keep it. Anyone who can get past a sleeping vampire is a master thief." Spike said as he looked around for clues.

"Well, we still have our clothes from yesterday. Let's get dressed and see if anyone else is missing anything." Alex said as he pulled on his boxers.

"Hold on luv, I need to say a proper good morning before we do that." Spike said and pulled Alex into a hug.

After a long, lingering kiss, Alex finally said, "Good morning Wil."

"Good morning Alex luv." Spike said in contentment.

"We didn't go too far last night, did we?" Alex asked with concern.

"No mate, it was just perfect. I've loved a few times over the decades, but I can't remember feeling loved like that before." Spike said softly from their embrace.

"I do love you Wil. After last night I'm more sure of it than ever." Alex said as he rubbed Spike's back.

"I love you too Alex. I think a lot of what I was feeling was just to try and protect us in case our feelings weren't what we thought they were." Spike said in thought.

"And how do you feel now?" Alex asked with concern.

"I feel like I've finally come home." Spike said softly into Alex's ear.

* * * * *

"Good morning Robert. How are you feeling?" Clark asked with concern as he, Trey and John exited their room.

"I am well. The new personality is acting in harmony with me and the robotic womb is functioning within normal parameters." Robert said seriously.

"You sound like your old self." John observed cautiously.

"Yes. That part of me which is Ki has withdrawn to allow me to interact as I did before his inclusion into my conscious mind." Robert said in thought.

"Oh. Um... isn't that, like, having a split personality or something?" John asked with concern.

"Yes. By the literal definition, I do have a split personality. But the process of integration has already begun. I anticipate no difficulty incorporating Ki into my existing life." Robert said in an assured voice.

"Okay, but if you have any problems that we can help with, just let us know. You're our friend, so you don't have to go through this stuff alone." Clark said seriously.

"Thank you Clark. I am gratified to know that you will be available should I need support." Robert said, then gently smiled.

"Yeah, that goes for all of us. Whatever you need." John said seriously.

Trey simply nodded in agreement.

Robert happily nodded in acceptance of the statement.

"So what are you guys doing?" Bobby asked quietly.

"Well, we figured that we'd go down and get some breakfast, then head over to the boathouse so Trey can regenerate. John has to go see Dr. McCoy this morning, so we figured that Trey could regenerate while John is getting treated. Since Slash needs to see the doctor, we'll pick him up while we're over there." Clark said simply.

"That sounds like a good plan. Would you mind if we tag along? We were planning on going to the boathouse so Robert could do a little regenerating too." Bobby said casually.

"Sounds like a plan. Come on." Clark said with a smile and started walking toward the stairs.

* * * * *

Scott awoke and put on his sunglasses.

He looked around his room at the mansion and thought about the night before.

When he invited Matt out to shoot some pool, he had thought that if they spent some time together that maybe... one thing might lead to another.

It became obvious about ten minutes into their first game that nothing but pool playing was going to happen.

As soon as Scott had determined that nothing romantic was going to happen between them, he relaxed noticeably.

The rest of the evening he and Matt played pool in easy companionship and camaraderie. Scott rested back on his pillow and smiled at the memory.

He and Matt were two very different people, and yet, that was part of what made their friendship interesting.

Matt has a dry, sarcastic... almost laconic sense of humor that Scott could appreciate.

For his own part, Scott felt as if he could really be himself with Matt. There was no need to hide anything or act a certain way.

Matt had made it clear that he considered them to be friends. All Scott had to do was accept what was being freely offered.

Reluctantly, Scott climbed out of bed and considered his tasks for the day.

A visit to the boathouse was first on his list. He had an important question to ask Alex and had been putting it off for days.

* * * * *

Hank walked into the MedLab to begin his work for the day.

A sound caught his attention and he began to look around the room to find the source.

Finally after taking a circuitous route through the lab he found the sound coming from his spectral imaging scanner.

Suddenly he remembered that he had been trying to identify the components of Clark's blood by using the mass spectrometer function of the scanner.

As he looked at the device, he realized that it had run the entire spectrum of light waves, radio waves and radiation on the sample over and over again throughout the night.

With a sigh of resignation, Hank turned off the machine and pushed the button to re-pressurize the chamber so he could eject the sample.

After being repeatedly bombarded by nearly every particle known to mankind for the better part of twelve hours, the sample would be useless to him.

The indicator finally changed to show that the sample could be removed.

Hank was about to open the chamber when he realized that he needed to observe the proper safety precautions in this situation.

The amount of radiation that the sample tray absorbed would most certainly make it extremely hazardous.

Physical contact with something so violently irradiated would definitely burn human skin, possibly to the point of causing deep tissue damage.

After walking to the door and turning on the 'Radiation Hazard' alert light over the door to forewarn anyone who might choose to visit, Hank quickly donned his lead apron, gloves and face-shield.

Properly attired, he moved to the scanner again and using a pair of tongs, carefully reached for the small specimen tray.

As Hank removed the dish from the chamber, something unusual immediately caught his eye.

This wasn't the few drops of blood that he had put into the scanner the night before.

Cautiously, Hank carried the dish to the microscope so he could get an enlarged and detailed image of whatever was in the dish.

Once the dish was in place, he turned on his monitor and clicked open the application to view the microscope's input.

What he saw amazed him. It was a complex cellular mass.

As Hank carefully studied the mass and began to identify the differentiated cell groups, suddenly he froze in astonishment...

...It moved.

* * * * *

"Hey, how are you guys doing this morning?" Scott asked in a cheerful voice as he walked into the kitchen.

"Um, I think we're all good. How are you?" John asked curiously, confused by Scott's cheerful mood.

"I've got a full day planned. I think that if I put my mind to it, I can clear out about a dozen things I've been putting off." Scott said as he walked to the collection of cereal containers and chose something that was a satisfying balance between sweet and healthy.

"Ouch, you have a waaaaay different way of having fun." John said with a puzzled shake of his head.

Scott chuckled and said, "Look at it this way. If I get all this stuff done today, I'll have the rest of the weekend to do whatever I want."

"Yeah, I guess so. But I think I'd still rather leave everything until Sunday night about six o'clock." John said honestly as he finished pouring his milk and handed the jug to Scott.

"Thanks. I'll tell you what John. If you'll try it my way one time, I'm willing to bet that you will enjoy your off time a lot more. When you get all your work cleared out early, then you can enjoy your free time without worrying about the things you still need to do." Scott said as he poured his milk and passed the jug to Clark who was standing on his other side.

"Well, since I'll be attending the Wagner school next week, I don't have anything hanging over me, so it's no problem." John said frankly.

"You don't have anything except the possibility of moving into a new house, getting everything ready to attend a new school and if I'm not mistaken, you'll be receiving treatment for an intestinal parasite while everything else is going on." Scott said seriously as he led the way into the dining room.

"I was looking forward to the weekend until I heard that." John said hesitantly.

Scott laughed and said, "Just roll with it John. We'll all be right there with you."

"Yeah. Okay, but, um... just in case you didn't know..." John began hesitantly.

Scott turned to face John and raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

"...You kinda suck at pep talks." John said with a pained look. Obviously not wanting to hurt Scott's feelings too badly.

Scott chuckled, more at John's expression than his statement.

"Yeah. I guess I do. Maybe you could help me with that sometime." Scott said with a gentle smile.

"You got a deal." John said with relief.

Scott looked at the other boys gathered around the table and casually said, "Trey, when we're done with breakfast I'll get you the design specifications for Cerebro. That way when you meet with the Professor tomorrow, you'll have a better idea about what the Professor is talking about."

"What form are the design specifications stored in?" Trey asked curiously.

"Well, they're in the computer. But I'll print them out for you. The only thing is, I'll have to ask you to return the printouts when you're done. That stuff is kind of classified and we can't take the chance of anyone else getting hold of it." Scott said in thought.

"If you would permit me, I can download the specifications directly into my personal data node. I am planning an unscheduled regeneration when I return to the boathouse and could process the information while I regenerate. It will have the same effect as many hours of studying printouts." Trey said seriously.

"That sounds good to me. Hmmm, studying in your sleep... I think I could get into that." Scott said in thought.

"Being Borg does have some advantages." Trey said with a gentle smile at Scott's statement.

* * * * *

"I guess it's time to get up." Andrew said in resignation.

"I guess so." Alan said reluctantly.

"I like it here." Quaid said from his position snuggled between his fathers.

"So do we, but we need to fix breakfast and get the day started." Andrew said gently.

"Yeah. I think maybe that's what I'm feeling... hungry." Quaid said uncertainly.

"Well, that settles it then. Come on, how about I give you a ride to the kitchen while Alan gets the babies ready for their breakfast?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"A ride?" Quaid asked curiously as he watched Andrew get out of the bed.

"Yeah, come over here and climb on my back." Andrew said with a chuckle.

"Like this?" Quaid asked cautiously as he draped himself over Andrew's back.

"Yep. Now just hold on." Andrew said happily as he stood.

Quaid gave a giggle as he was lifted.

"Whoa. You're heavier than you look." Andrew said with effort.

"I can walk if I'm too heavy." Quaid said with concern.

"No way. I said I was going to give you a ride to the kitchen, and I'm going to do it. Anyway, now that I'm standing, it's not so bad." Andrew said with a smile.

"Okay." Quaid said happily.

"First thing, a kiss for Dad, then we're off to make breakfast." Andrew said cheerfully as he walked to Alan.

Quaid watched the tender kiss between his fathers with a close-up view.

A second later, Alan broke the kiss, and waited for Andrew to turn sideways so he could kiss Quaid.

"Good morning son." Alan said quietly, then gave Quaid a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Okay, we'll see you in the kitchen." Andrew said happily.

"Will you start their bottles when you get in there?" Alan asked as he turned his attention to the babies.

"Sure thing, Alex's coffee, then the babies bottles." Andrew said firmly.

"Why does Alex rank above the babies?" Alan asked curiously.

"Just think about who has the more annoying cry." Andrew said in a teasing voice.

"I see your point." Alan said with a smile as he checked to see if Thomas needed to be changed.

Chapter 14: Something Wicked

"Alex, I've got your coffee right here. How are you guys doing this morning?" Andrew asked pleasantly as he handed Alex his cup of coffee.

"Thanks." Alex said with a grateful smile as he accepted the cup.

"Best be checking things out around here mate. We've been robbed." Spike said simply as he walked to the coffee maker to fix himself a cup.

"Don't worry Spike. You weren't robbed, you've just got a new room in the new wing. All your things are in there." Alan said from the stove where he was beginning to make breakfast.

"How did you manage to get the things out of our room while we were sleeping?" Alex asked curiously.

"That's kind of a long story that's a little bit hard to believe. Why don't you just go with it for now and we'll tell you when you're finished with your coffee." Andrew said with a smile.

"Do you want to see your new room? I remember which one is yours. I could show it to you if you want." Quaid asked hopefully.

"Sure. It looks like we have a few minutes before breakfast is ready." Alex said with a smile at the boy.

"Would you wake up my dad and Slash and tell them that breakfast will be ready soon?" Andrew asked casually.

"Sure, but I didn't see Lee in the living room." Alex said cautiously.

"Quaid will show you where their rooms are, won't you son?" Andrew asked with a smile.

Quaid beamed at being called son and happily said, "Yeah. Come on and I'll show you."

Alan and Andrew both smiled warmly as Quaid led Spike and Alex out of the room.

* * * * *

"Come in." Warren said cautiously at the knock on the door.

"Good morning Warren." Kurt said as he entered the room.

"Good morning Kurt. How are you doing today?" Warren asked with a gentle smile as he sat up in bed.

"I am well. I thought I would come to see if you are prepared to go to breakfast." Kurt said carefully.

Warren considered for a moment, then said, "I suppose so. It's just been so nice to lounge around in bed that I hate to get up."

"Zen do not. Relax and I will brink breakfast for us so you may enjoy breakfast in bed." Kurt said simply.

"Oh no Kurt. You don't have to do that." Warren said with concern.

"I know zat I do not have to do zis. But I believe zat ve would boce enjoy doink somesink different. Please allow me to do zis." Kurt finished hopefully.

Warren was about to refuse, but the expression in Kurt's eyes finally won him over.

"Okay Kurt. But one of these days very soon, you'll have to let me pay you back." Warren said with a smile.

"Please do not let zis cause a sense of obligation between us. Just enjoy ze moment." Kurt said seriously.

"Agreed." Warren said quietly.

Kurt nodded, then walked quickly out of the room.

Warren sat looking at the bedroom door for a long moment, then slowly snuggled down in his bed, doing his best to enjoy the gift that Kurt was giving him.

* * * * *

"Here, this is your room!" Quaid said with excitement.

Spike and Alex shared an amused look at the boy's enthusiasm before walking into the room.

"Oi! Look at all of this." Spike said in amazement as he looked around.

"That's my camera... but I left it in Hawaii." Alex said as he walked to the computer desk where his camera was sitting.

"This duster was destroyed back in SunnyHell." Spike said as he picked up the black leather duster and put it on.

"Q... I mean, Aunt Jean did all this. She made rooms for all of us... even me." Quaid said happily.

Both men turned their attention to the boy who was nearly bouncing in his jubilation.

"Let's go wake up Slash and Lee, we can check this room out later." Alex said in a gentle voice.

Spike nodded and turned with a swish of his duster to walk out of the room.

Alex smiled at the movement, appreciating how perfectly the duster seemed to accentuate Spike's individual style.

* * * * *

"Good morning Uncle Hank." Tara said cautiously as she walked into the biolab.

"I'm in here Tara." Hank said absently.

Tara walked into the small room to find her uncle completely engrossed in his work.

"I woke up early and thought that I could help you out this morning if you needed anything." Tara said as she looked curiously at the screen that had her uncle's undivided attention.

After a long silent moment, Hank absently said, "John Allerdyce will be coming by this morning to begin treatment for a parasitic infection. If you would like, you could gather the things we will need."

"Sure... but what are you looking at? The cellular structure isn't like anything I've ever seen before... or even heard of." Tara asked as she moved a little closer to look at the microscope's video display.

"This was originally a blood sample taken from Clark. I began a full-range spectral analysis last night to try and determine the makeup of his blood. But I inadvertently left the scanner running all night long and the sample was repeatedly bombarded with everything from all the ranges of light to x-rays and gamma rays." Hank said distantly.

"How is it still alive?" Tara asked curiously, then blinked when she saw the sample move.

"I don't know. The only theory that makes any sense to me is that the blood sample must have converted the various forms of radiation into energy and used them as nourishment to grow." Hank said grimly.

Tara thought about the statement for a moment, then looked more closely at the display.

"This was a blood sample?" Tara asked in a whisper.

"Last night it was. Now it is a cellular mass. It has differentiated cells and seems to be developing at an accelerated rate."

Tara took two steps back and said, "A clone."

Hank turned in his chair and looked at Tara with question.

"The growth and development of the blood sample is making a clone of Clark." She said as a look of horror filled her expression.

"No. I don't think..." Hank began to say, then looked at the cellular mass again.

He adjusted the magnification to zoom out a little and looked at the general configuration of the entire mass.

"If this just started growing last night, then we should know if it's going to develop into an embryo within 48 hours." Hank said in a low voice.

"Are you going to tell Clark?" Tara asked cautiously.

Hank considered for a moment, then shook his head as he said, "Not until we know for certain. The cellular mass may not develop into anything. It may simply be a growth pattern from the cells being overly fertilized by the radiation bombardment."

"What will you do if it is a clone?" Tara asked cautiously.

Hank closed his eyes to consider for a moment, then reluctantly said, "I will take the matter to Professor Xavier."

At Tara's look of question, he continued, "I have made some unfortunate judgments in the recent past, some of them having to do with ethical questions. I believe that it would be best to preclude making another such error by seeking the Professor's advice before taking any action."

Tara nodded her agreement, then quietly asked, "What are you going to do with the sample until then?"

Hank considered for a moment, then said, "If you'll check the inventory, I believe that you will find that we have an incubation tank in storage. If you'll take it to the Omega Chamber, I will convert the spectrometer so that it can be used to nourish the cellular mass."

"I'll get right to it." Tara said immediately.

"Hold on Tara." Hank said quickly.

Tara stopped and looked at her uncle with question.

"Before you do anything else, bring me the rest of Clark's blood sample. I want to be sure that it is completely destroyed." Hank said, then glanced at the microscope again.

Tara nodded, then quietly asked, "Uncle Hank? Are we doing the right thing?"

"I don't know if there is a 'right thing' in a circumstance such as this." Hank said darkly.

Tara gave a small, ironic smile, then left the room to complete her assigned tasks.

As Hank watched the monitor before him, he absently muttered, "I'm not sure if I'm hoping that you'll live or die."

* * * * *

"Hello?" Xander said blearily into his cell phone as he tried to come awake.

"Bon jour, mon cour." The low, husky voice said in reply.

"Remy?" Xander said with excitement as he bolted upright in his bed.

"Oui. How be Marguerite?" Remy asked quickly.

"She's fine, and just as beautiful as ever." Xander said as he looked at his sleeping daughter.

"Remy need for de Professor and Warren to be at de mansion tonight." Remy said quickly, and seemed to be distracted.

"What's wrong?" Xander asked with immediate panic.

"Remy be home tonight and tell you what he found. Give Marguerite a kiss from Remy. I love you." Remy finished in a whisper, then the call disconnected.

Xander's vision was blurred as an unformed tear welled in his eye.

He slowly leaned over the edge of the cradle and gave his daughter the gentlest of kisses, then said, "That's from your daddy."

* * * * *

There was a gentle knock on the front door.

As Andrew walked out of the kitchen to answer it, he saw the door open.

"Good Morning Andrew." Clark said with a happy smile.

"Well, good morning Clark..." Andrew said warmly, then watched as others followed him into the living room.

"It looks like you have the whole crew with you today. How is everyone feeling this morning?" Andrew asked curiously as he looked at Trey, Robert, Bobby, Clark and John with question.

"I think we're all fine. Robert and Trey are going to regenerate while Bobby and I take John and Slash over to the mansion so Dr. McCoy can look at them." Clark said as he looked over the group.

"Well, I asked Spike and Alex to wake Slash up a few minutes ago, so he's probably on his way." Andrew said, then made a motion for the group to follow him into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Good morning. Is anyone hungry?" Alan asked as he checked on the babies to see that they were sleeping comfortably.

"Actually, we had breakfast before we came over here." Clark said apologetically.

"Well, I suppose you could get Trey and Robert settled in while Slash has his breakfast." Andrew said consideringly, then smiled as he looked at the doorway.

"We got everyone awake." Quaid said proudly.

"Except Slash." Alex said with a barely restrained smile.

"Oh yeah. I went in to wake up Uncle Joe and he was showering." Quaid finished with a giggle.

"And *someone* had to go into the bathroom to tell him that breakfast was almost ready." Alex said with a smirk.

"Uh huh... did you know that Uncle Joe screams like a girl?" Quaid asked with an innocent expression.

"Well thank you for passing on the message, Quaid. That was a big help." Andrew said as he squatted down so he could hug his newest son properly.

"Uncle Alex did most of it." Quaid reluctantly admitted.

"But I wouldn't have known which rooms to go to without your help." Alex said from the kitchen doorway with Spike at his side.

"You see? You were a lot of help. Now have a seat at the table. I bet you're hungry." Andrew said as he released Quaid from the hug.

"We'll stop by to get Slash when we've got these guys tucked in." Clark said with a grin as he led his group out of the kitchen.

"Do you think it's time for the bacon?" Alan asked as he looked at Spike, Alex and Quaid sitting at the table.

"Yep. You start that and I'll start the eggs. I'm sure by the time we're finished we'll have the whole squad here."

* * * * *

Warren was surprised to see Kurt enter through the bedroom door.

Kurt must have noticed his curious expression, because as he was carrying the tray, he said, "Ze odor zat accompanies my teleport might make your breakfast less enjoyable."

"Thank you Kurt. That was very considerate of you. Did you bring enough for both of us?" Warren asked as he looked over the plate of food that Kurt was placing before him.

"I brought some extra toast for myself." Kurt said as he pulled a chair over beside the bed.

Warren smiled warmly at Kurt and said, "I don't know if you realize just how much this means to me. No one has done anything like this for me in... I can't actually remember the last time."

"With ze added responsibilities I vill be facing at ze new college, I do not know zat I vill be able to do such a sing again in ze future." Kurt said with concern.

"I think that if you establish your priorities early on, that you should be able to meet your professional obligations while maintaining a personal life." Warren said, then began to eat his breakfast.

Kurt considered the words for a moment, then said, "I haff had very little of vaht you would call a personal life up to now. I haff been very isolated unt alone."

Warren swallowed, then took a sip of his coffee before saying, "Then maybe we can work that out while you're getting settled into your new role."

Kurt looked at Warren with question as he took a small bite of toast.

"You're just starting out a whole new life for yourself. Let's make sure we get it right." Warren said gently.

"Perhaps if vee can include activities such as zis, I vill be able to feel content in my new position." Kurt said slowly.

"I have to travel quite a bit with my job. But when I'm in the area, we'll be sure to make time to meet. I have the feeling that it will do us both a lot of good to spend the time together." Warren said honestly.

"And perhaps vee could invite Jimmy to join us on some of zose occasions." Kurt said, then looked at Warren with question.

"Yes. And I've decided to stay around here for the rest of the weekend. Let's see if we can come up with something that the three of us can do together." Warren said gently.

"I believe Jimmy would enjoy zat as vell. He seems to enjoy our company." Kurt said with a smile.

Warren slowly chewed his food, then swallowed before saying, "I think with the size of his family, Jimmy may just appreciate receiving individual attention. I don't think his parents neglect him, or anything like that. But when he's with us, maybe he feels like his getting attention doesn't take away from his siblings."

"Or perhaps he enjoys our company." Kurt said frankly.

Warren looked at Kurt with surprise, then broke into a smile.

"Yeah. Now that you mention it. I think he does."

* * * * *

"Father, Dad. My alcove seems to be... missing." Trey said from the kitchen doorway, obviously fighting to keep his 'Borg' persona in place to hide his worry.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Trey. I should have thought to mention that to you. Your alcove has been moved to your room in the new wing." Andrew said as he kept a close watch on his cooking.

"The new rooms have been completed?" Trey asked cautiously.

Andrew looked down at the eggs with frustration, then glanced over to the table and asked, "Quaid, would you mind showing Trey where his new room is?"

The look on Quaid's face was nothing less than pure joy.

He hopped up from his place at the table and ran to Trey's side.

"Come on. I'll show you where your room is." Quaid said as he was nearly vibrating with his enthusiasm.

Clark and John both looked at Andrew with warm smiles before following Trey and Quaid out of the room.

* * * * *

"Mornin Andy." Xander said casually as he walked into the kitchen with Marguerite in his arms.

"Good morning Xan. You're in a pretty good mood." Andrew said cautiously.

"Remy called. He'll be back tonight." Xander said with a big smile as he gently placed Marguerite into the crib with Thomas and Chakotay.

"That's not going to effect the plans for today is it?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Nope." Xander said frankly, "Me. Icheb. Janine. Marguerite. Visit Aunt Vada... Consider it done."

"Thanks Xan." Andrew said with appreciation as he placed a cup of coffee in front of Xander.

Just then, Icheb walked into the room and Andrew casually asked, "Do you think you're ready for this son?"

"I am experiencing a sense of apprehension, but I will be able to function adequately." Icheb said carefully.

"Don't worry about it Andy. We'll be fine." Xander said with a fond sile directed at Icheb.

"Just call if you run into any trouble." Andrew said seriously, then turned his attention back to his cooking.

"Yes Dad." Xander said in an exaggerated tone and a roll of his eye.

Quaid walked back into the kitchen and immediately walked to Icheb for a hug.

"I wish I could go with you." Quaid said in a whine.

Before Icheb could respond, Andrew said, "As soon as Icheb has his driver's license, you two will be able to go and do things whenever you want."

Icheb nodded and said, "We will go and do many things. However, today is for Janine. At times it is necessary to put aside our own desires for the benefit of our family."

"Okay, Itchy. But can we do something when you get back?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"Perhaps you could compile a list of desirable activities while I am away." Icheb said thoughtfully.

Quaid giggled and said, "I think it's funny when you talk 'Borgy'."

Icheb smiled at the statement and pulled Quaid back into the hug.

* * * * *

"How are things going this morning Joey?" Andrew asked with a smile at Slash's sleepy expression.

"I'm good. The shower felt great." Slash said, then a look of surprise came over his face when Andrew placed a full plate of food before him.

"Thanks!" Slash said in a bewildered tone.

"Enjoy." Andrew said with a tender smile, then thought to say, "Last night, your hair was white, now it's black again. What's up with that?"

"Oh. My mutant power causes my hair to turn white while I sleep. I have to color it each morning." Slash said between bites of food, and was a little surprised that he didn't feel uncomfortable discussing his mutant ability.

"Well, just so you know, I liked it the other way too. In case you ever considering leaving it white." Andrew said casually. "It reminds me of those dandelion fluffs."

"Oh, that's just the look every guy wants to have." Slash said with a chuckle.

Andrew shrugged and said, "I think you could pull it off."

Before Slash could respond, Clark and John walked into the kitchen.

"I'll be ready in just a minute." Slash hurried to say.

"Take your time." John said casually. "From the way Robert and Bobby were looking at each other, they'll probably be 'saying goodbye' for quite a while.

Clark nodded his wholehearted agreement.

Slash relaxed a little and took the time to really enjoy the breakfast that Andrew and Allen had made him.

* * * * *

"Good morning Tara. How are you today?" Bobby asked quietly.

"I'm good. Come on back to the exam room. I have everything set up for both of you." Tara said as she gestured toward the door.

"This isn't anything like visiting the doctor my parents used. The first three hours were spent in his waiting room with two year old women's magazines." Slash said as he followed the group.

"Yeah. I never did like visiting doctors much, but this place isn't so bad." John said, a little bit nervously.

"It's going to be fine, John. You already know what's wrong and what's going to happen. That's really the worst part. Now you just have to get through the treatment." Bobby said encouragingly.

After a moment to think about the words, John quietly said, "Thanks Bobby. Not knowing really is the worst part. At least I don't have to deal with that."

"Well thanks guys." Slash said playfully, then continued, "Now I have to go in there thinking about that!"

"There's nothing wrong with you, Doof!" John said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. You're just here for a checkup." Bobby said with a grin.

"Okay. I guess you're right. I just haven't had the best luck with doctors." Slash said shyly.

The boys all looked at Slash with sympathy. None of them knew what type of experiences he had had, but all of them were sure that he was justified in his uneasiness around doctors.

* * * * *

"Did you start yet?" A voice asked from the doorway.

"No. We just got here." Clark said, as he looked at Lee uncertainly.

"I wanted to be here for Slash." Lee explained at Clark's puzzled look.

"That's kewl. Bobby and Clark are here for me." John said with a swell of happiness under his words.

"If you gentlemen are ready, I believe I would like to start with Mr. Allerdyce today." Dr. McCoy said to the group, then looked at John and asked, "Would you get on the table and remove your shirt?"

"Why?" John asked cautiously.

Hank wasn't used to his patients questioning his instructions and was brought up short of words.

"I mean, you already know what's wrong with me and what needs to be done. Right? Why do you need me to get up there without my shirt?" John asked as he looked Dr. McCoy in the eyes.

Hank finally got over his shock at being questioned and quietly said, "Yes. I do know what is causing your illness, but it would be irresponsible of me to administer treatment without first checking your current vital signs. If your blood pressure were elevated, for instance, then I might choose to delay your treatment for a day or two until you had it under control."

John thought about what Dr. McCoy was saying and finally nodded that he understood.

"I'm sorry Doctor. I didn't mean to sound like I didn't trust you." John said timidly.

Dr. McCoy smiled at John and said, "It's refreshing to be questioned. If you're ever uncertain or just want to understand what I'm doing, I would prefer that you ask."

John broke into a smile as he said, "You'd better watch out what you ask for Doc."

"If you'll hold still for a moment, I'll get these readings so I can proceed." Dr. McCoy said as he took his stethoscope and pressed it to John's chest.

After a moment of listening to John's heart, Dr. McCoy checked his blood pressure and did a quick check of his eyes, ears and throat.

"I thought you had scanning equipment that could do all of that." Clark said as he watched the 'old fashioned' examination.

Dr. McCoy turned to look at Clark and quietly said, "Yes. The scanning devices are useful for detecting specific ailments, but I find that the traditional examination is faster and more efficient for determining the overall wellness of the patient. A stethoscope and a well trained ear are still better tools than the most complex scanner... although Andrew's medical tricorder comes close."

Before Clark could respond, Hank continued, "Well John, everything seems to be just fine. You can put your shirt on and I'll get your medication."

"What's it going to do to me?" John asked nervously.

"The medication that I'm going to use will make your gastrointestinal tract an unwelcoming environment for the parasite that you've picked up. I doubt that you'll notice any significant effect from the medication today since it is relatively mild, but sometime tomorrow, you may start feeling nauseous. It is also possible that you may experience periods of weakness as the treatment continues." Hank said as he looked at John seriously.

"Sounds great." John muttered sarcastically.

"Given the side effects of this treatment, you should probably have someone with you for the next few days." Hank said as he looked John in the eyes.

"I'll stay with him." Clark said immediately, then asked, "Is there anything special that I need to watch out for?"

"It is possible that John's nausea may lead to vomiting or that he may suddenly become weak and need to be helped to sit down. If he has any symptoms beyond those, you should call me immediately." Hank said firmly.

"Got it." Clark said to Hank, then looked at John with sympathy.

"How long am I going to be feeling like shit?" John asked bluntly.

"If you can endure the treatment through Sunday, your unwanted passenger should be expelled. Then we can stop the treatment and you should return to normal relatively quickly. You should be back to yourself by Tuesday or Wednesday, I should think." Hank said quietly.

"Do it." John said, almost sounding angry.

Tara was standing by with a cup of pills and another cup filled with water.

Hank took a moment to look at the pills, verifying that they were the appropriate ones, then handed the first cup to John.

"Three days isn't so bad." Clark said with encouragement, then continued, "And you should be over it in time for school."

After finishing the cup of water, John looked at Clark and said, "Right. So I get to be sick and I don't even get time off from school because of it... lucky me."

"Stop by sometime tomorrow so I can check your vitals. Besides that, if you have any questions or concerns, please just come to me and ask." Hank said as he looked John in the eyes.

John chuckled and said, "Yeah. Count on it."

Hank turned his attention to Slash and said, "I'm ready for you now."

Slash hesitantly walked to the examination table, then stopped to look around the room.

"Would you guys mind if I saw the doctor alone?" Slash asked with difficulty, feeling that he was being rude to his new family.

"No prob, Slash. We'll just hang out in the hall until you're done." Bobby said immediately.

Clark and John nodded their agreement, none of them looking the least bit offended.

"Does that include me?" Lee asked cautiously.

"No Lee. You can stay." Slash said shyly.

"Well then, if that's all sorted, would you remove your shirt and get up on the table?" Hank asked professionally.

* * * * *

About fifteen minutes later, Slash and Lee walked into the hallway side by side.

"How did it go?" Clark asked, concerned by the disturbed expression on Slash's face.

"Slash is fine. He's just had some bad experiences with doctors in the past." Lee said carefully.

"I don't want to lie." Slash muttered.

Lee couldn't tell if the statement was directed at him, so he looked at Slash with question to see exactly what he wanted to do.

After a moment lost in thought, Slash looked around the group and said, "Doctor McCoy said that because of... some stuff, my hormones are kind of out of whack. He's going to do some checking and tests and stuff to be sure, but it's possible that I'm going to have to have some kind of treatment for it."

Clark, Bobby and John looked at each other, none really knowing how a hormone imbalance would manifest or what the treatment would be like.

Lee noticed their confusion and said, "It's too early to even worry about that. From the way Hank described it, if he decides that Slash really does need some kind of treatment, it won't be anything to worry about. It'll be something as simple as taking a pill each morning."

"Oh. Well, that doesn't sound too bad." Clark said consideringly.

"For the rest of my life." Slash said darkly.

Silence fell over the group for a moment, until John said, "There are people all over the place that have to take medicine for their whole lives. As long as it does what it's supposed to, what's the problem?"

Slash looked hesitantly at John and said, "I just don't want to be dependant on a drug like that."

"Who does?" John asked frankly.

At Slash's look of surprise and question, John continued, "Sometimes you don't get a choice about things like this. You just have to deal with it."

Lee looked at Slash and reluctantly nodded his agreement with John's words.

After a moment to consider, Slash said, "I guess so. Thanks for being here for me... and for being honest."

Clark looked Slash in the eyes and said, "Those are two things you can always count on Slash... Always."

Slash broke into a smile as he nodded.

"I don't know about anyone else, but this is the only thing I had planned to do today." Bobby said as he looked around the group, effectively changing the subject.

"We're just kind of waiting on Trey to regenerate." Clark said, then looked at John with question.

"I don't have any plans." Lee said with a glance at Slash.

"Walk to the boathouse?" John suggested cautiously.

"Sounds good." Clark said with a smile.

"I'm in." Slash said, sounding much closer to his usual, carefree self.

Since everyone seemed to be in agreement, Bobby turned and led the way.

* * * * *

//Scott, mobilize the X-Men for an urgent mission.//

//What's going on Professor?//

//One of the genetic researchers at the South African facility apparently decided to do some homework on a variant of the X-Gene Virus. Even though he was dispatched, his private lab still exists. It appears that while his lab assistants were packing his things, they unwittingly released the virus. Gather your team and get there as quickly as possible. Every minute of delay increases the possibility that we will be unable to contain the spread of the virus.//

//Will you call Dr. McCoy, Storm, Portal and Wolverine to the hanger bay and fill them in?// Scott asked seriously.

//I will summon them now. Please hurry Scott.//

* * * * *

Andrew appeared beside Scott a moment later with a look of panic in his eyes.

"Portal, get with the professor to find out where we're going. You're our transportation." Scott said as he finished pulling on his boots.

"I'm on it." Andrew said as he hurried to his locker to start changing.

"What do you need me to do Cyke?" Matt asked as he rushed into the room.

"Wolverine, you'll be in charge of securing our perimeter. The virus has gotten loose again and there may only be this one chance to contain it. Let the professor know who you'll need to help you and he'll call them." Cyclops said firmly.

"Got it." Matt said as he skinned out of his clothes.

Chapter 15: Something New

As Cyclops walked out of the locker room, he saw Dr. McCoy rushing into the room at a hurried pace.

"Hank, your code name will be Beast. You'll be in charge of identifying and containing this thing. We need to make sure that there's no trace of it left for someone else to find. Let the professor know who'll you'll need to ensure that this damned virus is finally wiped out." Cyclops said firmly.

"Will I also be in charge of seeing that the technical data is destroyed?" Hank asked cautiously.

"Yes. Bring whoever you might need to deal with it." Cyclops said firmly, then noticed Storm walking out of the women's locker room.

"Storm, I'll need you to stick with me to assess the situation. Since we'll be in your home country, you might notice something significant that I would overlook." Cyclops said seriously.

A firm nod was Storm's only reply as she watched Tara rush into the room then into the women's locker room.

//Portal, Trey is requesting that you form a portal from his bedroom at the boathouse.// Professor X sent telepathically.

Andrew was surprised by the request but immediately cast his mind out and created a portal.

"How may I be of assistance?" Trey asked cautiously as he stepped out of the portal. He was wearing his large ocular implant and had a device that covered the majority of his left arm.

"Wait a moment for Tara to join us, then come to the MedLab with me and get into a containment suit." Hank said seriously.

"I'll open a portal to MedLab for you." Andrew said as he gestured to a portal forming beside them.

John and Bobby hurried into the room and looked at Scott with matching expressions of question.

"Who called for fire and ice?" Cyclops asked as he looked around the increasing gathering.

"I did. These guys can back me up." Wolverine said seriously.

"Iceman, Pyro. Suit up." Cyclops said as he gestured toward the men's locker room.

"Bobby! Wait!" A voice said from the door of the hanger bay.

"Robby? You can't go with me. You need to stay here and protect our baby." Bobby said as he stepped to Robert's side.

"Yes. I will. I just wanted to give you this before you go." Robert said as he presented Bobby with a small silvery piece of cloth.

Bobby unfolded the cloth, then looked at Robert with confusion at the pair of shorts in his hand that essentially looked like a silver speedo.

"If there is a need to manifest your full power, this material should be able to withstand the extreme cold." Robert said carefully.

"Thanks Robby." Bobby said with a smile and gave Robert a quick but firm kiss.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Clark asked hopefully from the doorway.

Cyclops was about to refuse when he realized why Clark was really there. Both John and Trey were being included on the mission and Clark didn't want them to go into danger without him.

"Sure Clark, you can be on the team. You'll need a code name, do you want to be called 'Heat Vision'?" Cyclops asked seriously.

"No, that's just going to be for my writing. How would you feel... I mean, would it be alright if I went ahead and used the name Superman?" Clark asked hesitantly.

"Superman it is. But I'm afraid I don't have any red and blue tights for you to wear." Cyclops said with a teasing smile.

"Good." Clark said with a chuckle, then asked, "What can I do to help?"

"When we get there, stick with me. If I see something that needs to be done, you'll be the one doing it." Cyclops said seriously, back to his full professional persona.

Hank, Trey and Tara stepped out of the medlab portal wearing bright yellow containment suits at the same time Bobby and John rushed back from the locker room.

"Portal, you're up." Cyclops said seriously.

Andrew nodded, then concentrated to form the distant portal.

Even though it didn't necessarily stretch his abilities to form the portal, it still took quite a bit of power and concentration.

"Wolverine." Cyclops said and motioned for him to go first.

Cautiously, Wolverine stepped through the portal, followed closely by Pyro and Iceman.

As Beast started walking toward the portal, Cyclops held up his hand and shook his head.

"Wait until we get the all clear. It won't help anyone if you step through the portal and get shot." Cyclops said seriously.

Beast nodded that he heard, since talking through the biosuit was somewhat bothersome.

"Perimeter secure." Wolverine said through the portal.

"Beast, Sprite and 3 of 7, check out the lab." Cyclops said and gestured toward the portal for them to go.

"Portal, Storm and Superman, you're with me." Cyclops said, then stepped through the swirling vortex.

* * * * *

"Beast, do you think it will be safe for us to go into the house?" Cyclops asked into his communicator.

After a long moment of silence, Beast answered, "There is truly no way to know how infectious this strain of the virus is. The possibility of infection existed the moment you stepped through the portal, I don't think going into the house will increase the risk."

"Thanks for the pep talk Beast. We're going to check out the house." Cyclops said, then motioned for Storm and Superman to walk with him.

"Where do you need me?" Portal asked seriously.

"Right here for now. You can function as both our lookout and escape route." Cyclops said as he turned to leave.

"Call if you need me." Portal said as he watched them walk away.

"Count on it." Cyclops said seriously, without turning back.

* * * * *

"It looks so... normal." Clark said in surprise as he walked around the neat little living room.

"You expected it to be otherwise?" Ororo asked cautiously.

"Well, yeah. This is Africa... I guess I just... I don't know..." Clark said uncomfortably.

"You expected to see mud huts in the Serengeti?" Ororo asked frankly.

"Well, yeah. And starving babies with swelled out bellies." Clark said in an apologetic tone.

Ororo looked Clark in the eyes as she said, "The Serengeti does exist here and unfortunately, so does the reality of hunger. But there is so much more to Africa than that limited vision. I suppose it would be like looking at the United States as being New York and Los Angeles with a rural area in between where the Dukes of Hazard live."

Clark smiled at the statement, then turned as he heard a sound.

"What is it?" Ororo asked immediately.

"I thought I heard something." Clark said as he walked toward the room to investigate.

"Wait. Cyclops, come over here." Storm said seriously.

"Did you find something?" Cyclops asked as he walked from the other side of the room where he had been looking at the items on a desk.

"Superman believes he heard something from that room." Storm said as she pointed.

"I'll check it out, Superman, be ready to back me up." Cyclops said as he put his hand to the side of his visor and walked carefully into the next room.

Clark waited apprehensively for Scott to say or do something.

"Oh no." Cyclops said as he rushed out of the room.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked with concern.

Scott held up his hand, then hit his communicator and called out, "Beast, I need you over here in the house. There's a kid here and he's in pretty bad shape."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I'm afraid that if he is infected, there is a larger concern." Hank said seriously.

Cyclops froze at the statement, then shook his head and said, "I understand that. But isn't there something you can do for this boy?"

"I am unable to leave what I am doing, but perhaps Portal may be of assistance to you." Hank said with regret.

"Right... and I'll see to the quarantine measures." Cyclops said reluctantly.

"Yes. The entire team." Hank said with resignation.

"Mama?" A small voice called out from the next room, then broke into a fit of coughing.

Clark started walking toward the door, but stopped at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder.

"You can't go in there. He's infected." Cyclops said with pain and regret.

"Listen Scott, I've never been sick. It's possible that I can't become sick. And if this is the virus that attacks the X-gene, it shouldn't effect me at all." Clark said seriously.

"The original strain of this virus mutated so that it effected non-mutants. Clark, I made a promise to your parents... to our parents, that I'd watch out for you." Scott said in an imploring tone.

"I understand that, but there's a sick kid in there that doesn't have anyone to watch out for him. Do whatever you need to do, but I'm going in there." Clark said, then started walking away.

After a moment to get over the shock of Clark standing up to him, Scott turned to Ororo and said, "Find out as much information about the boy as you can. I'm going to call Andrew."

"Scott, I believe that Clark is doing the right thing. It would be wrong for the child to have to suffer through his last moments alone." Ororo said softly.

Cyclops reluctantly nodded, then hit his communicator as he said, "Portal, I need you and your MedKit in the house."

"I'm on my way." Andrew said immediately.

"...One more thing..." Scott said reluctantly.

"What's that?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Close the vortex. We can't go back."

* * * * *

"What do you need?" Andrew asked as he hurried into the room.

"There's a small boy in there... I'm pretty sure he's got the virus." Scott said in a pained voice.

"I'll look at him, but I don't know what you expect me to do." Andrew said helplessly.

"Do what you can. Ease his suffering." Scott said quietly.

Andrew nodded and turned toward the door to find Clark with the boy held in his arms.

"Please help him." Clark said with tears running down his cheeks.

"Hold still." Andrew said as he started scanning the pale little boy.

"I'm sorry... I threw up." The boy said in a small trembling voice.

"Don't worry about it. We'll clean it up." Clark said past the lump in his throat, then leaned down to kiss the boy on the top of the head.

"Where's my mama?" the boy asked as he looked at the strangers in his home.

"I really don't know." Clark whispered as he held the boy a little tighter.

"Cyclops." Ororo called out from another doorway.

Scott walked to Ororo's side then looked into the room.

"She's dead." Ororo whispered.

Scott nodded, then fought to ask past the lump in his throat, "Did you find any information?"

"Not as yet. I just thought you should know." Ororo said quietly.

"I need to get him to the MedLab." Andrew said as he walked to Scott's side.

"We can't go back. We'll infect the mansion." Scott said with regret.

"I can take him to the containment room. I need to get him on an IV right away."

Andrew said seriously.

"Hold on, I'll see what I can do." Scott said reluctantly, then cast his mind out to call to the Professor.

//Professor. The situation here is pretty bad. Andrew wants to take this boy back with us, but we'll risk infecting everyone in the mansion if we do.// Scott sent with regret.

//I am in the process of locking down the MedLab so your team may return. Make sure the area is sterilized before you leave.// Professor Xavier sent professionally.

//Thank you Professor. I'll take care of it.// Cyclops sent, feeling somewhat assured.

"Portal and Superman, when the Professor gives you the signal, take the child to the containment room and do whatever you can for him." Cyclops said seriously.

"Thank you." Clark said in a whisper.

Cyclops hit his communicator and said, "Storm, report to Wolverine. He may need your help making the sterilization look like an act of nature."

Ororo walked out of the bedroom carrying a manila folder.

"Here is all the information I could find about the boy. I will go now." Storm said as she handed the folder to Andrew.

Scott nodded and watched her go.

"Beast, how much time before your team is done?" Cyclops asked seriously.

"The computer information has been deleted and we are nearly finished neutralizing the samples, but the escaped virus will still need to be dealt with." Hank said with concern.

"We're going to sterilize the entire compound as soon as you're finished." Cyclops said decisively.

"Understood. We'll be leaving the lab in one minute." Hank said firmly.

Cyclops watched as Andrew created a portal. Clark carried the boy through the vortex, still holding him close to his chest.

"I need to go with him." Andrew said cautiously.

"I know. I'll call for a portal when we're finished."

"Wolverine, gather your team outside the lab. I'll meet you there in one minute." Cyclops said firmly.

"On our way." Wolverine said immediately.

After one last look around the home, Scott walked for the door.

* * * * *

"We're going to take care of you. Everything is going to be fine." Clark said as he stroked the boy's sweat slicked brown hair.

The boy looked at Clark with question for a moment and it seemed like he was going to say something, but then he started coughing again.

"Can't you give him something for the cough?" Clark asked desperately.

"Yeah. But I need to get him on an IV first. I don't know how long he's been sick, but he's dangerously dehydrated." Andrew said as he pushed a needle into the boy's vein.

The boy winced at the sudden jab.

"It's okay. He's just trying to help you get better." Clark said in a pained whisper.

The boy nodded cautiously that he understood.

"What's your name?" Clark asked gently.

"Gar." The boy said, then broke into a fit of coughing.

"Let's try this." Andrew said quickly as he pressed a hypospray to Gar's neck.

A moment later Gar stopped coughing and looked at Andrew with wonder.

"Oh good. I wasn't sure that would work on a Human." Andrew said with relief.

Clark looked at Andrew with surprise at the statement.

"Hold still a second Gar and I'll get a blood sample. I won't be able to do much with it, but it might be able to tell Dr. McCoy something when he gets back." Andrew said as he pressed the hypospray to Gar's upper arm.

"Don't worry about the blood sample. It doesn't hurt a bit." Clark said to Gar with assurance.

"Okay." Gar said weakly, then quietly asked, "What's your name?"

"My name is Clark."

Gar giggled and said, "That's a funny name."

"I think Gar is a funny name too. Is it short for something else?" Clark asked with a gentle smile.

"Yeah. Garfield." Gar said with a crinkled nose, then asked, "Is Clark short for something?"

"Nope. Just Clark."

"What's that?" Gar asked as he pointed.

Clark turned and saw that a vortex had formed behind them.

"That's just a way that we can travel. It's called a portal." Clark said gently.

* * * * *

"Come on John, you need to sit down." Bobby said as he walked through the portal on one side of John.

"Perhaps if we were to find a private place, I could endeavor to relax John." Trey said through the speaker in his biosuit.

"Yeah, let's do that. I love the way you relax me. Hey Clark! Come on over here so you can relax me too!" John said with an elated giggle.

"Is he okay?" Clark asked with concern.

"Power rush. He had to create this really big, really hot fire to sterilize the entire compound and it kind of went to his head." Bobby said as he guided John to a chair.

"It was such a fucking rush!" John said through his chuckles.

Matt walked through the portal next with his arm around Ororo, supporting most of her weight.

"Is Storm okay?" Andrew asked with concern.

"She was concentrating the winds on the compound to make John's fire into a firestorm while keeping it from spreading out of control. It took a lot of concentration." Matt said as he helped Ororo into a chair.

"He's still alive?" Hank asked as he stepped through the portal, followed by Tara and Scott.

"Yes. I've been able to relieve the worst of his symptoms, but there's no way he's going to be able to fight off this virus." Andrew said frankly.

"Since he has lived this long, perhaps there is a reason to hope. I'll need a blood sample." Hank said firmly, his voice sounding 'tinny' through the speaker in his biosuit.

Andrew handed the blood sample to Hank without comment.

"Tara, bring the samples we collected. Trey, I will need the computer files detailing the specifications of each strain." Hank said as he rushed out of the biolab.

"What is that?" Gar asked as he stared at Hank getting out of his biosuit in the foyer of the containment room.

"Oh, that's Beast. He's our doctor, his name is really Hank." Clark said frankly.

Gar stared out the window for a moment, then whispered, "He's kinda pretty."

Clark smiled at the young boy's words, then said, "Yeah, I guess he is."

* * * * *

"What's the verdict Hank?" Andrew asked hopefully through the containment room's speaker into the main lab.

"A moment." Hank said as he studied the computer files that Trey had retrieved.

"The boy is asleep right now, he's weak, but it looks like his body may be fighting it off." Andrew said hopefully.

"I believe this strain of the virus is an influenza variant. It's designed to kill the host more slowly than the main virus, thus providing more of an opportunity to spread the infection before the host dies. He will most likely appear to improve and become coherent before the final stage of the virus kills him." Hank said, then made an adjustment to the view on his computer screen.

Andrew shook his head and said, "Before I saw this, I just thought that bad things happened because people sometimes make self-serving choices. But knowing that someone created this, knowing full well the pain and suffering it would cause... seeing this proves to me that evil truly does exist."

"Andrew, will you check to see if the boy's fever has broken?" Hank asked as he concentrated on the details of the different variant viruses before him.

"Yeah." Andrew said quickly.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Andrew asked as he walked to Clark's side.

"Not good. He's sweating and he seems to be in pain." Clark said quietly.

Andrew ran a quick scan, then put a hand on Clark's shoulder as he said, "We'll do whatever we can for him."

"I know. I just wish there was something more I could do." Clark said quietly.

Andrew nodded as he walked to the window so he could face Hank in the BioLab while talking to him.

* * * * *

"No, his fever hasn't broken." Andrew said quietly.

"Good." Hank said as he kept his focus on the computer screen before him.

"Good? Do you mean that there's something you can do to help him?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"No. Unfortunately it's too late for that." Hank said with apology.

"Then what's good?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"It's good that he hasn't progressed into stage 3. That's when the true horror of the virus will begin to manifest, right now it's simply behaving like the flu." Hank said reluctantly.

Andrew looked at Hank with question, but couldn't find the will to ask what horrors lay in store for the boy.

"Gather everyone. I know which strain of the virus we're dealing with now, so we can take the proper steps to deal with it." Hank said seriously.

Andrew walked around the containment room and gathered everyone to join him at the window.

When everyone was assembled, Hank said, "This variant of the virus can be countered with the anti-viral agents that we have developed. A simple inoculation should be able to prevent any members of the team from contracting the virus."

"What about Gar?" Clark asked with concern as he glanced back to the boy in the bed.

"I'm afraid that his condition has progressed beyond the point where the anti-virals can be of any benefit." Hank said gravely.

"Isn't there anything you can do for him?" Andrew asked desperately.

"Let's begin the inoculations." Hank said in a quieter voice, then with Tara at his side, walked to the foyer of the containment room to change back into his biosuit.

* * * * *

"Everyone, you will need to stay in the containment room for observation for just a while longer. Make yourselves comfortable while the anti-virus does it's job." Hank said seriously through the biosuit's speaker.

"What about Gar? Isn't there anything you can do for him?" Clark asked desperately.

"I'm sorry Clark. The only possible thing that might be of help to him is the counter-virus that was created to enhance the X-gene. Leaving aside the ethical considerations of pursuing that option, I can say with near certainty that the boy wouldn't be able to survive the side effects of that added viral infection." Hank said seriously.

Andrew glanced at Hank with question at the analysis. Before he could think better of it, Andrew cautiously asked, "Isn't that the virus that you and Jean were infected with?"

"Yes." Beast said as he looked at Andrew darkly.

"And the beneficial virus, is it still alive and active in your body?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Yes. But it is more or less dormant since my X-gene has undergone complete enhancement." Hank said carefully.

"Right, but that dormant version of the virus... wouldn't it be possible to create some sort of slow acting cure for Gar based on that? You know, rather than hitting him full-force with a concentrated dose of the active virus." Andrew asked speculatively.

Hank considered for a moment, then slowly nodded before saying, "There are a number of factors that might prevent this from working, but if we begin now, there is at least a possibility of doing something for the boy."

"Just tell me what I can do to help." Andrew said with determination.

"Can your scanning device detect the X-gene?" Hank asked seriously.

"Yes. I've made a preset test mode for that." Andrew said immediately.

"Good. If we're lucky, the child has the X-gene dormant in his body. And if that is the case, then we at least have a chance." Hank said, then moved quickly toward the containment room door.

"Tell me if there's anything I can do to help him." Clark said immediately from Andrew's side.

"Just stick with me for the moment and I'll let you know." Andrew said, then with tricorder in hand, walked back to Gar's bedside.

* * * * *

"Good news." Andrew said as he looked at the results on his tricorder.

"He's a mutant?" Clark asked hopefully.

"That's right. His X-gene is sitting there, just waiting to be activated." Andrew said with a relieved smile.

"So if Doctor McCoy can make the cure, he should be alright?" Clark asked as his excitement increased.

Andrew thought about the question, then started to slowly shake his head.

"What's wrong?" Clark asked with concern at Andrew's reaction.

"The cure... from a certain point of view it could be seen as being worse than the disease." Andrew said as he slowly met Clark's concerned gaze.

"Why? What will happen?" Clark asked desperately.

"I don't know. But before Dr. McCoy got the virus, he looked just like an average non-mutant person. It physically changed him into the beast that he is now." Andrew said with pain at saying the words.

"At least he'll be alive." Clark said in a small voice.

"As I understand it, when Jean Grey was infected with exactly the same virus as Hank, her mental and extra-sensory abilities grew beyond a point that anyone could understand. She had to leave Earth because she was too powerful to exist here." Andrew said quietly.

"So something like that could happen to Gar?" Clark asked in a whisper.

"Yes. Actually, anything could happen. I think it all depends on what kind of mutation he has in his dormant X-gene. And as far as I know, there isn't any way to predict what mutant ability, if any, he would have."

"What should we do?" Clark asked, obviously afraid of the answer.

"I don't have an answer for that, I'm just saying that we need to at least consider the consequences before we end up making matters a whole lot worse. Would it be worse for him to die a quick death or to suffer for decades in a severely mutated form?" Andrew asked slowly.

"Let me talk to Gar for a minute. I'll try to explain it to him and see what he says." Clark said quietly.

"I could do it if you want." Andrew said, seeing the pain in Clark's eyes.

"No. I promised him that I'd take care of him. I'll do it. And besides, if he says that he doesn't want the treatment, then it'll save Dr. McCoy a lot of time and trouble." Clark finished with a forced smile.

"Don't let Hank's attitude throw you off. I know him well enough to say that he would do ANYTHING to cure Gar." Andrew said seriously.

Clark nodded, then took the few steps to stand by Garfield's bed.

* * * * *

"Gar. I need you to wake up, just for a minute." Clark said as he gently shook the boy's shoulder.

"Clark?" Gar asked weakly.

"Yeah. It's me. I need to ask you something really serious." Clark said as he looked into the boy's eyes.

"Okay." Gar said in a whisper.

"You know the big blue furry doctor that you saw before?" Clark asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah. Beast." Gar said slowly.

"Right. What I need to know is how you'd feel if something like that happened to you." Clark asked seriously.

"Like what?" Gar asked in confusion.

"Like if you woke up and you were blue or furry or something else really different like that." Clark said with concern.

Gar looked into Clark's eyes for a moment, searching for his reason for asking the question.

Finally Gar said, "I guess if that happened, it'd be okay. As long as I could live where you and Beast are. That way I wouldn't be alone."

Clark smiled at the answer and said, "Thanks Gar. That's what I needed to know. Try to get some sleep so you can get better."

"Clark? Where's my mama?" Gar asked quickly.

"I don't know Gar. Let me see if I can find out and I'll tell you when you wake up." Clark said gently.

Gar reluctantly nodded, then closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Clark walked to the window of the containment room and said, "He said he wants to do it."

"Excuse me?" Hank asked with surprise.

"I talked to Gar and asked him how he would feel if he woke up and he was blue or had fur or anything like that. He said that as long as he had you and me around, he wouldn't mind." Clark said in a rush.

"Why would he want me?" Hank asked cautiously.

"He thinks you're pretty." Clark said with a chuckle.

Hank thought about the words for a moment, then nodded with resolve.

"I can't be sure if this will even work. The boy has the X gene, but since he hasn't reached puberty yet, it's dormant... I am certain that the virus will activate the X gene. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine what will happen to him."

"So he's going to get his mutant powers a little early?" Clark asked cautiously.

Hank shook his head and said, "More than that. Whatever mutant ability he might have had before will be augmented somewhere between a hundred and a thousand times."

"But the other choice is to let him die?" Clark asked quietly.

Hank looked at Clark through the heavy glass and nodded.

* * * * *

As Hank began to gather the things he would need, he noticed the time.

"Andrew, while I attend to administering treatment to the child, would you do something for me?" Hank asked hopefully.

"Sure. What can I do?" Andrew asked immediately.

"The anti-viral treatment should have worked by now. I've developed a blood test to detect the virus. If you'll gather blood samples from everyone, Tara can run the test and we can begin clearing people to leave the containment room." Hank said seriously.

"Sure, that sounds simple enough." Andrew said happily.

"Tara? I'm going to need you in the containment room." Hank called as he looked around.

"I'm right here." Tara said shyly as she stepped to Andrew's side.

Andrew jumped at the sound, then said in a chuckle, "Even wearing a bright yellow suit, she can still blend into the background."

Tara shyly smiled at Andrew's comment, then looked at her uncle with question.

"I need for you to help Andrew draw blood on everyone, then run the X-Virus test. If all the tests come back negative, we can clear people to leave the containment room." Hank said seriously.

Tara nodded, then looked to Andrew with question.

* * * * *

"Clark, we're cleared to leave." John said with concern.

"I'm staying here with Gar." Clark said immediately, then reached down to smooth the boy's sweat soaked hair.

"Then we'll stay with you." John said, glancing at Trey and Bobby with question.

Clark thought for a moment as he gently petted Gar, then he quietly said, "No. I'd rather you go for now. It could be days before we even know if this is going to work."

"Then maybe we could come back later and stay with him so you could have a break?" John asked cautiously.

Clark looked at John with love and unshed tears in his eyes as he said, "That would be great."

"Call us immediately if you are in need of anything." Trey said seriously.

"I will. I promise." Clark said with a forced smile.

"And call us if there's any change in his condition." Bobby said in a whisper.

Clark nodded that he would, then looked down at Gar with concern as he seemed to be twitching in his sleep.

"Come on guys." Bobby said, and urged John and Trey to walk with him out of the containment room.

Clark had his full attention focused on Gar, feeling the tiniest jerking movements just under Gar's skin.

He bit his lip, wondering if this was a symptom of the virus, the counter-virus or a manifestation of the battle going on inside the frail boy.

As Clark was about to call Dr. McCoy to check Gar's condition, he noticed something unusual.

Clark closed his eyes, then looked at the boy again, wanting to be sure that it wasn't just some combination of the fluorescent lighting and his tired eyes.

But as he watched, there was no disputing what he was seeing.

Gar was turning green.

Chapter 16: Sometimes Away

"Dr. McCoy!" Clark screamed as soon as he was certain that his eyes weren't deceiving him.

"What is it Clark?" Hank asked as he hurried to Garfield's bedside.

"Look at him Hank! He's turning green!" Clark said anxiously.

"If that's the only manifestation of his treatment, we can count ourselves as very lucky."

"But isn't there something you can do to help him?"

"Clark, the moment I administered the counter-virus, I gave up any control that I might have had over the situation. I can only hope that the consequences of our actions will turn out to be better than if we had taken no action at all."

Clark thought about the words for a moment, then nodded that he understood as he took gentle hold of Garfield's hand.

"Clark?" Gar called in a weak voice.

"I'm right here." Clark said as he moved closer.

"I feel... funny." Gar said with confusion.

"The medicine that Dr. McCoy gave you is just fighting the virus that was making you sick." Clark said as he looked into the green young boy's eyes.

"Am I gonna die?" Gar asked weakly.

Clark wanted to assure the boy, but found that he couldn't lie to him while looking him in the eyes.

"I don't know, Gar." Clark hesitantly admitted. "I hope not."

"I... I..." Garfield started to say, then arched his back in a violent seizure.

"Hank!" Clark called in a panic.

"Help me keep him on the bed." Hank said as he worked to limit the child's movements.

"Don't restrain him, just prevent him from injuring himself."

As Clark released Garfield's hand, he noticed that the boy's small green hand began to shrink as the fingers lengthened.

"What's happening to him?" Clark asked as he scrambled to take hold of Garfield's hand again.

"I'm not sure." Hank said as he stopped trying to hold the boy down and carefully watched what was happening.

Garfield finally stopped thrashing and quieted.

Tears streaked down Clark's cheeks as he stared in horror at what had just minutes before been a young boy.

"Uncle Hank?" Tara whispered in awe at what she was seeing.

"It appears that he has devolved." Hank muttered mostly to himself, knowing that Clark and Tara weren't hearing his words.

"Can we help him?" Clark asked past the lump in his throat at the sight of the small green monkey lying unconscious on the bed.

"Of course we'll try, but... at this point I'm not hopeful." Hank said quietly.

The small green spider monkey opened his eyes and looked at Clark curiously.

"Don't worry Gar. Dr. McCoy is working on it." Clark said, trying to sound encouraging.

"He'll figure something out."

The monkey lifted one arm and reached up to wipe the tears off Clark's cheek.

"Thanks." Clark whispered with a pained chuckle.

The little monkey chattered, then blinked with surprise at his own voice.

"Don't worry about it Gar. We'll figure out some way to make this better." Clark said sympathetically at the look of confusion on the little simian face.

"What do you want me to do Uncle Hank?" Tara asked in a trembling voice.

"There's nothing to do right now but wait." Hank said quietly.

Gar froze for a moment, then his eyes narrowed as his body started growing rapidly.

"Tara! Get out of here!" Hank commanded as he took hold of Clark's arm and guided him to walk backward, toward the door.

As Clark realized what Hank was doing, he started to resist.

"The only thing we can do right now is stand back and let it happen, Clark." Hank said as he backed away. Once they had reached the wall, Hank added, "Until the child has stabilized into one form, I can't even begin to speculate on a treatment for him."

As Hank and Clark watched, the monkey on the bed continued to grow in both height and mass.

"Do you know what's happening to him?" Clark asked as he instinctively moved closer to Hank out of a need for reassurance.

"It appears that his body is reforming to another point along the evolutionary scale." Hank said speculatively as he gently placed one of his large hands on Clark's shoulder.

"He's becoming a gorilla?" Clark asked helplessly when he recognized the shape that Garfield's body was settling into.

"It appears so." Dr. McCoy said quietly.

The gorilla-Garfield looked down at his large green hands, then at Clark uncertainly.

"Please don't worry, Gar. I'm still here." Clark said assuringly as he fought the urge to run to Garfield's side to comfort him.

The green gorilla-Garfield grunted decisively, then gave a low growl of effort.

"I'm not sure, but it looks like he's changing on purpose. Like he's making himself change." Clark said with realization.

"Perhaps the child has retained his higher reasoning despite the changes in his outward appearance." Hank said speculatively.

"I bet he's trying to figure out how to be Human again." Clark said suddenly, then rushed to Garfield's side. "You can do it, Gar! I know you can!"

The gorilla-Garfield let out a snort as he glanced at Clark, then closed his eyes as he seemed to be concentrating.

"Don't give up Gar. I'm right here." Clark said helplessly, feeling that he should be able to do something more than spew impotent words at the struggling child.

Clark watched and held his breath with anticipation as he waited to see what form Gar would be taking on next.

"You're doing good. Just stick with it." Clark said encouragingly as he watched Gar getting smaller.

"You're almost there." Clark whispered anxiously.

"Do I look alright?" Garfield asked in a tired voice.

"You look great." Clark said with a radiant smile as he moved in to give Garfield a hug.

"How are you feeling?" Dr. McCoy asked slowly as he checked the readings of the medical scanners of the bed.

"I'm a little bit tired, but I don't feel sick anymore." Garfield said thoughtfully, then puzzled at the sound of his raspy voice.

"Are you having any difficulty holding this form?" Dr. McCoy asked cautiously.

Garfield looked at him curiously, obviously not understanding the question.

"He wants to know if it's hard for you to stay like you are now or if maybe you'll change into a monkey again soon." Clark paraphrased.

Garfield considered for a moment, then said, "No. Now that I'm like this, it's not hard to stay this way. It was just kinda hard to figure out how to make myself change."

"Do you think you would be able to change back to a monkey again?" Dr. McCoy asked curiously.

"Yeah. That's easy." Garfield said, then to prove his declaration, he immediately shrank and became a small monkey again, seemingly without any effort at all.

"Extraordinary." Dr. McCoy said in amazement.

In less than a second, Garfield was back to his humanoid, albeit green, form.

"As mutant abilities go, that's a pretty good one." Clark said with a relieved smile at his young friend. "You can become a monkey or a gorilla whenever you want to."

"Why would I want to do that?" Garfield asked with confusion.

"I don't know for sure that you *will* want to." Clark said quietly, then reluctantly admitted, "But when you started to change the first time, I was really worried that you weren't going to be able to come back to us; that you weren't going to be you anymore."

"I'm fine, Clark. Really." Garfield said timidly.

"Clark, I think we should allow the patient to get some rest so he can recover from his ordeal." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"Try to get some sleep, Gar. I'll be close by if you need me for anything." Clark said gently.

"Clark?" Garfield called with a look of concern filling his expression.

"Yes?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Where's my mama?" Gar asked in a small, tragic voice.

"I'll try to find out while you're sleeping. Just relax and I'll be right here when you wake up." Clark whispered.

Gar gave a hesitant nod, then closed his eyes.

Clark silently watched him for a moment longer before walking away with purpose.

* * * * *

"Clark, you should take this opportunity to get some rest. I will summon you immediately if he should awaken before you return." Hank said quietly.

Although he wanted to argue, Clark could see the resolve in Hank's eyes and reluctantly nodded.

As Clark was walking to the door, he spotted Scott walking in and quickly asked, "Is there any way that we can go back and look for Gar's mother? He keeps asking for her."

"I'm sorry, Clark. Storm found her body while you were taking care of the boy. We assume the virus was the cause." Scott said regretfully.

"Oh." Clark said in a small voice.

"How is the boy doing?" Scott asked quietly.

"He's doing better, but I don't know how good he'll be when I tell him about his mother."

"I can tell him, if you want."

"Gar doesn't know you. It'll be best if I do it."

"Although I appreciate that you're willing to tell him, this may be a bit more than you can handle by yourself." Scott gently suggested.

"Then I'll get Dr. McCoy to help me."

"I'm afraid that Hank might scare him."

"Gar thinks that Hank is pretty. Please, Scott, let me do this so Gar will feel as comfortable as possible."

"Alright, Clark. But be sure to remember to come to me if you need a shoulder to cry on afterward."

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to need that shoulder, so you'd better have it ready."

When John saw Clark step away from Scott's side, he quickly said, "Trey is gonna help relax me, you wanna help too?"

Clark was shocked by the question and was about to respond angrily, when he noticed the boyish excitement dancing in John's eyes, obviously a leftover from his mutant power rush.

"I wish I could, John, but I've got to tell Gar that his mother is dead. I don't think I'll be up to playing around for a little bit."

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry, Clark. Do you need our help?" John asked quietly.

"No. But I might need someone to hold me when it's all done."

"You'll have two someones ready and waiting whenever you need us."

* * * * *

"Dr. McCoy?" Clark asked timidly, reluctant to interrupt him while he was talking to Ororo.

"What can I do for you, Clark?"

"Gar has been asking for his mother. Scott just told me that she's dead. So, I thought that maybe you could be there when I tell him, since he's already said that he likes you."

"I would like to be there, as well, if I may." Ororo said gently.

Clark considered for a moment, then quietly said, "Thank you, Ms. Munroe, I think that'd really be good for Gar."

Before she could respond, Clark noticed Gar thrashing and struggling in his sleep.

Without thinking, Clark rushed to the boy's side.

Hank and Ororo followed more slowly and looked on with concern as Clark soothed the boy awake.

"It's okay, Gar. You're safe. It's just a bad dream." Clark said gently as he held the boy's small green hand.

"Clark? Where's my momma? I want my momma." Gar said as the tears in his eyes spilled over to run down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Gar. Your momma got sick and wasn't able to get better." Clark choked out past the lump in his throat.

"My momma's sick?" Gar asked in confusion.

"No, Gar. She's dead." Clark was barely able to force out.

Gar seemed to be frozen in place, trying to process the words.

Finally, after close to a minute of silence, Gar cried out, "I want my momma!"

Clark didn't know what to do. He felt a strong pair of hands gently move him aside as Ororo rushed past him.

As Ororo was holding the sobbing boy close to her, Hank quietly said, "You did that very well, Clark. It's never easy to tell the loved ones, and it's even worse when it's a child."

"I don't know what to do now." Clark said helplessly.

"Ororo's doing it. The boy needs to be comforted and given time to accept this fundamental change to his life. Why don't you go and get some rest? I promise that we'll call you if the boy needs you."

"I feel like I should stay with him."

"That's a natural reaction in a situation such as this. But let me tell you that based on my years of experience, I think that I can safely say that he won't be up to conversation for quite a while. Please, take this time to calm yourself and get your own emotions settled before you talk with him again. He's probably going to need for you to be strong for him. It's the best thing for both of you."

"I guess you're right."

"It looks as though John and Trey think so as well." Dr. McCoy said as he looked past Clark.

When he turned, he saw John and Trey standing in the doorway, watching him with concern.

"Thanks, Dr. McCoy. Just remember that you said that you'd call if he needs me."

"I promise."

* * * * *

Hearing the sound of a car, Andrew looked out the kitchen window and smiled.

He couldn't resist the urge to hurry outside and find out how things were going.

"Father, you would have been proud of me. I did an outstanding job of driving." Icheb said happily as he got out of the car.

"I'm glad to hear that." Andrew said warmly, then quickly added, "I knew you could do it."

"I did so well that Uncle Xander even kissed the ground in celebration when we arrived." Icheb said joyfully.

Andrew looked askance at Xander as he got out of the car, much more slowly.

"Nothing I ever saw in Sunnydale... NOTHING..." Xander trailed off in a daze.

"Good morning, Pumpkin. Did you enjoy your visit with Aunt Vada?" Andrew asked as he hugged his daughter.

"Aunt Vada said that I was her special little girl and that she's going to teach me all kinds of girl stuff so I can teach it to Marguerite as soon as she's ready."

"That's wonderful. Since there aren't any other girls in the house, you'll be able to help her in ways that none of the rest of us can."

"I've got to go tell Quaid that I'm sorry for being mean to him and not being happy that he's here. Aunt Vada says that isn't how a good little girl is supposed to act."

"The last time I saw him, he was in the living room with your brothers. You go on, Pumpkin."

Andrew watched with a smile as his daughter happily scurried away. Finally, he quietly asked, "How are you, really, Xan?"

"Icheb needs a *real* driving instructor. I mean *seriously*. Someone needs to get the point across to him that just because the car *can* fit somewhere doesn't mean it *should*. No matter how much I howled, he didn't seem to notice."

"I can see how with his ability to make precise measurements by sight, he could make that mistake." Andrew said as he looked into the car seat at the perfectly content little girl who was fast asleep.

"Andy, back in Sunnydale I've cheated death more times than I can count, but today was on a whole new level." Xander said as he began to gather Marguerite's things.

"I'll talk to Matt about giving him some driving lessons." Andrew said as he held out his hands and accepted part of the load.

"Yeah. That's a good idea. Someone who's virtually indestructible needs to be the one to teach him." Xander said as he gathered up his sleeping daughter in her car seat.

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As Xander walked into his room still carrying Marguerite, a low voice quietly said, "Bon jour, mon coeur."

Xander's heart leapt as he turned and searched for the source of the voice.

"How be Marguerite?" Remy asked softly as he stepped out of the shadows and met Xander's eye.

"She's wonderful. I think she really likes it when Aunt Vada fusses over her. She was cooing and giggling most of the way home." Xander said with a smile at the thought.

Remy stopped for a moment just to enjoy the contentment of seeing his daughter sleeping peacefully.

After a long quiet moment, Xander hesitantly asked, "Can you tell me about what you've discovered?"

"Oui. Da top secret information, it wasn't all dat secret. I walked in like I belonged dere, asked a few questions, like I was confirming what everybody already knew and found out everyting I needed to know without having to pick a single lock or tap a single phone. The day you take over your company, first ting you need to do is fire your head of security." Remy finished firmly.

"I will. I promise." Xander said with a sultry smile before moving in to give Remy a slow firm kiss.

* * * * *

"Do you want to talk about it?" John asked cautiously.

"Maybe I was right before. Maybe everyone would be better off if I weren't here... I mean, on this planet... or maybe if I had never existed." Clark muttered despondently.

"Bad day, huh?" John asked, only half jokingly.

"I butted in and talked Dr. McCoy into giving Gar the X-gene counter-virus, so I'm partially responsible for him turning into a monster. Then, on top of that, I had to tell him that his mother was dead... I probably should have just stayed out of it and let him go and be with her."

"I don't know all of what's going on here, but I know that my own personal Boy Scout wouldn't ever intentionally hurt anyone." John said with certainty, then explained, "Sometimes no matter how hard you try to do the right thing, bad things still happen."

"I'm not a Boy Scout." Clark feebly protested.

"You are the non-human equivalent." Trey stated firmly, leaving no room for argument.

"But I know you well enough to know that you're going to fuss and worry about this. And no matter how impossible it is, you're going to try to make things right." John said with conviction.

Before Clark could think of how to respond, Trey added, "Despite the futility, we will aid you in this endeavor. I believe the pursuit may be a reward unto itself."

"Huh?" Clark asked in bewilderment.

"We're a part of this. *You're* not going through this. *We* are." John said firmly.

"Oh." Clark was barely able to say before John had engulfed him in a kiss.

Before Clark had any idea of what was happening, John shifted aside slightly to give Trey a turn.

As per John and Trey's insidious plan, for one blissful moment Clark had his mind blown and the worries of his world were left to attend to themselves.

* * * * *

"Are you mad at me?" Janine asked timidly as she approached the couch where Jimmy and Quaid were talking.

"I don't think so. I didn't even know you were here. I thought you went somewhere." Quaid answered honestly.

"I went to Aunt Vada's house. I just got back. But I wanted to tell you that I'm really sorry that I acted like I didn't want you to be here. I didn't mean it. I was just mad."

"That's okay. Did Itchy come back with you?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"Yes. Icheb remained outside with the car. It appeared that he was seeing to the maintenance and well-being of the vehicle." Janine stated frankly.

"Jimmy, do you want to go out and talk to Itchy? Maybe his trip to Aunt Vada's will make a good story for you." Quaid asked hopefully.

"Yes. Before he left, he seemed excited about the prospect of driving. I'm interested to know if it lived up to his expectations. We'll need to tell Dad before we go. He worries for us if we leave without telling him." Jimmy said seriously.

"Okay." Quaid easily agreed and was about to hurry away when he noticed that Janine seemed to be waiting for something.

"Do you want to go with us too?" Quaid asked uncertainly.

"I have no other activities scheduled for this time." Janine said simply.

"You could'a just said 'yes'. C'mon." Quaid finished with a slight grin before leading the way to the kitchen, where their dad was making dinner.

* * * * *

"Slash and I were with the guys when you got called out on your mission. Did everything end up working out okay?" Lee asked carefully.

"Too early to tell, but I think we accomplished our objectives." Andrew answered seriously.

"Good." Lee said with a smile, then cautiously asked, "Are you really busy right now?"

"Not particularly. I was going to help Alan with dinner, but he can handle it just fine without me if you need something." Andrew said easily.

"If you've got a few minutes, I was hoping that you could help me with learning my ability." Lee anxiously explained.

"Well, I was planning on doing that when we could set aside an hour or so, kind of like the way we do it for the kids in their power training classes."

"Well, I was just kind of hoping that you could get me started so that I can practice on my own a little before I have to start work. Once I'm working at the Wagner Institute, it might be a while before I can get things organized enough to be able to get serious and work on my ability." Lee said frankly.

"Yeah. Um... Okay. Let's go outside, away from the house, and we can try a few things to see what works." Andrew said as he motioned toward the front door.

* * * * *

Lee followed his son out of the house and toward the lake.

"From what little I've seen of your ability, it looks like you're probably powerful enough to get the job done without much instruction from me. I think the thing we're going to have to work on first is targeting. Let me pop open a portal for you and see if you're able to follow it with your inner sight." Andrew carefully explained.

"Inner sight? I'm not sure if I have any of that." Lee cautiously informed him.

"We're about to find out." Andrew said, then pointed at a misty vortex forming in mid-air before them. "See if you can follow that and tell me where it goes."

"How do I do that?" Lee asked curiously.

"Well, when *I* do it, I kind of let a little bit of my power loose and it allows me to see any twists or wrinkles in the fabric of space." Andrew said with difficulty.

"I think I can honestly say that I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't have any power to let loose and I can't see any twists." Lee said honestly.

"Okay. Let's try this another way." Andrew said as he let his hand drop. As he did so, the misty vortex faded from sight.

Before Lee could ask, Andrew continued, "Go ahead and create a vortex for me so that I can see how you're doing it. Maybe that will give me some kind of an insight into your power."

"Are you sure? I mean, whenever I use it, I end up opening a *literal* doorway into hell." Lee asked anxiously.

"Yeah. Go ahead. I have a pretty good idea of where your portal's going to go. I just want to see how your power manifests. If the portal turns out to be something dangerous, we can just close it." Andrew said simply.

"Okay. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Whenever you are." Andrew assured him.

"Here goes." Lee said nervously, then raised his hands in a 'spreading' gesture.

"Okay. I see what you're doing there. You're not targeting at all, are you?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Not as far as I know. It's like there's this place right on top of ours. I can push through the veil from one place to the other, but that's about it." Lee fought to explain.

"Veil? Does that mean that you can see through it?" Andrew quickly asked.

"'See' is kind of a strong way of putting it. I don't know how to describe it. I guess it's kind of like when you look at clouds and you can see familiar shapes in them. It's something like that, except that I can see it everywhere, all around me, if I put forth the effort to look for it." Lee said haltingly.

"So you can only see, or sense, what's right in front of you?" Andrew asked to confirm.

"Yeah. I guess so. I didn't ever think about there being any other way of seeing it." Lee said frankly.

"Close that down and let me try something." Andrew said seriously.

Lee made a single swiping motion and the portal that he had created faded out of being.

Andrew closed his eyes and seemed to be in deep concentration.

Not wanting to interrupt, Lee looked back toward the house where Icheb, Jimmy, Quaid and Janine were gathered around the front of the car, where Icheb had the hood raised.

"Okay. I've got it." Andrew said suddenly, slightly startling Lee.

"Got what?" Lee finally asked.

"Here. Tell me what you see." Andrew said as a large vortex formed right in front of them.

"It looks like an open field... in Maryland, maybe." Lee said cautiously.

"Pennsylvania. But that's not what I mean. Look *past* the field and see what's hiding underneath." Andrew said encouragingly.

"Oh, yeah. I'll try." Lee said, then squinted his eyes slightly as he strained to 'see' beyond what he could see.

"Your eyes are glowing." Andrew stated informatively.

"Hold on... I can almost see it." Lee said slowly.

"What do you see?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Demons... The place is crawling with them." Lee said in wonder.

"Yeah. It's kind of like a town square for them."

"You don't want me to open a portal, do you?" Lee asked cautiously.

"No. Of course not. I just wanted to test your vision on something more interesting than a landscape of rocks and fire." Andrew explained.

"Oh. Good." Lee said with relief and smiled when Andrew closed his portal.

"Next, I'd like for you to open a portal for us to go through so that we can look back and see if you can see our dimension from hell." Andrew said reasonably.

"Are you really sure that you want me opening a doorway to a hell dimension?"

"I've checked out the area. There aren't any demons around and we'll only be there for a couple minutes." Andrew assured him.

"Is here okay?" Lee asked.

"Yes. That's fine." Andrew assured him.

"Here we go." Lee said nervously, then opened a full-fledged portal, reaching all the way to the ground.

"Nice." Andrew said appreciatively as he stepped through.

"Thanks." Lee said anxiously as he followed, looking around them for any sign of imminent attack.

"Come on. Over here." Andrew said as he started walking away.

"Where are you going? I thought you just wanted for me to try and look back at the real world." Lee said as he followed.

"I still want for you to do that, but I was also thinking that, if you wanted to, you could see if you can find your room in the boathouse." Andrew suggested.

"You mean, find the same coordinates in our world that match up with this one, then create a doorway there?" Lee asked to confirm.

"Yeah. What I do is more like folding space. I find the entry and the exit, then bring them together. But you're just creating a door directly from this space to that." Andrew explained.

"It's over here." Lee said as he veered to the left.

"Yeah. but you can't get there directly, you'll have to go around this way, then climb up to where your room is." Andrew explained.

"You can see everything, I mean, this whole place, can't you?" Lee asked as he returned to Andrew's side.

"I can see what I know to look for. Sometimes it's less helpful than you'd imagine." Andrew said honestly.

"Do you want to pop in on the kids in the living room?" Lee asked with a smile as he pointed off in another direction.

"I wouldn't want to scare them." Andrew answered simply.

"I might worry about that with just about any other children, but not yours." Lee chuckled.

"Even so, I'd rather not." Andrew said firmly, letting it be known that they would *not* be surprising the children.

"Understood." Lee said as he leapt across a slight fissure and down to an outcropping of rock.

Andrew noticed that Lee was going precisely to the location where the dimensions overlapped in his bedroom.

"How is this going to work with me being below the level of the floor?" Lee asked cautiously as he froze in place.

"Actually, I'm not sure. The way my portal ability works, I bring the entrance and exit together, so I never have to worry about things lining up like that. Go ahead and open it and we'll see what we can do." Andrew suggested.

"Okay. Here it goes." Lee said, then made a dramatic gesture.

"Can you get up there on your own?" Andrew asked as he hopped down to join his father.

"I can't figure out how to do it. If I open the portal any lower, it'll be in the basement, below my room. But I can't reach the level of the room from here." Lee said with frustration.

"If I'm understanding what I'm seeing, there may actually be a way that you can do this yourself. I'm just not sure that I'll be able to explain to you how to do it." Andrew said uncertainly.

"Can't you show me?" Lee asked curiously.

"I can *try*. But the only problem with that is that I don't know if you'll be able to see what I'm doing. To someone without the ability to see the dimensional forces at work, it wouldn't look like much of anything." Andrew fought to explain.

"Go ahead. I'm ready." Lee said as his eyes began to faintly glow red.

"I'm going to do this slowly, so hopefully you'll be able to figure out how to recreate it." Andrew said seriously.

Lee closed his portal, then watched his son carefully. He was astounded by the portals within portals that were fluidly forming beneath Andrew's feet.

"I don't know if you can do that or not, but it's the only way I can think of to get you from this ledge up to the level of your room." Andrew explained as he let his stacking portals dissipate.

"Yeah. Um... Okay. I'm not really sure what I'm doing here, so you might want to stand back." Lee said nervously.

"Not a chance, Dad. I'm here trying to help you. If this somehow goes wrong, I want to be close by to help you out of it." Andrew said honestly.

"Alright then, hang on. Here I go." Lee said anxiously.

Andrew nodded that he was ready.

Lee looked around and seemed to be surveying his situation.

Andrew held still and remained silent as he used his special vision to watch what his father was doing.

"This isn't going to be nearly as smooth as yours, but I think I can make it work." Lee said as he phased a slice of space, slightly warping the reality of it, causing it to swell beneath their feet, raising them slightly.

"You might want to be careful with that. It seems like the world is reacting to your manipulation of it's natural laws." Andrew quietly warned.

Plumes of flame and foul smelling clouds of gas began erupting all around them.

"Are you going to be able to make it up to the portal before those things roast us alive or suffocate us?" Andrew asked anxiously.

"Yeah. I think so. I'm getting the hang of it now." Lee said seriously as he increased his portal abilities and they began to rise faster.

"You'd better open the portal into your room, otherwise we might choke." Andrew warned.

"You don't think it'll burn down the house, do you?" Lee asked in concentration.

"Probably not." Andrew gasped.

In a grand lifting gesture, Lee released his power to shift them from one dimension to the next.

One second they were in hell, complete with flames and sulfur. The next, they were standing side by side in Lee's bedroom in the boat house.

"Well, then. That was... something." Andrew said as he caught his breath.

"Yeah. Thanks for the lesson. Let me practice with this for a while. I'll get back with you when I've gotten a little more comfortable with it." Lee said uncertainly.

"Just don't do anything too dangerous. You're right to be afraid of demons. Make sure to look carefully before you leap. Always be sure to have a way out." Andrew warned.

"Look before I leap? Yeah. I should probably start doing that now that I'm being all responsible and everything. I mean, I have *grandkids* who are paying close attention to the example that I'm setting." Lee said with a weary smile at his son.

"You're doing great, Dad. You've been a wonderful example for the kids and we all love having you around." Andrew said sincerely.

"I'm glad that you don't regret inviting me to stay, because I love it here."

"Good. Because soon I'm going to have *ten* kids. I'm going to need every bit of help that I can get." Andrew said as he turned toward the door.

"You'll have it." Lee promised as he draped an arm around his son's shoulders.

Chapter 17: Where We Dwell

"How are you doing, child? Did you have a good sleep?" Ororo asked gently.

"I... I don't know. I dreamed..." Gar trailed off as he looked around the MedLab to verify where he was.

"You're in a safe place with people who will care for you." Ororo quietly assured him, then cautiously asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Really tired. But I don't feel sick like I was before." Gar struggled to articulate.

"Do you feel like you're ready to eat something yet?" Ororo asked with a tranquil smile.

"A little bit. Maybe some soup or something." Gar said uncertainly.

"Why don't you take a little nap while I see to getting you some soup?" Ororo asked gently.

Rather than answer verbally, Gar closed his eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

"Hank, Garfield briefly awoke, and I wanted to know if he is able to have some soup at this stage of his recovery." Ororo asked quietly from the doorway.

"What? Oh, yes. I'd recommend clear broth at first until his stomach has had more of a chance to stabilize. Then later, when he's hungry for something a bit more substantial, he should have it." Hank said absently, never once taking his gaze off his computer screen.

"What has you so consumed? This isn't another variant of the X-Gene virus, is it?" Ororo asked with concern.

"No. Nothing so dire. This is a cellular mass developed from Clark's blood sample." Hank said gravely.

"He's not sick, is he?" Ororo cautiously asked.

"No. He appears to be in remarkable health for someone who didn't evolve in this ecosystem." Hank said frankly, then explained, "What I'm looking at is a cellular mass... given the level of complexity it has achieved, one might possibly be justified in calling it an embryo. As much as I didn't want to admit it, the spectral imaging scanner that I used to analyze Clark's blood sample appears to have nourished and stimulated the cells to replicate. Essentially, what we're looking at is a clone of Clark."

"What are you going to do?" Ororo asked with concern.

"I don't know. On the one hand, I've sworn an oath to do no harm. But at the same time I have to consider the quality of life this being might be able to experience, should it survive. The radiation that bombarded it when it was first replicating seems to have severely warped it. This clone won't be a faithful copy of Clark. It's going to be wrong... potentially, horribly wrong." Hank said darkly.

"I wonder, how many normal everyday parents have faced a similar quandary when confronted with the possibility of having a mutant child." Ororo asked gently.

"I'm not a parent. I'm a doctor. I'm in a position to make a medical judgement that provides the most benefit to those involved." Hank countered.

"If your Hippocratic oath doesn't cover this mutated alien child, then what good is it? Who is it for?" Ororo asked firmly.

After a moment to consider, Hank finally said, "I know you're right. But I at least had to go through the process of reasoning out what was the right thing to do. Thank you for being my sounding board."

"So what are you going to do with the child?" Ororo asked with concern.

"It's too soon to be thinking of it as a child. It's currently a mass of differentiated cells." Hank calmly reasoned.

"That's a matter of semantics and you know it." Ororo said firmly.

"I suppose it is." Hank wearily relented.

"Is Tara going to be checking in on Garfield soon? I'm committed to work on a project with a group of students shortly." Ororo asked quietly.

"She should be here momentarily. I can keep an eye on him until she arrives." Hank assured her.

"Hank. I don't know if you've realized it yet, but you need help. I know that you're used to doing everything yourself, but the fact of the matter is that you're gambling with the well-being of your patients by assuming that you and Tara will be able to consistently provide twenty-four-hour care." Ororo said urgently.

"The professor also keeps a telepathic eye on things so that we don't have to constantly be physically present." Hank weakly explained.

"Hank. Listen to yourself. You've been treating these creative stopgap measures as your standard operating procedures." {It's only a matter of time before someone is seriously neglected because you *can't* do everything yourself.} Ororo finished in a gentle whisper.

"Before we encountered the virus, this wasn't as much of an issue. But with things being as they are, I've had to delay certain research projects to deal with away missions, alien maternity issues, and multiple degrees of patient care." Hank said gently as he absently placed his hand over Ororo's.

She turned her hand over to accept his hand into hers, then asked, "So are you going to get some help?"

"I will contact a few acquaintances in the medical community and let it be known that I'm looking for a research assistant. There are probably more than a few medical students who would jump at such an opportunity." Hank said as he gently caressed the back of her hand with his thumb.

"I have to go now." Ororo said regretfully.

"I know. But perhaps we can spend some time together tonight?" Hank suggested hopefully.

"You know how unlikely that is to come to fruition." Ororo said tenderly, then continued, "Why don't we just plan on me coming down here tomorrow while you're working and spend some time with you so that you won't have to neglect your duties?"

"You know me too well." Hank wearily chuckled.

"I must go." Ororo said as she leaned in to give Hank a brief, but firm, kiss.

The dreamy look in Hank's eyes was all the response he was capable of giving.

"Ask Tara to have some broth on hand for when Garfield awakens. I promised him that I'd see to it." Ororo said gently.

Hank absently nodded, still unable to form words.

"Don't forget to call your friends to ask for help." Ororo quietly said from the doorway before slipping out of the room.

Hank blinked in astonishment for a moment, then automatically picked up the phone.

* * * * *

"Remy? I wasn't expecting you back so soon. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Professor Xavier asked as he gestured for Remy and Xander to take seats.

"Warren be here?" Remy asked cautiously.

"Not at the moment. I'm expecting him back shortly." Professor Xavier answered, then asked again, "What brings you here this afternoon?"

Once seated, Remy said, "Tonight dere gone be a demonstration of de Sentinel Project at de Westchester Mall."

"Before you explain just what the 'Sentinel Project' entails, perhaps you could explain why they would choose our local mall as a testing ground, of all the unlikely places."

"It be a place where mutants be known to gather wit non-mutants. Dey need both to prove dat dere project works." Remy explained.

"Yes. I can see that reasoning, so now, pray tell, what is the Sentinel Project?" Professor Xavier asked curiously.

"De Sentinels be robots, built for de government, programmed to detect de X-Gene and negate mutant abilities. De test tonight be to show how de Sentinels be able to subdue all de mutants in an area witout getting any regular people." Remy carefully explained.

"I suspect that you have already come up with a plan of action to deal with this unfortunate intrusion." Professor Xavier prompted.

"*Oui*. De robots be programmed to do one ting. If a mutant be detected, dey neutralize de mutant ability and take de mutant into custody. If someone beside a mutant attack dem, dey got no programming to deal wit it." Remy said seriously.

"So you're suggesting that we gather a group of non-mutants to go on the offensive?" Professor Xavier speculated.

"It be a little more dan dat. I tink dat if we have a few mutants who can hold dere own, den we can use dem to lure de Sentinels into a trap." Remy said frankly.

"Otherwise the people who are running the operation might pull the plug when they realize that there aren't any mutants for them to collect." Xander said thoughtfully.

"*Oui*. An beside, if we arrange for some tird party wit a camera to be dere to witness de whole ting, it might end up making de people who want to hurt mutants look bad." Remy said determinedly.

"Not a bad idea. Did you have any specific people in mind to go on the mission" Professor Xavier asked cautiously.

"Remy and Xander not be from here. It be best if de professor choose de team." Remy said frankly.

//Cyclops, Wolverine, Portal. Would you come to my office? I have something to discuss with you.// Professor Xavier telepathically called out, not bothering to shield Remy and Xander from the call.

"Come in." Professor Xavier called in response to the knock on his door.

"What can we do for you today, Professor?" Andrew asked pleasantly as he entered the room with Scott and Matt following a step behind.

"Mr. LeBeau seems to have come into possession of some information about a potential attack at the Westchester Mall tonight. I've asked you here to make preparations to engage them." Professor Xavier explained.

"Before we start plotting, I just have to ask, if you know it's coming, why wouldn't you choose to *prevent* or *avoid* the attack?" Andrew asked carefully.

Scott and Wolverine glanced at each other, then toward the professor in unison to wait for an answer.

"If we prevent the attack tonight, that will only cause them to change their target. If we avail ourselves of the opportunity to thoroughly discredit them, we could possibly put an end to the threat altogether." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Fair enough. So, what kind of threat are we talking about?" Andrew asked gravely.

"Dey be giant robots called Sentinels." Remy said simply.

"Believe it or not, I have some experience with giant robots." Andrew said grimly, then thought to add, "From my supervillain days."

"More like a super pain in the butt." Xander muttered.

Andrew laughed, then looked to the professor and said, "You normally don't include me in your planning sessions unless you expect for me to play a part. Did you want for me to provide transportation?"

"No. It's close enough that we can drive. Also, the giant robots reportedly have the capacity to analyze and neutralize mutant abilities." Professor Xavier explained.

"Now I can see why you want for us to get involved." Scott said thoughtfully, then slowly asked, "So, what *is* the plan?"

"Remy suggested that we could assemble a group of non-mutant fighters to combat the Sentinels. He seems assured that they won't have a defense against someone who doesn't have an X-Gene. They will automatically be classified as 'non-combatants'." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Did you invite me here to recruit my children?" Andrew asked uncertainly.

"No. Actually, I was thinking of asking you to talk to Buffy about borrowing a few of her Slayers for a pleasant evening of shopping and violence." Professor Xavier said frankly.

"Two of their favorite things. From what I've been hearing, the Cleveland hellmouth has been kind of a disappointment lately. Nothing like Sunnydale, anyway. I'm sure that if I asked, they'd jump at the chance to have something constructive to do." Andrew said casually, then broke into a smile as he added, "Or something *destructive*."

"Of course we'll invite Angel and Spike along." Xander said thoughtfully.

Andrew nodded, then cautiously added, "Tara and Dawn, too."

"We should have at least a few of our people there who can function with their mutant abilities negated." Scott said thoughtfully.

"I can go. My only real mutant ability is healing. I can fight just fine without it." Matt said frankly.

"*Oui*. Remy be able to function juss fine witout de mutant ability." Remy said confidently.

"That may be so, but you're still a mutant, so that automatically makes you a target. It makes more sense for me to go and for you to hang back and help with the planning. Remember, it's our responsibility to make sure that Marguerite has someone to watch out for her, well into the future."

"You know more about the Sentinels than anyone else. It *would* make sense for you to have more of a behind the scenes role." Professor Xavier interjected.

"Remy be better in de field. But Remy stay behind for Marguerite." He said resignedly.

After a long moment, Andrew quietly said, "It might be good to include Clark on the team. Even though he just has the optic blast to work with, he's not a mutant, so he might be able to do some impressive damage."

"Perhaps, since we're dealing with autonomous robots, it might be to our advantage to invite Trey along. From what I've seen of his capabilities, he might be able to attack the Sentinels on an entirely different front." Professor Xavier said cautiously.

"I'm sure that you can understand why I'm reluctant to allow my children to participate in this plan of yours." Andrew said slowly.

"According to Remy, the Sentinel robots won't attack anyone who isn't a mutant. That being the case, your children will most likely be overlooked no matter what action they choose to take." Professor Xavier said confidently.

"Forgive me for saying so, but you or Remy saying it doesn't make it true." Andrew said seriously.

"We should be able to verify *that* within the first few minutes of the encounter. If it turns out that the Sentinels *have* been given the ability to defend against non-mutants, then we can withdraw the younger and more vulnerable members of the team and allow the more seasoned fighters to assail our opponents with brute force." Professor Xavier said decisively.

"Okay, if Clark and Trey are going, John's going to want to go too. We need to be united in our reasoning for refusing before they start pestering us about it. Trey is incredibly convincing when he puts his mind to it." Andrew said frankly.

"I doubt that John is going to feel much like engaging in heroics for the next few days." Professor Xavier said simply.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Considering their bond, Clark and Trey might want to stay behind so he won't feel left out." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"Whatever they decide, we should support them. The only way they'll ever learn about consequences is to be allowed to make decisions for themselves." Matt said seriously.

"But what if William wants to go? How can I justify allowing Trey to go and not William?" Andrew asked seriously.

"How likely is it that he will be able to contribute anything positive to the fight?" Scott asked cautiously.

"If it were just his fighting skills, he probably couldn't do much more than any other child. But if we're counting on him to use his Borg traits, then I could see him potentially doing a lot of good." Andrew said frankly.

"Wait, Andy, which side are you on?" Xander asked in confusion.

"I'm on the side of doing what's best for the kids. Giving them the opportunity to do great things... it's kinda what I do." Andrew weakly admitted.

"So you expect Trey and William to be on the team?" Scott asked cautiously.

"Possibly. Icheb too, if he's interested. Beyond that, if Jimmy wants to go along to document the occasion, I would be alright with that. At least, as long as I can be assured that he would be kept out of the battle." Andrew said slowly.

"We *will* need for someone to document the events." Professor Xavier cautiously admitted.

"Any word on how many of these things we'll be fighting?" Matt asked slowly.

"Dey have ten complete. Dey wait for de result of de test tonight before deciding to make more or not." Remy said seriously.

"How do you know that? Where did this information come from? Just how dependable is it?" Andrew cautiously asked.

"Remy infiltrated my company to see what was going on with some super-secret government contract. He saw all of this himself." Xander said seriously.

"If this is your company, can't you just shut the project down?" Andrew asked curiously.

"The way Warren explained it, that part of the company is sort of *leased* to the government. And while their paychecks might come from our accounting department, we have next to no say-so in how they perform their duties. If things go our way tonight, I might be in a position to make the 'yes' or 'no' decision about whether or not to continue the lease, but me stepping in now would only tip our hand." Xander said regretfully, then ruefully added with a roll of his eye, "Contracts."

"If we're going to do this, we might need to consider bringing along a little more bait than just me." Matt said frankly.

"I was thinking the same thing. One or two capable fighters who are quick-witted and agile might significantly improve our chances for success." Scott said thoughtfully.

"Are we going in picking a fight or are we going in undercover, pretending that we belong at the mall on a Friday night?" Matt asked curiously.

"If it's too obvious that it's a setup, they might abort their mission. I believe that some small measure of stealth might be called for." Professor Xavier said firmly.

"Marie's good in a fight and wouldn't lose effectiveness if her ability were neutralized." Scott said seriously.

"I thought she went to visit her family for Thanksgiving." Matt said hesitantly.

"She did. She's back." Scott said frankly, then thought to add, "Some families function best with limited contact."

"As long as everyone's happy, it sounds like a way to go." Matt said honestly, then continued, "Either way, it sounds like she'd probably be up for a trip to the mall."

"Who else would you recommend?" Professor Xavier asked curiously.

"Evan's got some good fighting skills and he's fast on his feet." Matt said seriously.

"Make sure he brings his skateboard." Scott added.

Matt nodded his agreement.

"As long as we can recruit enough Slayers to get the job done, this sounds like it's doable." Andrew said frankly.

"That sounds like your department. Do you want for me to talk to your kids while I'm inviting the others?" Scott asked curiously.

"You might as well. If they have any questions about my feelings on the matter, let them know that I'll be back as soon as possible." Andrew said frankly.

"Okay. I'll talk to the kids, but I'll let you explain it to Alan." Scott finished with a mischievous grin.

"Yeah. I'll go and talk to him about it before I head to Slayer Central. He'll be expecting you when you get there." Andrew said unenthusiastically.

"Scott, why don't you stay here and work on planning? Gathering fighters is something I'm used to doing and I think you'd do a lot more good here." Xander said seriously.

"When you put it that way, it *does* make sense." Scott easily admitted.

"Be sure to let us know as soon as you have an answer. Our plan hinges on gathering a sufficient force to counter our robotic adversaries." Professor Xavier cautioned.

"Like I said before, I have some experience with giant robots, I'm more aware than most people of what you need to take them down." Andrew said confidently.

"So, while Andrew's busy recruiting Slayers, you want us to go ahead and invite the rest of the fighters?" Scott asked to confirm.

"Yes. If we end up having to cancel the operation later, it won't cause anyone too much of an inconvenience. Giving them sufficient time to mentally prepare is probably for the best." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"I can't be sure how long it will take to gather all the available Slayers. I should go right away." Andrew said frankly.

"Yes. No need for you to delay. I believe that from here on out, we will be discussing tactics and contingencies." Professor Xavier said decisively.

"I'll be back as soon as I know something." Andrew said as a doorway appeared next to him.

"Hang on, Andy. I'll go with you." Xander said quickly as he hurried to Andrew's side.

As Andrew and Xander stepped through the portal, Matt quietly said, "If you don't need me here, I could start inviting the people from the mansion."

"Remy stay wit Scott an de professor an plan for tonight." Remy said seriously.

"Sounds good. I'll be back as soon as I've talked to everyone." Matt said as he started toward the door.

"Check in with us as soon as possible to let us know who is committed to going so we can start making more definite plans." Professor Xavier called after him.

Matt waved his acknowledgment as he continued unabated out the door.

* * * * *

"Do you want me to go ahead and start inviting people while you talk to Alan?" Xander asked as he and Andrew arrived in the living room.

"You might as well. Even if he absolutely forbids it, the worst that will happen is that we'll have to tell the kids that we changed our minds." Andrew said frankly.

Xander looked around the large empty room, then cautiously asked, "Any idea of where I could start looking for them?"

"Icheb and the younger kids are out front looking at the car. Trey, Clark, and John appear to be sharing a quiet moment in Trey's room. Robert, Bobby, and William seem to be working on a project in the basement." Andrew said slowly as his eyes glowed golden for a long moment.

"I'll try Icheb first. Good luck on your talk." Xander said with a weak smile.

"Thanks." Andrew said quietly, then turned to walk to the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Did you have a good visit with your dad?" Alan asked as he opened the oven.

"What? Oh, yeah. He needed portalling lessons. He did great." Andrew muttered.

Alan looked at him curiously, then slowly asked, "What's wrong Andy?"

"After I got done helping my dad, the professor called me." Andrew reluctantly admitted.

"You just got back from Africa, he doesn't have you going on another mission already, does he?" Alan asked in a pained voice.

"No. I mean, I plan on being in the command center, but I won't be going into battle or anything." Andrew said reluctantly.

"Do you need for me to go with you?" Alan asked cautiously, sensing that Andrew was holding something back.

"No. Scott's got it covered. It'd probably be best if you hang back so that we'll have you in reserve if things end up not going the way we expect." Andrew said uncomfortably.

"Out with it, Andy. What are you *not* saying?" Alan asked as he looked deep into Andrew's eyes.

"Icheb, Trey, William, and Jimmy are all going to be invited to join tonight's campaign." Andrew said quietly, then waited anxiously for Alan's reaction.

"I'm sure that there's something that I'm missing, so maybe you could tell me why you think involving the kids makes any kind of sense at all." Alan said, mostly reasonably.

"They're going to be fighting giant robots programmed to hunt down and neutralize mutants. Not being mutants, they should register as non-combatants to the robots which will leave them free to 'hack attack' the robots' programming." Andrew fought to explain.

"Just because they're *supposed* to be seen as non-combatants doesn't mean that they will be." Alan said thoughtfully.

"True. But I'm going to be recruiting Slayers to the fight, so if the kids turn out to be in danger or aren't effective, we can pull them out and let the Slayers deal with things the old-fashioned way." Andrew said seriously, beginning to sound a bit more self-assured.

"What happens if I say 'no'?" Alan asked curiously.

"Then that's it. The children won't be included in the plan." Andrew said simply.

"That would probably be the safest and most responsible thing to do, but I think I see what you're thinking. It's not about allowing the kids to *contribute* to their community by defending it, as much as it is allowing them to make a *unique* contribution." Alan slowly reasoned.

"I'll be there watching them every step of the way. I can pull them out if they're ever in any danger." Andrew promised.

"You'd better." Alan said firmly.

"I have to hop over to Slayer Central right now to gather a fighting force. I may be gone for a few minutes." Andrew said regretfully.

"Don't run your blood sugar too low. At least take something with you." Alan said with concern.

"Hand me a slice of bread." Andrew said as he reached for the jar of peanut butter.

"How about a glass of milk to wash it down?"

"Just a small one." Andrew said as he spread peanut butter on a single slice of bread.

* * * * *

As Xander walked to the car, he saw the curious sight of the children grouped around the open hood.

"Icheb, do you have a minute?" Xander asked cautiously, not sure of what he might be interrupting.

"Of course, Uncle Xander. Would you like for me to drive you somewhere?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Oh, Gods no!" Xander automatically responded, then calmed himself before continuing, "I mean, I just had a question to ask you."

"Proceed." Icheb said reasonably as he straightened and devoted his full attention to Xander.

"We've gotten word that there might be an attack tonight. Your father thought that you should be invited along to join the counterattack." Xander carefully explained.

"Am I being asked to join the X-Men?" Icheb asked curiously.

"Maybe. As one of the reserves, at least. You see, the attackers tonight will be targeting only mutants, so the idea is to gather a group of non-mutant fighters to stand against them."

"You should invite Trey. He has the most fighting skill of any of us." Icheb said frankly.

"I'll be inviting him next." Xander assured him, then thought to add, "And the enemies that we'll be fighting are giant robots. We thought that you might be able to attack them in some way besides brute force."

"Purely robotic adversaries... that is an interesting challenge." Icheb said slowly, obviously considering a million or more possibilities.

"Will we be invited to attend as well?" Janine asked seriously.

Xander looked over the remaining children and thought quickly about how he should respond.

"They wouldn't send little kids to fight giant robots. That'd be stupid." Quaid said frankly.

Xander was surprised by the statement, but decided to capitalize on the opening that Quaid had given him. "The adults and older kids fight to *protect* the younger kids."

"If you want to be part of the fight, then we should stay here and defend Marguerite, Thomas and Chakotay. While we're depending on everyone else to defend us, we can defend them." Quaid said seriously.

"Yes. We can prepare defenses in the event that their efforts prove to be inadequate." Janine said decisively.

"Actually, that sounds like fun." Quaid said with surprise.

"Jimmy, your father was saying that if you were interested, you might want to go along to document the fight." Xander said cautiously.

"Father said that?" Jimmy asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. At least, he said that you could go as long as we promised to keep you out of the fighting. You're just supposed to watch and report back." Xander explained.

"Yes. That *does* sound like Father." Jimmy confirmed.

"Jimmy, is your subspace neural link functional?" Janine asked seriously.

"It is functional but inactive." Jimmy responded.

"Activate it when you observe the confrontation. I may have something to contribute." Janine said succinctly.

"Yes. I will do so." Jimmy promised.

"I need to go and invite Trey and Clark. Make sure to be somewhere that we can reach you." Xander said seriously.

"We have concluded our post-trip inspection of the vehicle. Henceforth we will be inside the boathouse. When you are ready for us to embark on our journey simply call." Icheb said in a moderately Borg tone.

Xander nodded his agreement, then headed back toward the boathouse.

* * * * *

"Do you mind if I interrupt you for a minute?" Matt asked from the doorway.

"Not at all. What can I do for you today, Matt?" Ororo asked pleasantly.

"I just need to talk to Marie for a minute." Matt said simply.

"Certainly. I hope it's not a problem." Ororo said with concern.

"Not much of one. Remy got word that there was going to be an attack at the mall tonight and I was sent to recruit Marie to be on the team to deal with it." Matt said frankly.

"Why am I just now hearing of this?" Ororo cautiously asked.

"I think the Prof is getting our first wave organized before worrying too much about the home front." Matt said seriously.

"If there's an operation, as a team leader I should be included in the planning." Ororo said firmly.

"I'm not disagreeing. But since the professor is planning for a battle between robots and non-mutant fighters, I think he's worrying less about the mutant contingent and more about the fighters he's recruiting from another dimension." Matt said carefully.

"Robots and non-mutants from another dimension? It sounds messy. Perhaps this once I won't be too bothered about not being involved." Ororo said with a forced smile.

"Ro, if you're feeling left out, let Charlie know. I don't think it has anything to do with him looking down on your capability as a leader. He's probably just looking at the simplest way to achieve his goals and isn't thinking too much about what it looks like to anyone else." Matt said frankly.

"Who did he decide to put in charge?" Ororo asked cautiously.

"From what I saw, he's taking care of it himself. He's got Scott there, but that's mostly to carry out his decisions." Matt said seriously.

"And he has you recruiting certain people for this operation?" Ororo asked to confirm her understanding.

"Yes. In fact, right now I need to track down a couple vampires. If you want to help me out, you could ask your nephew if he'd like to join in on the mission." Matt asked cautiously, obviously uncertain of her probable reaction.

"May I know what Evan and Marie will be expected to do? Even if Professor Xavier doesn't have need of me, I am curious to know why he would choose to include the younger members of the team." Ororo said with concern.

Overhearing her name, Marie stepped closer to participate in the conversation.

"I think it's because they look like they'd fit in at the mall on a Friday night. Besides that, both of them are smart, fast, and agile and not too dependent on their mutant abilities. If

these robots can really stop a mutant ability, then they've still got a good shot at being able to fight or dodge them." Matt said frankly.

"This is why you have us doing all that work in the Danger Room, isn't it?" Marie asked seriously.

"Yup. Days like this is what we're training for." Matt confirmed.

"Marie and I would be happy to aid you by inviting Evan to join your endeavour." Ororo said peacefully.

"Thanks Storm. Remember to tell him to bring his skateboard. We're going to need everyone at their best, ready to react when the time comes." Matt said as he turned to leave.

"We will be." Marie assured him.

Chapter 18: Oveurfest

"Hi Robin, you look a lot better than the last time I saw you. How are you feeling?" Andrew cautiously asked as he walked into Slayer Central.

"I'm just about as good as new. Going a little stir crazy, to be honest. Since I work at the school, I have my evenings and weekends free. With all the Slayers around, it doesn't leave much for a freelance vampire hunter to do in his spare time." Robin said wearily.

"Well then, I might have just the thing for you." Andrew said with a grin.

"You having a vampire problem?" Robin asked hopefully.

"A giant robot problem, actually." Andrew said frankly.

"Giant robots? That takes me back." Robin said with a distant smile.

"Yeah. Good times..." Andrew muttered uncomfortably as he fought to suppress a squirm.

Before Robin could go more into it, Andrew hurriedly asked, "So do you think we can gather a fighting force to stand against them?"

"From what I was told, you've got some super-human people on your new team. Why are you needing Slayers all of a sudden?"

"Supposedly, the robots can negate mutant abilities. We're trying to gather a fighting force of non-mutants to stand against them." Andrew said seriously.

"Let's go up and see who's in the living room. I think we may be able to help you." Robin said with a grin, then motioned for Andrew to walk with him.

* * * * *

"Hey Andrew! Are we still on for tomorrow?" Faith called out as Andrew and Robin crested the stairs.

"Sure. Assuming that we survive tonight." Andrew cheerfully responded.

"New big bad?" Faith asked seriously.

"Yep. Giant robots." Andrew automatically answered.

"Nice! That's a classic." Faith said with a smile.

"We've heard that the robots can counteract mutant abilities, so the professor suggested that I invite any Slayers who might be interested to join us for an evening of mall shopping and robot ass kicking."

"You'll have them at 'mall shopping'." Faith said simply.

Robin nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"What do you think? Can we recruit a few of your fighters to help us deal with the robots?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Of course! Robin, why don't you go get the Queen B, and I'll start calling in the Slayers." Faith said decisively.

"I'm on it." Robin said as he hurried out of the room, down a hallway.

Faith took off in the opposite direction, and hurried downstairs.

"I'm guessing that you don't have a place on your team for a regular person, do you?"

Andrew turned and saw Willow sitting at her computer, looking back at him anxiously.

"Actually, yeah. There's one job that you might be able to do that no one else can." Andrew said honestly.

"What's that?" Willow cautiously asked.

"The X-Men aren't all that familiar with the abilities of the Slayers. If you could work with us in the command center, it would probably help everyone out a lot." Andrew said seriously.

"Work in the command center? That's what I do here, too." Willow said happily.

"I don't know what kind of computer stuff you need to do your job, but you might want to make sure you have offline copies, since it's a whole other world and all." Andrew said frankly.

"How different is it?" Willow asked cautiously.

"Well, there *is* no Sunnydale. There never has been. Last I heard, Kendra was the current Vampire Slayer." Andrew said seriously.

"Okay. Got it. I'll make sure to pull local copies of everything I could possibly need, but do you think that my computer will be able to hook up to your Internet?" Willow asked hesitantly.

"I didn't bring any computer equipment from here, but Dawn hasn't said anything about there being compatibility issues." Andrew said honestly.

"I'll be ready either way." Willow confidently declared, then abruptly said, "Oh yeah! I've got a message for you! Give me a minute to find it!"

Andrew nodded, then noticed a movement from the hallway where Robin had gone.

"Robin said that you've got an emergency." Buffy said as she hurried into the room with Robin following closely behind.

"More like a *pre* emergency. If we can stomp it out right now, it probably won't grow into anything that's too big of a problem for us."

"Okay. I get that." Buffy said seriously, then continued by asking, "What have you got?"

"Giant robots are going to attack the mall to try and harvest the mutants while leaving the normal people behind." Andrew said professionally.

Buffy arched an imperial eyebrow, then slowly asked, "Giant robots? Do I detect the sweet scent of karma in the air?"

Andrew couldn't help but smile as he said, "I know. I was a messed-up kid back then. But we've got a chance not only to defeat these things, but also to discredit them, so that the people who made them won't think about making more."

"Government?"

"Yeah."

"Someone needs to remind them who they work for." Buffy said absently.

Andrew nodded his agreement.

"So, do you only want Slayers, or can anyone attend?" Buffy asked seriously.

"Anyone, I guess. The more the merrier." Andrew said easily, then quickly added, "Except for mutants. Apparently these things are programmed to detect and neutralize mutants before taking them into custody."

"As far as I know, you're the only mutant that we've encountered in this world... well, except maybe for Adam, but he was more of a science experiment gone wrong." Buffy finished in a mutter.

"The whole crew is on the way in. I've got a few extras, if that's okay?" Faith said as she crested the stairs.

Buffy looked to Andrew for his response.

"As long as they can fight, that should be fine." Andrew quietly responded.

"Getting them to fight isn't a problem. Getting them to stop... never mind. I'm sure that they'll be fine." Faith said with a grin.

"Who is it?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"I don't think you know them. Their names are Groo and Riley." Buffy said frankly.

"I've heard of Riley, but I thought that he was burned-out really bad or something and had to go back to the government labs." Andrew said uncertainly.

"Yeah. They fixed him." Buffy said simply.

"What about the other one?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Oh, you know how it is, same old story, the sovereign ruler of a demon realm jumps across dimensions when no one is looking so that he can take a little unscheduled vacation." Buffy said with a grin.

"In Cleveland?" Andrew asked incredulously.

"The hellmouth is like Niagara Falls to them." Buffy quipped.

"So he's here for sightseeing?" Andrew asked with a chuckle.

"Actually, he came here hoping to visit with Angel. Apparently they're old friends or something. Do you know if Angel's going to be fighting the robots with us?"

"We're planning on inviting him. I'm pretty sure he'll show." Andrew said frankly.

"Be sure to tell Groo when he gets here. It'll make his day." Faith interjected.

"Andrew!?! How are you?" A girl's voice called joyfully, then before Andrew could identify who it was, he was engulfed in arms imbued with Slayer strength.

"How have you been? Is Dawn with you?" The girl rambled as she seemed to be determined to squeeze the life out of him.

Andrew was finally able to squeak out, "Hi Caridad."

"You're going to kill him, Cari." Faith warned.

"Oops. Yeah, sorry." Caridad said as she quickly released him.

"Andrew stopped by to invite us to an evening of shopping and gratuitous violence. How does that sound to you?" Faith asked with a smile, obviously already knowing the answer.

"Guys who bring candy and flowers are nice, but Andrew's the best." Caridad said happily.

"See?" Faith told Andrew with a smile.

As Andrew was about to respond, Willow handed him an envelope with his *old* name on it.

* * * * *

"School's out, you know that, right?" Matt asked as he walked into the classroom.

"Spike was just giving me some teaching advice. What's up, Matt?" Alex asked cheerfully.

"I'm here to recruit your boyfriend for a campaign tonight." Matt said simply.

"What do you have for me, mate?" Spike asked with interest.

"Giant robots are supposedly going to attack the mall. We're setting up a little ambush for them." Matt said seriously.

"Am I invited?" Alex asked cautiously.

"No. The robots are going to be there to hunt mutants. We're trying to gather all the non-mutants we can to stand against them." Matt said firmly.

"You gonna call Peaches in for the fight?" Spike asked curiously.

"If you mean Angel, yeah. I was going to call him next." Matt confirmed.

"Last I heard, he was at the Wagner school with Julia, doin some stuff to get ready for the grand reopening." Spike said seriously.

"Hold on. Do you mean that there aren't going to be *any* mutants in the fight?" Alex asked cautiously.

"We have a few who can handle a fight without their abilities. But they're being counted more as 'bait' than as 'fighters'." Matt explained.

"I should go along. As an instructor of the Junior X-Men, I should be there not only as an example, but also to take on my share of the risk." Alex said resolutely.

"It's not up to me. If you feel that strongly about it, talk to Charlie and see if he'll go for it. If it counts for anything, you can tell him that it's okay with me." Matt said firmly.

Alex looked at him with surprise for a moment and finally said, "Thanks, Matt. I won't let you down."

Matt smiled at the sincere response before hurrying away to make a call.

* * * * *

After a knock on the bedroom door, Xander heard hushed whispers.

"Who is it?" A voice finally responded.

"It's Xander. I need to talk to you guys for a minute." Xander said seriously.

There were more hushed whispers, then someone finally said, "Come in."

Xander cautiously opened the door, not knowing what to expect.

What he ended up finding was three boys looking flushed and a little anxious, but otherwise normal.

Before Xander could speak, Clark anxiously asked, "Is there something wrong with Gar?"

Surprised by the question, Xander stammered, "No. Not that I know of."

"What did you need to discuss with us, Uncle Xander?" Trey asked calmly.

"Your Uncle Remy found out about an attack that's supposed to happen at the Westchester Mall tonight. We talked it over with the professor and decided to gather a group of non-mutant fighters to stand against them." Xander said seriously.

"Where does that leave me?" John asked in a wounded tone.

"We're trying to limit the number of mutants, but they said you were sick and wouldn't feel much like fighting anyway." Xander said simply.

"Oh yeah. I probably wouldn't be of much use to them unless puking on the enemy would help somehow." John reluctantly admitted.

"Who are we going to be fighting?" Clark asked with concern.

"More like, 'what'." Xander said frankly, then explained, "Apparently, ten giant robots were built to subdue mutants and take them into custody. The test tonight is to prove that they are capable of doing that job without hurting the non-mutants around them. We're going to do our best to discredit them."

"So that's why you're getting the non-mutants to fight?" John asked cautiously.

"Yes. We'll have a few mutants that we can use to draw their interest..."

"As bait?" Clark asked darkly.

"Well, yeah. If we don't have any mutants with us, they might not see any point in fighting us and just leave." Xander said frankly.

"If they are programmed to subdue mutants, that would make sense." Trey said reasonably.

"Who do you have around here besides me and Trey that aren't mutants?" Clark asked curiously.

"Icheb, of course, Dawn and Tara, Angel and Spike, but I think our biggest fighting force will probably come from your father's home dimension. He's going there now to ask whoever he can find if they want to come back with him and fight robots with us." Xander finished with a smile.

"From what I have seen of my father's world, I believe the fighters should be well skilled, having had many opportunities to hone their craft." Trey said seriously.

"It's my world too, and you're right. The fighters from there have been through the fire and know how to handle themselves in a serious fight." Xander said passionately.

"I don't know how effective my hand-to-hand combat will be against a metallic opponent." Trey said absently, obviously lost in thought.

"From the way Icheb was talking, I got the impression that he was thinking of attacking them in some way that only the Borg can. Not being Borg, I don't know for sure what tools you have at your disposal." Xander said honestly.

"While it is possible for us, the Borg, to defeat robotic adversaries, before we can program nanoprobes to assimilate our opponents, we will need to take readings so that we can identify their vulnerabilities. Such things take time."

"Once you've observed them, then what do you have to do?"

"We would have to reprogram nanoprobes to exploit their vulnerabilities and override their programming." Trey said seriously.

"About how long do you think that would take?" Xander asked curiously.

"That is impossible to predict with any accuracy. Once we've scanned one of the units, an estimate might be possible." Trey said simply.

"Well, take your time to prepare so that you'll have everything you need when you get there." Xander suggested.

"Yes. Clark and I will prepare for the confrontation while John advises us, given that he has the most practical combat experience." Trey said confidently.

John seemed surprised by the suggestion, but finally broke into a smile and said, "Yeah. I'll make sure they know what to expect."

Xander seemed happy with John assuming the role of advisor and said, "I'll go and invite the others. Be ready to go when we call."

"We will." Trey assured him.

"Wagner Institute, Doctor Hoffman speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hey'ya Doc. This is Matt. I was just wondering if Angel is there." Matt asked pleasantly.

"Not yet, but I'm expecting him back at any moment." Julia said simply.

"How's it going Doc?" Matt asked curiously.

"Most things are going well." Julia said evasively.

"What's wrong?" Matt asked with concern.

"It doesn't matter. It's just something I thought I had resolved ended up falling through at the last minute."

"How bad is it?"

"I have several people arriving on Sunday and no one to meet them at the airport." Julia said frankly.

"That doesn't sound too bad. What would this person have to do?" Matt asked cautiously.

"The main thing would be to drive them to and from the airport, so they won't have to hire a rental car or a taxi. Beyond that, it would be nice if the driver knew a little bit about the college so that they could answer any questions that might come up."

"Do you have a brochure with what they'd need to know?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Yes. I do." Julia answered, then abruptly added, "Angel's back. I'll let you speak to him."

"Before you go, make sure to give him one of those brochures to bring back to the mansion." Matt rushed to say.

"Certainly. Are you saying that you know someone who can help me?" Julia asked hopefully.

"Yeah. What time do you want me there?" Matt asked with a smile.

"Nine a.m., Sunday. Thank you Matt. I really appreciate it." Julia said gratefully.

"Anything for you, Doc." Matt said with a grin, then asked, "Can I speak to Angel now?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Matt? What can I do for you?" Angel asked with concern.

"The professor's trying to gather a group of non-mutant fighters. He asked me to see if you were interested in joining the team." Matt said frankly.

"*Who are we going to be fighting?*" Angel asked cautiously.

"What." Matt corrected, then answered, "Robots."

"*I thought that when I came here that I'd be getting away from things like that.*" Angel said with weak humor.

"You in or out?" Matt asked flatly.

"*You have to ask?*" Angel asked with a chuckle.

"Not really. Just get on back here to the mansion so you can get filled in on the latest plans."

"*Will do.*"

"And don't forget to get a brochure from Julia. I promised to help her this Sunday."

"*Got it.*"

* * * * *

"Hey guys. Is it okay if I interrupt you for a minute?" Xander asked as he walked down the stairs.

"Yes. We are simply modifying Robert's alcove to make allowances for his maturation pod." William said seriously.

"This will only take a minute. We found out about an attack that's supposed to happen at the Westchester Mall tonight. We're getting a group of non-mutants together to stand against them and I came down here to see if William wanted to be included on the team." Xander said seriously.

"What about me?" Bobby cautiously asked.

"According to what we've heard, our opponent is able to analyze and counteract mutant abilities." Xander carefully explained.

"So you're not taking any mutants with you?" Bobby asked to be sure.

"Only three, last I heard. We need to have enough mutants to draw the enemy out without having so many that we can't defend them." Xander carefully explained.

"I can fight. I should go along." Bobby said seriously.

"You can talk to Scott and the professor about it if it's really that important to you, but from the way it looked to me, they'd already decided who was going." Xander said frankly.

"But you wanted to include me?" William asked dubiously.

"Your father said that if you were interested in going, he would permit it. Since you're not a mutant, it wouldn't entail the same level of danger and with you being Borg, you might be able to attack more on a programming level than a physical one." Xander explained, then thought to add, "We're going to be fighting giant robots."

"If there's no danger..." Robert began to say, but was stopped by the unified negative glares of all those present.

"Never mind. Just make sure that you tell Pop that I offered." Robert told Xander quietly.

"I will." Xander promised, then continued, "And in case you need to hear it, your baby is half mutant, so it *could* trigger one of the robots to attack you. No one here is willing to take that risk."

"Got it. Me and Bobby will hang back and cheer William on from the sideline." Robert assured him.

"If you want, you could serve as dispatchers for me. While I am in the field, you could advise me and do research." William suggested.

"Yeah. If I can't go myself, at least I can still be a part of it." Bobby said resignedly.

"Don't worry, Tavi. We've got your back." Robert said with a grin.

"I will not worry." William assured him.

"Activate your subspace neural link when you arrive and grant me access to your scanning functions. I will monitor the situation and we will advise you in real time." Robert said confidently.

"I will do so." William promised.

"The others have said that they will stay close to the house, so that when your father calls, he'll be able to reach you right away."

"Yes. We will complete this task while we await the call." William said decisively.

Xander left the boys, feeling assured that he had done everything possible to prepare *his* part of the team for the coming battle.

* * * * *

"I'd almost given up on finding you two." Matt said with a grin.

"Shhh. You don't want to wake Gar." Tara gently scolded.

"Yeah. Sorry. I didn't think." Matt quietly apologized, then continued, "We've got a situation developing. We're expecting giant robots to attack the Westchester Mall tonight. I've been working to recruit non-mutants to join the fight."

"Why non-mutants?" Dawn asked curiously.

"The robots are supposed to be able to detect the X-Gene and neutralize it or counteract it somehow." Matt said simply.

"So you're gathering witches? Where does that leave Andrew?" Tara asked curiously.

"On the sideline, I think. He'll be there to watch and be ready to jump in if there's an emergency, but I doubt that he'll get into the fight." Matt said honestly.

"Besides, Andrew's got fire. That usually doesn't work too well against things like robots." Dawn said frankly.

"What do you say? Are you two in?" Matt asked curiously, honestly not able to predict either of their answers.

"I'll have to talk to Uncle Hank, but I *should* be able to go." Tara said uncertainly.

"You can count on Tempest and Sprite to be there." Dawn said confidently.

"Will you be here in the MedLab?" Matt asked to confirm.

"Yes. Call us when you need us." Dawn said for both of them.

Matt nodded and left the room, feeling strangely optimistic after their encounter.

* * * * *

"I'm back. Where do you want everyone?" Andrew asked as he appeared in the professor's office.

"So far we've been sending people to the dining room. Will that work for you?" Professor Xavier asked cautiously.

"That should be fine. By the way, do you know if Angel is going to be joining us?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Yes. It seems that he was helping Doctor Hoffman with something at the new college, but Matt was able to reach him and he's committed to attending." Professor Xavier quietly explained.

"Good. We have an old friend of his who would really enjoy fighting alongside him." Andrew said with a smile.

"How many non-mutant fighters have you been able to recruit?" Professor Xavier cautiously asked.

"Twelve. All the Slayers plus a few of their friends. I also invited a non-fighter to work in the command center with you. Willow knows who everyone is and their fighting capabilities, plus she might know about something from my dimension that could help us in this one." Andrew carefully explained.

"Very good. Ms. Rosenberg will be a welcome addition to the team." Professor Xavier said confidently.

"I need to open a portal to the dining room for them. I'll be back with Willow in just a minute." Andrew said quickly before disappearing through a dark doorway.

There was a long silence before Professor Xavier quietly asked, "Thoughts?"

"If dis go wrong, it could follow us home." Remy said emotionlessly.

"It *is* right in the neighborhood." Professor Xavier reluctantly agreed.

"If someone were planning to attack us, covertly or outright, there wouldn't be a better opportunity." Scott said honestly.

"Recommendations?" Professor Xavier asked cautiously.

"I think the best thing we can do is turn it over to Storm and let her take whatever actions she deems necessary." Scott said frankly.

"Since the majority of the X-Men and the students will be available to help her, that should give her the freedom to adequately prepare." Professor Xavier said speculatively.

"And knowing dat she got our backs will make it easier fo us to focus on what be in front of us." Remy added.

A movement drew their attention as Andrew and Willow stepped through a vague doorway that had just appeared.

"Ms. Rosenberg, welcome to the team. If you and Andrew will go to the dining room with Scott and Remy, I will be along shortly." Professor Xavier said pleasantly.

"Thank you Professor. I hope that I'll be able to help somehow." Willow said anxiously.

"Of that, I have no doubt." Professor Xavier assured her, then watched as Willow followed the trio out of the room.

After a moment to reflect on all of what they were doing, Professor Xavier mentally called, //Storm, would you come to my office? I have a matter to discuss.//

Storm knocked on the office door and waited to be bid to enter before letting herself in.

"Ororo, I'm not sure if you've heard, but Mr. LeBeau seems to have acquired some information about an attack that is supposed to happen later tonight." Professor Xavier began.

"Yes. I have heard something of it, though not many details." Storm admitted.

"The threat this time appears to be in the form of giant robots that are programmed to detect mutants, neutralize any mutant ability they might have, then take said mutant into custody." Professor Xavier carefully explained.

"But wouldn't such an action work in direct opposition to the law guaranteeing mutants the same rights as everyone else?" Ororo asked curiously.

"On the surface, yes. But the law hasn't been tested in court and it might be some time before a precedent can be set. Those who created the Sentinel robots will most likely claim an exemption due to jurisdiction or some such nonsense." Professor Xavier said with irritation.

Ororo nodded her understanding.

"Regardless, I'm going to be taking a group of non-mutant fighters to the Westchester Mall to stand against the robotic attack force. It was my hope that in our absence, you could take charge of the home defense. Scott pointed out that this crisis might create the perfect opportunity for someone to exploit our absence." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"So just what is it that you're asking me to do?" Ororo cautiously asked.

"If you keep an extra watch on outside activity, that should be sufficient. But if you recognize a threat, take whatever action you feel is appropriate to the situation. It is entirely up to you." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Did Matthew already talk to you?" Ororo asked cautiously.

"He reported in and told me who had agreed to join us." Professor Xavier said slowly, then thought to add, "He *did* mention that Havok wanted to participate in the mission. I haven't talked to him about it yet, so let me know if you'd rather have him here to help you."

"Are you sure that you won't need him?" Ororo asked with concern.

"Every mutant we send into the battle is someone who we'll have to fight to defend, using time and personnel that could be more effectively used trying to defeat the enemy. Past a certain point the cost outweighs the benefit."

"If I may ask, why send Marie and Evan but not Alex?" Ororo asked seriously.

"If Marie or Evan's mutant abilities were somehow negated, it wouldn't diminish their ability to fight or flee, depending on their circumstance. I don't have the same faith in Alex to be able to adequately deal with the situation, should he suddenly find himself powerless."

"If you feel that way, why do you have him training the Junior X-Men?"

"Scott made that decision, but I have since seen the value in it. Not only does Alex have much to teach, but also much to learn."

"When I heard that you were conducting a mission without me, I became concerned that you had lost faith in me." Ororo quietly admitted.

"Not at all. I simply didn't have a role for you that utilized your strengths. I would much rather hold you in reserve than have you standing around with Scott and me as we monitor the battle." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"I believe that I would prefer that as well." Ororo said with a demure smile.

"I'm sensing quite a pool of anticipation growing nearby. I would guess that the Slayers are waiting for us in the dining room. Would you care to join me?" Professor Xavier gently invited.

"Yes. It would be my pleasure." Ororo said warmly.

* * * * *

"Andy, do you want to go ahead and call your kids to come to the meeting? I think it'd be better if they knew without a doubt that you're okay with this." Xander said frankly.

"Yes. I'll go and get them." Andrew said without hesitation.

"I'll be right back; I need to make a call too." Matt said as he left the dining room.

"So are we going to stand around and talk, or are we going to do something?" Faith asked across the murmuring crowd of people.

"We have to come up with a plan." Scott said simply.

"Rip off its arm, beat it over the head with it until it stops moving, then move on to the next one. How's that for a plan?" Faith asked playfully.

"I could see that working if a certain number of our assumptions turn out to be true." Scott easily admitted.

"Dese tings be ten feet tall an built solid. Rippin off a arm may not be as easy as you be tinkin." Remy said seriously.

"Then what do you think we should do?" Rona cautiously asked.

"De outer hull be covered wit sometin like Kevlar. Blunt attack do nuttin, but chop an stab attacks eventually git ta de innards of it." Remy explained to the group.

"Better and better." Faith said with a grand smile of anticipation.

"Did everyone bring their weapons of choice?" Buffy asked as she looked around.

"Yeah. I think we've got the slashing and chopping thing pretty much covered." Caridad said with a bloodthirsty grin.

"Xan, I brought your axe." Faith said as she presented it to him.

"Thanks Faith. It'll be just like old times." Xander said happily.

"No. Now is better." Faith said with a tender look in Robin's direction.

"Yeah. It is." Xander admitted as he glanced toward Remy.

* * * * *

A procession of Borg kids walked into the room and Xander was concerned when he saw Janine and Robert amongst them.

"John? How are you feeling?" Scott quickly asked.

"Like I got hold of some bad chow from behind the restaurant." John said frankly.

"You're not wanting to be included in the mission tonight, are you?" Scott asked with concern.

"No. But I want to sit in on the briefing in case Trey or Clark need for me to explain something. They're both new to this." John said seriously.

"That's good thinking, John. Excellent use of resources." Scott said proudly.

"John, perhaps when the others go into battle, you could join us in monitoring their progress and advising them remotely." Janine said as more of a statement than an invitation.

At John's questioning look, Quaid hurried to explain, "Yeah. And we're also going to help by making sure that everyone here stays safe."

"Bobby and I were planning on doing something like that too. Maybe we should all work together." Robert cautiously suggested.

"Yes. We should work collectively." Janine said calmly, then gave a slight smile before continuing, "We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own."

Chapter 19: Night of Knights

"Jimmy, your father tells me that you're quite the journalist and that you will be attending tonight's event in that capacity." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Yes, Professor." Jimmy confirmed.

"Would it be possible for you to maintain a set of unedited recordings that we could submit as evidence of the attack? In the event that unfavorable propaganda about the event begins to be spread, raw footage could prove to be invaluable."

"Yes, of course, Professor." Jimmy said professionally, then added, "Clark and I will also be submitting a summary of the incident incorporating our observations to the school newspaper, for those who wish to share in the experience vicariously."

"I will look forward to reading it." Professor Xavier said warmly, immediately won over by the young boy's charm.

"Thank you, Professor." Jimmy said before walking away to rejoin his siblings.

* * * * *

"Xander? I'm sorry I'm late. I got tied up with Rome ironing out about a thousand and one niggling little details regarding the Wagner Institute. What's going on?" Warren asked quickly.

"Nothing to do with the college. This has to do with the investigation you did on my company. Remy went undercover and found out that they're planning something for tonight. That's why he's back so soon." Xander said seriously.

"I'd guess it's not something good, from the look of your guest list." Warren said cautiously.

"They're sending giant robots to the Westchester Mall for a field test. Supposedly, these robots can detect and somehow neutralize mutant abilities. The test will include capturing mutants while leaving non-mutants unharmed. We're gathering a group of non-mutants to stand against them." Xander said frankly.

"Are you planning to go?" Warren asked with a glance at the axe in Xander's hand.

"I've been fighting alongside the Slayer for most of the past seven years. Standing up for what's right and defending the disadvantaged has become a way of life to me. I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror if I stood back and let other people fight when I was capable of doing it myself." Xander said seriously.

"If you didn't already have your own company, I'd hire you in a second. *That's* the attitude that I'm looking for in my upper level management." Warren said firmly, then smiled when a small pair of arms wrapped around his waist.

"It would have been nice to have a boss who appreciated my extracurricular activities." Xander said with a grin at the thought.

"How are you doing today, Jimmy?" Warren gently asked the boy at his side.

"I'm doing fine. But if you have something for me to do, I've already promised to do another job tonight." Jimmy said solemnly.

"No. I don't have a job for you. I'm just here because I received word that Xander needed me for something." Warren said frankly as he returned the hug.

"I wanted for you to be here when things got interesting in case you can spot something that the rest of us wouldn't know to look for. If the people in charge of this project say or do *anything* that will help us shut them down I want to make sure that we don't miss it." Xander said firmly.

"I'm sure the professor would probably catch anything like that, but then again, he might not be in a position to do much about it in the heat of the moment. He might have other priorities. I'll be sure to keep my eyes and ears open." Warren promised as he continued to hold Jimmy at his side with one arm.

"Is Uncle Kurt going to be here?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"No. He and Julia have quite a bit of work to do. But I happen to know that he's planning to have dinner at your house tomorrow." Warren said warmly.

"You're not here for the battle, are you?" Jimmy asked with concern.

"Only to observe it. I'll be here to witness what was done and said. While I may not be using my mutant abilities, I *will* be using my knowledge of the law and accepted business practices."

"I will also be observing from a distance. Perhaps you will have an opportunity to watch my video feed." Jimmy said hopefully.

"I don't know where the command center is going to be, but once it's set up, I imagine that we'll probably *all* be watching your feed." Warren said frankly.

//Likely, yes. But we will access a variety of security cameras around the mall as well.// Professor Xavier interjected into their conversation.

"Where do we need to be right now, Professor?" Warren asked curiously.

//We're waiting for the last few people to arrive, then I will let everyone in on the plan all at once.// Professor Xavier said professionally.

"Then I should take the opportunity to visit with a few people before we all start going in different directions."

"Can I go with you?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"Of course you may." Warren answered warmly.

* * * * *

"Everyone! May I have your attention?!" Professor Xavier called from the front of the dining room.

It took a moment, but a quiet anticipation finally swept over the gathering.

"Most of you are aware of the operation we are embarking upon. According to information we were able to acquire, giant robots, known as Sentinels, will invade the Westchester Mall tonight in an attempt to subdue and abduct only the mutants from amongst the mall shoppers. Should their test prove successful, I imagine that we will be contending with these troublesome things for years to come. Therefore, I am looking at this as our best, and perhaps only, opportunity to discredit these things so that no attempt will be made to deploy them against the population again." Professor Xavier said to the gathering.

"All we need to know is when and where. We'll handle the rest." Buffy said firmly.

"We will be driving a number of vehicles to the mall to prepare for the event. Since we don't want to announce our presence, I would suggest that you break into small groups and, if you are so inclined, do some light shopping until the excitement begins." Professor Xavier answered professionally.

"*Light* shopping?" Buffy asked incredulously.

"Forgive me. The degree of shopping is entirely at your discretion. I simply wouldn't want you weighed down with bags at an inopportune moment."

"I'll trust you to do what you do best. Trust us to do the same." Buffy said grimly.

"Agreed." Professor Xavier said seriously, then continued, "For those of you who don't know them, Marie, Evan, and Matt are going to be the only mutants that we will be bringing with us. Raise your hands so everyone will know who you are."

Evan thrust his hand into the air, looking almost like he'd won an award. Marie and Matt were a bit more reluctant, but *did* eventually raise their hands.

"We don't know what methods these robots will employ to neutralize their intended victims, so if you see one of these three in trouble, I'm asking that you help them." Professor Xavier said firmly.

Matt was obviously uncomfortable with the statement, but was able to hold his tongue.

"The younger members of our team are all non-mutants with a skill set that we may find especially useful in this battle. If you notice a change in circumstances that suggests that they might be in danger, I would ask that you take a moment to get them out of harm's way.

"While I will be monitoring the situation telepathically from a distance, Scott will be establishing a command center in the parking lot of the mall. Hopefully that will provide us the best vantage point to coordinate things. Or, in a worst-case scenario, it will allow us to provide aid as needed and facilitate an evacuation." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"What are you going to do if there are any mutants mixed in with the regular shoppers at the mall?" Willow asked cautiously.

"Good question, Ms. Rosenberg. Given what we know of the programming of these machines, the best thing we can do for any mutant in their path is to help them to escape. You can ask that they be brought to the command center in the parking lot if you feel that there is a need for us to shelter them. Otherwise, we would do best to get them out of harm's way and explain to them that the robots are after them and that they should get as far away as possible." Professor Xavier explained to the crowd.

"Since the Borg were invited, may we assume that you plan for us to take some particular action against the robots?" Trey asked seriously.

"You're being invited to evaluate the situation and let us know what action you might be able to realistically take. Once we have that information, we will decide on a plan of action which may or may not include your recommendations, depending on how practical they are." Professor Xavier carefully explained.

"We intend to go covertly, Icheb with Marie and me with Clark. It would be helpful if William had someone to accompany him so that they can work in tandem." Trey said seriously.

"Yeah. All my friends here are mutants." William timidly added.

"Evan? Would you mind?" Professor Xavier asked cautiously.

After a moment for the surprise to wear off, Evan looked at William and cautiously asked, "Can you fight?"

"Oy, that boy's my namesake. Believe you me, he can fight well enough." Spike proudly declared.

"And of the two of us, I likely won't be their target." William added in his own defense.

"About that, I think each mutant should have a Slayer assigned to them." Buffy said firmly.

"Yes. That sounds like a reasonable precaution. I will trust you to see to it." Professor Xavier said simply.

Buffy seemed to be pleased with the arrangement.

"It might be most productive if the remainder of our fighters were to form such partnerships. That will make it that much less likely that we'll *mishplace* someone in the fray." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"I wish to be partnered with Angel!" A strikingly handsome man with unusual eyes immediately announced.

"Of course. I will be honored to fight at your side, Groo." Angel said diplomatically.

"What do you say, Buffy? For old time's sake?" Riley quickly asked.

"Sure... as long as you don't get in the way of my shopping. I wouldn't want for you to get hurt." Buffy cautioned him.

"Mind if I tag along with you?" Robin cautiously asked Faith.

"I've just been waiting for you to be healed up enough." Faith said happily, then added, "This is gonna be great."

"Scott is going to be handing out communication devices." Professor Xavier announced as he nodded in Scott's direction, then he continued, "Just tap them to activate them, then speak. If you want to talk to one person, say their name first thing. Otherwise you'll be speaking to the whole team."

"I don't know about anyone else, but a lot of times in the middle of a battle I can't stop and go digging through my purse for my phone." Buffy said frankly.

"As I said before, I will be monitoring the situation telepathically. If you're in trouble, or you need to make me aware of some new fact, you can call out to me, either mentally or aloud, and I will respond." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"There are some of us who can't use telepathy." Angel reminded the professor.

"That's another reason for us to have the communicators." Professor Xavier said frankly, then thought to add, "But keep in mind that it *is* possible for others to access our frequencies, please remember that when disclosing sensitive information electronically."

//Besides, since our first meeting, I have discovered a method of speaking telepathically to vampires. However, I would prefer that this development not become common knowledge.// Professor Xavier sent directly to Angel.

"You don't have to worry about Peaches givin up any valuable info. He's not very chatty." Spike announced.

//Agreed.// Angel internally responded.

There were a few chuckles at Spike's choice of nickname.

"We don't know *exactly* when this event is going to take place, so those who aren't familiar with the area can select vehicles from our garage and follow Matt, when you're ready to go to the mall."

"A mall in a parallel dimension. *This* is the payoff for all that we do." Buffy announced to her Slayers.

"Excuse me, but I'd like to visit with Matt for a moment, if I may." A voice called from the back of the room.

"Ken? I didn't see you come in." Professor Xavier said with pleasant surprise.

"You were busy. I let myself in. May I speak with Matthew Logan for a moment?" Mr. Howlett asked anxiously.

"Yes. Of course. In fact, take as long as you please. Scott can conduct our guests to the mall once everyone has secured transportation." Professor Xavier said pleasantly.

"Thank you, Charles." Mr. Howlett said with relief.

"If no one has anything else, all of us will get into position and await further developments." Professor Xavier announced to the crowd.

A low murmur spread across the room, assuring him that no one had any further questions.

* * * * *

"What's got you so quiet, Andy? Is something wrong?" Xander asked with concern from Remy's side.

"When I went to Slayer Central, Willow gave me a message." Andrew said quietly.

"Bad news?" Xander guessed, based solely on Andrew's pained expression.

"It's a message from a hospital in California. It's about my mom." Andrew said uncomfortably.

"The one who stole your stuff and abandoned you when you were fifteen?" Xander asked to confirm.

"Yeah. That's the one. But she's the only mom I've got... in *our* dimension anyway." Andrew said uncomfortably.

"So, what? She's sick and wants you to visit her? Is that it?" Xander asked as he snaked an arm around Remy and held him firmly.

"I don't know. Maybe. But the thing the letter said was that as her closest relative, that they need for me to make some decisions on her behalf." Andrew finished quietly.

"Dat not soun good." Remy said in a low voice.

"Are you going to do it?" Xander asked uncomfortably.

"I don't know yet. I'll need to think about it... talk to Alan. Talk to Dad. I just... I don't know. I kinda wish I was going into battle with everyone else. This feels like one of those things that gratuitous violence might actually be good for." Andrew finished with weak humor.

"Just let us know if there's anything we can do. Remember that me and Dawn are both from there too. We'll be there to stand with you whenever you need us." Xander promised.

"Thanks, Xan. It helps to know that." Andrew said with a pained smile.

* * * * *

"If this is about that land deed, I didn't mean for you to drive all the way down here to talk to me about it." Matt said frankly.

"Do you have the original of that deed?" Mr. Howlett asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's up in the room I've been using. Why?"

"May I see it?"

"Sure." Matt said as he led the way to the nearest elevator.

"Tell me again, what is the significance of the deed?" Ken asked curiously.

"I was told that I deeded the land to myself when I changed identities. Something happened a few years back that I lost my memory, so I was hoping that this could give me a clue of who I really am."

"If that were true, that would make you over a hundred years old." Ken said in a leading tone as they got off the elevator.

"Yeah. I've seen a picture that I'm pretty sure was me back in 1864, so I've been figurin that I'm at least 140." Matt said seriously as he guided Ken down the hall to the proper room.

"Actually, that would fit in just about right with what I was able to uncover in regard to the named individuals in the title search." Ken said thoughtfully.

"So does that mean that you found something? Do you know my real name?" Matt asked hopefully.

"Let me see the original document. Once I've determined that it's genuine, I *might* have some news for you." Ken said cautiously.

Matt was uncharacteristically nervous and fumbled with his keys to unlock his bedroom door.

* * * * *

"So you have this Winnebago full of tech and stuff just waiting around to be used?" Willow asked as she followed Scott aboard.

"We don't use it often, but when we do, we're thankful to have it." Scott said as he pulled the RV forward and stopped, allowing the others to queue up behind him.

"*How do you turn this thing on? There aren't any buttons.*" An indistinct voice called from Scott's communicator.

"Tap once, then speak. Tap it once again when you're finished speaking." Cyclops patiently instructed.

"*Yeah. But where's the button that you're supposed to tap? I need a button. I can't tap without a button.*" The voice said with obvious frustration.

"Tap the 'X'. That *is* the button." A voice responded before Scott could. Scott recognized the voice and tapped his own communicator before cautiously asking, "Alex? Is that you?"

"*Havok, and yeah, it's me. I decided that since I wasn't invited along that I might just go and kill some time at the mall, you know, like a person does on a Friday night when he's been ditched by his friends and family. Is that alright with you?*" Alex defiantly asked.

"Not really, but I guess I can understand. Just be careful. We really don't know what these things are capable of. Call me if you need anything. Okay?" Scott quietly responded.

"I think I found it! Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me?" A female voice interrupted.

Scott just shook his head and checked his mirror as he tried to account for all those who were supposed to be following him.

He naturally assumed that Remy and Xander would be riding together. Andrew would almost certainly be driving a bus, to accommodate all his children. And Matt appeared to have other business to attend to and would most likely be catching up to them later.

That being the case, Scott finally asked, "Willow? How would you feel about handling communications with the Slayers while I'm driving?"

"I was hoping that you'd ask. Listening to that was kinda painful. Do you have a standard multi-frequency communications hub?" Willow asked cautiously.

"Yes. You can access it through the TRFQ program on any of our computers." Scott said as he slowly pulled away from the garage, having determined that everyone was as ready as they were going to get.

"Can I access it with a guest account?" Willow cautiously asked.

//Not to worry, Ms. Rosenberg, I have taken the liberty of granting you team member level computer access. Your username is Willow and your password is misskittyfantastico... all one word.// Professor Xavier sent to her seriously.

"Thank you. That'll make it a lot easier for me to get things done." Willow said honestly.

//We appreciate your help.// Professor Xavier responded fondly.

"I think I got it turned on now, but how do I turn it off?" The voice on all the radios asked in frustration.

"Do you happen to have any plain old walkie-talkies around here? I'm thinking that this high-tech communicator thing isn't going to work out for a few of the Slayers." Willow asked hopefully.

"Check the cabinet under the left bench seat, I seem to recall there being a few old-style walkie-talkies in there. Batteries are behind me on the charging station. Once you have them powered up, you'll need to key the mic on each one to log it into the system." Scott said as he fought to maintain his focus on his driving.

"Don't worry. This is something that I'm very familiar with from back home." Willow assured him.

"How are you feeling, Clark? Do you think you're ready for this?" Andrew asked as he slowly followed the procession of vehicles down the drive.

"Why are you asking me? I'm not the only one who's going to fight." Clark asked defensively.

"The Borg tend to have a certain pragmatic outlook about things that I understand for the most part. I know that something like this won't stress them out. But to know how you're doing, I have to ask." Andrew said seriously.

"I'm worried that I don't know how to use my ability well enough. All I can really do is light beams." Clark said anxiously.

"That's the main thing Scott and Alan have to work with and they seem to do alright." Andrew said frankly, then thought to add, "But keep in mind that they also have teammates that they know they can count on to back them up. If you fall short, remember to let your team take up the slack. It can mean the difference between being a hero or a glory hog."

"Clark, if you can use your optic blasts to provide cover so that I may deeply scan our opponents, then we can retreat until the information from the scans can be analyzed." Trey said seriously.

"Is your holo-camouflage going to interfere with your scanning ability?" Andrew asked with concern.

"No. The level of precision that I anticipate needing will necessitate the use of my arm unit." Trey said as he held up his left arm covered to the elbow with an electronic device.

"There's not going to be any way to hide that, is there?" Andrew slowly asked.

"No. None that I can think of." Trey quietly admitted.

"We'll just have to hope that no one will think it's a weapon." Andrew said weakly.

"That had not occurred to me. Had I thought to do so, I could have attempted to make it look less threatening." Trey said with concern.

"Yeah. Next time we'll make sure to put some feathers on it before we leave the house." Clark said with a barely restrained grin.

Trey slowly looked askance at him, but didn't dignify the suggestion with a response.

"How have you been doing, Dawn? We don't get to talk nearly enough." Buffy asked with concern.

"I'm pretty sure that you already know about most of what's going on. I mean, it's been pretty calm since we brought the kids back from your dimension so there's not much to tell." Dawn said frankly.

"Except for the part about time-traveling alien kids and Superman." Buffy responded with a grin.

"What about Superman?" Riley asked with undisguised interest.

"Yeah. He exists for real here. But don't get all freaked out about it. He's a sweet guy who tries really hard to do what's right. So far as I know, his only special ability is optic blasts." Dawn said seriously.

"You live on a world where Superman is *real*? That's awesome!" Riley said with a grin.

"I live and work in a boarding school. No matter how big and flashy and exciting it sounds from the outside, at the end of the day it's a job and a place to live. I mean, don't get me wrong. It's nice and I love working with the kids and being on the team and everything, but it's easy to get the wrong idea and think that it's all adventure and glory." Dawn explained.

"Now tell me, what is it that we're going to be doing tonight?" Buffy asked her sister playfully.

"Okay. Yeah. I guess that every now and then it *is* just like what you'd expect." Dawn timidly admitted.

* * * * *

"Are you sure that Scott's okay with us not riding with him in the mobile command center?" Xander asked cautiously.

"Scott be a big boy. If he need Remy an Xander to hold his hand, he speak up about it." Remy said casually.

"It's good that we can have a few minutes to speak privately." Warren said from the back seat.

"Did you have something that you needed to talk to us about?" Xander asked with concern.

"No. But it's just nice to be able to talk and not have to be on guard about who might be listening." Warren said frankly.

"What do you think about what we're getting into?" Xander cautiously asked.

"Given the choice, I would probably choose to completely avoid something like this. But since we're here, we might as well do our best to turn this thing to our advantage."

Warren said frankly.

"Do you think it's a mistake for me to take part in the fight?"

"I think it would only be a mistake if you were doing something that you didn't believe in. As long as you're standing up for your true beliefs, then if something from this tries to come back to haunt you, you can proudly declare that you were fighting for what is good and right." Warren said seriously.

"You be able to earn respect wit your action instead of being all talk, like some people."

Remy interjected.

"He's right. Talk is cheap. If you never *do* anything, then you stand for nothing. Being seen doing something like this can go a long way toward defining who you are in a lot of peoples' minds." Warren added.

"Got it. Show, don't tell." Xander said simply.

Warren nodded in agreement with his summary.

* * * * *

After a long silent inspection, Ken finally said, "By all indications this deed is authentic."

"So does that mean that you can tell me who I really am now?" Matt asked hopefully.

"Yes. Would you mind getting the large book out of the bag on the back of my chair?"

Ken asked seriously.

"Sure." Matt said slowly as he moved behind Ken.

"When I received your fax, I had no idea what a rabbit hole it would take me down."

"Is there a reason you're not telling me who I am?" Matt asked as he carefully dislodged the large book from the oversized tote bag.

"Go to the page with the Post-it Note then tell me what you think." Ken said hesitantly.

"What kind of book is this? It looks like it's handwritten." Matt asked as he leafed through the enormous book, gently making his way back to the Post-it Note.

"It is and it isn't. The original pages were written and drawn by various members of my family over the course of many years, each telling their own stories, as well as the oral histories that had been passed down to them. All those original documents were compiled

and photocopied, so that each member of the family could have their own copy." Ken said carefully.

"So what does that have to do with me?" Matt slowly asked.

"Have you found the page?"

"Yes."

"Then take a minute to read the story. I think you'll find something of interest to you."

"It's not that I don't want to read this but it's tiny, the handwriting is hard to read and besides that, I've promised to go on a mission with the team. Could you maybe just give me the Reader's Digest version, so I don't have to keep Scott waiting *too* long?" Matt asked hopefully.

"Since I have some idea of what a mission for Charles entails, I'll go ahead and tell you." Ken relented, then solemnly continued, "Back in the late 1800's one of my ancestors became concerned that a favorite uncle of his seemed to have gone missing, along with his entire family. He did some investigation and wasn't able to find out much more than what he had already deduced. The homestead where they all lived had been abandoned. There were stories going around town about some conflict with a neighbor and a messy love triangle, but no one could give a satisfactory answer to the question about what had happened to any of them."

"Sounds to me like they were probably all killed." Matt said frankly.

"Yes. And that may be the case. The only complication to that theory is the land deed. According to the county clerk, around that same time, the land deed that you have in your possession was legally signed over from my distant cousin to one Jonathan Matthew Logan." Mr. Howlett said seriously.

"You think I killed your cousin?" Matt cautiously asked.

"No. Remember where the deed is supposed to have come from?" Ken hesitantly asked.

Matt slowly nodded as he turned his attention back to the book in his hands.

"I think that maybe you *are* my cousin." Ken finally explained, so that there was no doubt what he was thinking.

"This cousin of yours, what was his name?" Matt asked as he once again struggled to read the small handwriting.

"James."

"James what?"

"James Howlett."

* * * * *

"You lot alright? You're bein awful quiet." Spike asked the teenagers in the back seat.

"Maybe you're used to stuff like this, but I'm not sure that I'll know what to do when it counts." Evan quietly admitted.

"Listen up. The people in charge think that you're good enough. Remember that. Out of all the X-Men *and* all the students, they picked you." Spike said simply.

"Yeah. They picked you, and *didn't* pick me. Chew on that for a minute." Alex said grimly.

"Sometimes I put on a show. I'm just afraid that they might have bought into something I was selling that wasn't real." Evan admitted anxiously.

"Listen, mate. I done more than my share of talkin big and puttin on a good front. Take it from someone who knows, ain't nobody fooled by it. No one who matters, anyway." Spike said frankly.

"So even though I talk a good game, you think they know the truth?" Evan asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. It's their job to judge the skill level of people. I trust the teachers here to be able to see past the bullshit and know who's best for a certain job." Spike said honestly.

"And besides, being able to talk a good game is a good skill to have. A win is a win whether you get there by fighting or bluffing." Alex stated reasonably.

"All I have to do is go there and be bait. When these things attack, just don't let them catch me. Right?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Just hang out for a while and be ready to cut and run as soon as things start to go wrong." Alex confirmed.

"What about you, Marie? How you feelin bout things?" Spike asked curiously.

"Me? I'm good. I may not be the fastest or the strongest, but I'm here and I'm ready for a fight. That's just going to have to be good enough." Marie said frankly.

"I can see why they picked you." Spike said with an admiring grin.

"Yeah. She walks the walk and talks the talk." Alex confirmed.

"And she has a lick of good sense, besides. I'm bettin that when these things start to throw down, Marie's gonna have bout twelve ways out already planned." Spike added speculatively.

Evan looked at Marie for a long moment before declaring, "My mutant ability is still a lot cooler than yours."

"Which does you exactly *no* good in this situation." Marie informed him with a smile.

"She got you there, mate." Spike said with delight.

{Do you see that?} Alex suddenly asked in an awed whisper as he stared out the car window.

"What? What is it?" Evan asked anxiously as he leaned forward and searched the road ahead of them for a threat.

"There. At the mall entrance. That has to be the biggest crow I've ever seen."

Chapter 20: Rondel et Marionettes

"Cyclops. Do you want the teams to rendezvous with you in the parking lot or should they proceed directly into the mall?" Andrew asked curiously.

"We don't necessarily need to have a group meeting, but the mobile command center can be a place for teams to gather so that they can go into the mall with all their members. We have no idea when things are going to start heating up." Scott said thoughtfully.

"Team. Superman and Three of Seven are here with me. They need to know where they're supposed to meet up with their escort." Andrew stated professionally.

"Rona, you got this?" Buffy called.

"Yeah. I can see their bus ahead of us. We'll pull in beside you and you'll have all your Slayer escorts at once." Rona easily responded.

"As soon as everyone is with their escort, I'll be on my way to the command center." Andrew said seriously.

"Anyone who needs an old-fashioned walkie-talkie can meet up with us when the command center comes to a stop." Willow quickly announced.

"Yeah. Me and this badge circle thing just ain't gonna get along." Another of the Slayers said frankly.

"Don't worry. I've got your back." Willow quickly assured her.

"Thanks Wills. You always do." The woman responded appreciatively.

* * * * *

"Quaid, are you versed in the manipulation of differentiated subspace domains?" Janine asked seriously.

"Of course, I'm not a baby." Quaid responded with a roll of his eyes.

"Then, should you so desire, you may work to hardwire the incoming signals to appropriate soft-frames of the video playback device. While you do that, Robert and I will work to isolate and redirect the individual data streams." Janine said firmly as she handed him a somewhat worn and abused tricorder.

"Do you need for me and John to do anything?" Bobby hesitantly asked.

"Be prepared to analyze the video output once Quaid is able to properly route the feed." Janine said firmly.

"What are you kids up to in here? Are you planning to watch some cartoons?" Alan asked as he pushed a double stroller with one hand and carried a baby with the other.

"We are going to access the various video feeds from the mission team so that we may advise them remotely and do research for them." Janine said simply as she nimbly worked to reconfigure the video playback chip reader on the television.

"We're going to act like dispatchers." John paraphrased.

"Make sure you don't get in your father's way while he's busy." Alan said with concern as he slowly took a seat on the couch.

"We will be doing the things Father cannot do, such as analyzing structural and programming deficiencies in our opponents that can potentially be exploited by us." Janine said confidently.

"Maybe you can help us see that they won't distract from anything important or get too much in the way." Quaid helpfully suggested.

After a moment of consideration, Alan slowly nodded his agreement, then asked, "So what are you doing now?"

Before Janine could answer, Quaid quickly said, "We're setting up the video feed so that all of us will be able to watch the team and tell them if we see something that they're too busy to notice."

"That looks kind of complicated. I'm really impressed that you know what you're doing with that." Alan said with a smile.

"I think being a great dad to a bunch of kids must be really complicated, too. I guess that means that we're each good at our own things." Quaid said as he kept the majority of his attention on rerouting the isolinear circuitry.

"Quaid, do you have any signals ready for me?" Robert cautiously asked.

"Yeah. I have nine of them set up. There's a dummy signal to hold each line open until they have a real signal to receive. I have lines reserved for Icheb, Trey, William, Jimmy, and five alternates for whatever other feeds we can latch onto." Quaid said professionally.

"When the time comes, we will request access to the mobile command center's data stream." Robert added seriously.

"The professor saw the value of including us, the Borg, on this mission. I have no doubt that he will see the value in granting us access to additional sources of information to do the job most effectively." Janine said confidently.

Alan wasn't sure how he felt about what his children were planning to do, but at the same time, he *was* sure that he didn't want to get in the way of them doing it.

* * * * *

"So what all does this book tell you about me that we don't already know?" Matt asked as he tried to decipher the small handwriting.

"Considering the questions that you probably have, not much. But from my own perspective, this book holds an incredible wealth of information having to do directly with you." Mr. Howlett said honestly.

"Don't make me have to hurt you, Ken." Matt said with frustration evident in his voice.

Ken couldn't contain a laugh, then said, "This book contains memories of a beloved family member who went missing. It's a beautiful tribute, written with love."

"That's nice, but is there *anything* in that book that helps us prove who I really am?" Matt asked hopefully.

"*Prove* is a pretty strong word to use with a lawyer...." Mr. Howlett began to say, but was interrupted.

"I'm about to use some stronger ones..." Matt growled.

Ken laughed again, then said, "I think that if you go through the stories related to James and his father that you *might* be able to isolate enough fine details to be able to say conclusively that you *are* James Howlett." Ken said carefully.

"So you're saying that you believe it, but you can't prove it. Am I getting that right?" Matt asked cautiously.

"There is quite a lot of apocryphal information to sort through that may or may not contain proof of the thing that you want to believe is true. I believe that if you read through it yourself that it is possible that you will find enough obscure facts that you can stitch together to support your preferred conclusion." Mr. Howlett said diplomatically.

"But do *you* believe it?" Matt asked cautiously.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because I've read the story of James Howlett. When you strip away all the memories of a man, what's left is his bare essence. I can see the person you are resulting from the person James was known to be. My relative is remembered and mourned as being a man

of good character who would stand up for what was right and never compromise his principles. Not only do I suspect that those traits exist in you, but I can also imagine more than one scenario when such a person could be manipulated into abandoning his family in an attempt to protect them." Ken said frankly.

"Sounds like I've got a lot of reading ahead of me." Matt said unenthusiastically.

"Go do your mission and you can look at this when you get back. I'll leave it here with you."

"I'll be sure to take good care of it." Matt quietly promised.

"I'm going to order another copy, so you'll have your own. Every member of the family gets one." Ken said with a smile.

"You're already counting me as a member of your family?" Matt cautiously asked.

"Given the circumstance of your amnesia, the geographic distance of the events and the passage of time, I believe that it may be impossible for us to unequivocally *prove* anything. Even so, I *believe* that you are part of my family. When you believe it, too, let me know and I'll introduce you to the others."

* * * * *

"One of the Borg subspace channels just came on." Quaid announced.

"Jimmy typically uses that frequency. Would you be able to route the video portion of the output on the screen?" Janine asked cautiously.

"I think so, but I'll need for someone to watch the screen and tell me when they see it come on." Quaid said seriously.

"Right now I'm covered with sleeping babies. There's very little else that I can do but sit and watch. I'll be happy to help you." Alan said frankly.

"Go ahead, Quaid. Just tell us what we need to watch for." John helpfully added.

"I'm going to patch it in. Let me know when you can see the signal on the video screen and if it's clear or not." Quaid said in concentration.

"I see something snowy and staticky in the first box in the upper-left corner. Kind of an electric nightmare." Bobby said quickly.

"The interpreter isn't sorting the sub-channel out right. Give me a second." Quaid said seriously.

After another moment of watching, John suddenly said, "Wait! Stop right there. I've got a clear picture now. I can see Xander in front of a Dippin Dots stand."

"It looks good. Nice and clear." Bobby added.

Quaid scooted out from his position half-behind the television to look at the picture for himself.

"Robert, I require your assistance. Could you connect to the video interpreter box with your tubules?" Janine asked hopefully.

"Sure. I *could*, but why would I?" Robert asked curiously.

"I anticipate needing more computing power than my personal processor and data node can provide. If you will connect to the interpreter and route the decrypted signals to me, I will use my alcove to process the data." Janine said reasonably.

"Why can't you just *watch* the video with the rest of us?" Alan cautiously asked.

"Icheb, Trey, William, and Jimmy are going to be gathering data, visual and otherwise. If we do not process the data in a timely manner and transform it into something useful to our cause, then any risk they are undertaking is rendered pointless." Janine said firmly.

"Okay, I guess I can see that." Alan reluctantly admitted.

"All you need for me to do is keep the subspace signals sorted out for you, right?" Quaid asked to confirm.

"Yes. Be sure to maintain the data streams beneath each video. Anything we accomplish this evening will be, in part, due to your efforts." Janine said as she looked him in the eyes.

"This family thing is really awesome." Quaid said with a giggle under his words.

"Robert, once I am in my alcove, begin direct transmission." Janine said firmly.

"You got it, Sis." Robert said confidently.

* * * * *

"Do you have access to all the mall video channels?" Scott asked into the RV.

"I've got it, but I'm not sure what you want me to do with it." Willow said honestly.

"Just keep an eye on things and tell the team, especially your Slayers, about what's ahead of them. You can warn them about potential dangers or just when they might be about to run into another team." Scott said seriously.

"What you be doin?" Remy cautiously asked.

"While you watch over the teams, I'll be watching over you to keep you on track and hopefully prevent you from stepping on each other's toes too much." Scott said frankly.

"This place is packed. It's insane" Willow said aggravatedly.

"It'll probably get worse before it gets better. Think about it, it's the Friday after Thanksgiving, the first 'official' day of Christmas shopping." Andrew said frankly.

"There's Xander and what was his name? Jimmy?" Willow asked as she pointed at one of the many split screen monitors before them.

"Yeah. That's them." Andrew confirmed.

"Do you tink dat dey should have a Slayer watchin over dem?" Remy asked with concern.

"I think Xander can hold his own." Andrew assured him.

"He survived seven years in Sunnydale, what more qualification could you ask of a person?" Willow supportively added.

"It looks like Buffy and Riley are stopping at a shoe store." Willow said as she pointed at a different screen.

"Just Buffy is going in. It looks like Riley's going to keep watch at the planter outside the store." Scott said slowly.

"Keepin watch. Yeah. Dat be what he doin." Remy said flatly.

"Tara and Dawn are on the upper level. How'd they get up there?" Scott asked suddenly.

"Maybe they parked on the upper-level of the garage." Andrew said speculatively.

"No. They rode in with Buffy. How did they enter the mall from opposite ends at almost the same time?" Willow asked confusedly.

"Remy tink you be readin de camera layout wrong. You got de left and right backward." Remy said slowly.

"Yeah. There's Icheb and Marie's group. They entered the mall the same place as Buffy." Scott said quickly.

"Right. I've got it now. Whoever set up these cameras zig-zagged them instead of running them in sequence." Willow said in frustration.

"The switch box for the video output is under the first monitor if you want to reorganize them before we get too much into this." Scott offered seriously.

"I think I should. It makes more sense for each camera to flow into the view of the camera next to it." Willow said as she began switching the video output like a practiced professional.

"Any sign of Sentinels?" Warren asked cautiously.

"Nothing so far." Scott said seriously.

"Do we know what they look like?" Warren asked uncertainly.

"We know that they're each over ten feet tall and coated with Kevlar. From the sound of it, they'd be kind of hard to miss." Andrew said frankly.

"I don't know about that. All the parking lot cameras are focused to look down on the cars, so we'd have no way of seeing them if they come at us from above." Willow said seriously as she worked to reorient the camera layout.

"If we're lucky, maybe they'll carpool in." Scott said awkwardly, obviously not comfortable with making light of the situation, but likewise not knowing what else to say.

"It might be good if we had someone out there spotting for them... possibly from the air." Warren cautiously suggested.

"Someone with wings, perhaps?" Scott asked with a smile in Warren's direction.

"Dat might not be de smartest ting to do. If dey can't fly, den we'll see dem on de cameras. If dey *can* fly an dey spot you, den all ten might zero in an try to take you down." Remy said seriously.

"He's right. As nice as it might be to have a pair of eyes in the sky, it's not worth the risk. If we're going to have to face them, it's best to do it on our terms as much as possible." Scott reluctantly admitted.

"Eyes in the sky, huh?" Andrew mused aloud.

"Do you know a non-mutant who can be a lookout for us?" Scott asked hopefully.

"No. But I can use my mutant ability from here to keep an eye on what's going on outside the mall. It won't put me in any additional danger and the only downside is that I won't be able to help you keep watch on the video feeds." Andrew said seriously.

"We've got enough people watching this. If you can keep watch for Sentinels, hopefully it will give us enough of a warning so that we can face them at our best." Scott said confidently.

"I'm going to be counting on you to keep watch on the kids." Andrew said firmly.

"I'll see to it that they're kept as safe as possible." Scott assured him.

Andrew's eyes turned golden and began to glow faintly as he said, "I'll be able to hear you if you have anything to ask me. I just won't be able to see you."

"Got it. Just keep watch on things outside and we'll keep you up-to-date on what's happening in the mall." Scott said seriously.

* * * * *

"What's with the subtitles? Is Trey trying to send us a message?" Alan asked curiously.

"Yes and no. Trey can send us text messages embedded in the video feed, but they're not technically subtitles, since they don't have anything to do with the video being transmitted. He probably doesn't want to establish a whole new channel for a message he can send in just a few words." Robert said frankly.

"It's too small for me to read from here. What's he saying?" Alan asked anxiously.

"He's just telling us that he's taking environmental base readings on his first subchannel and sending us the layout of the mall on the second." Robert easily explained.

"So is that the data that Janine is going to be processing?" Alan asked curiously.

"That's some of it. Trey will get all this stuff established early so that we have it processed and on file when the bad guys show up." Robert easily explained.

"So that way Janine won't have to check how high the ceiling is and things like that because she'll already know it?" John speculated.

"Exactly right. We'll already have the specifications of everything calculated and virtually rendered so that once we have scanned our opponents, we will be able to run thousands upon thousands of simulations, calculating every conceivable possibility." Robert said firmly.

"I'm curious, how many times do humans do things that are inconceivable to you?" John asked with a mischievous grin.

Robert glanced at Bobby for a long moment, then quietly said, "If it weren't for the unpredictability of human behavior, I would be able to calculate the outcome of today, and every day, from now on. Having done that, what would be the point of going through the motions just to arrive at a foregone conclusion?"

"Oh right. You're the poet, aren't you?" John said in realization.

Robert shyly smiled, then quietly admitted, "Yeah. I guess I am."

"Robert. I cannot use telepathy while ensconced in my alcove. Please contact Professor Xavier and request access to the mobile command center video feeds. If he resists, remind him that we will share Icheb, Trey, William, and Jimmy's video feeds in exchange." Janine said in a modulated Borg whisper-voice over the television speaker.

"Yeah. I'll get right on it. Professor X has been all up in my mind before, so I feel like he gets me. Don't worry. I got this." Robert said into the air and transmitted simultaneously.

* * * * *

Faith was the first to confirm that cash from the parallel universe was accepted without issue. Ashley B. was the first to find that their credit cards weren't quite as easy to use.

With Cerebro's help, Professor Xavier was able to construct facsimile accounts and connect them to the Slayers' existing credit cards. After that, Warren volunteered to do his part for the cause by footing the bill for the Slayers' shopping spree that evening with the proviso that he not be saddled with any subscriptions or recurring payments.

"Warren, did you notice that nearly all the Slayers, no matter where they are in the mall, appear to be doing exactly the same thing?" Scott asked curiously.

"No. I hadn't noticed, but it could be something that they planned ahead of time... or maybe they all just think the same." Warren said speculatively.

"In each case, one of them went into a store and shopped while the other waited outside. Each one bought something, I'm not sure if it was the same thing, but each one of them left the store with a large bag." Scott observed.

"It's shopping camouflage." Willow said simply, then explained, "They hide their weapons that way."

"That's good thinking. I was wondering how Xander was going to be able to walk around carrying an axe like that." Warren said frankly.

"Actually, Xander can probably get away with it. Whenever someone sees a big doofy guy with an eye patch carrying a battle axe, they automatically assume that he's an actor or a cosplayer or that he's going to try and sell them something; insurance, most likely." Andrew said as his golden eyes stared sightlessly forward.

"That's funny, because if I saw just about anyone else carrying an axe like that, I'd probably at least stop to question it, but Xander just seems to be natural that way." Scott said thoughtfully.

"He be dangerous, gentle, worldly, innocent... all contradiction." Remy said, finishing with a loving smile.

"Guys! Northwest, ten o'clock, I see at least four rocket engines in the sky that very well could be the Sentinels." Andrew said ominously.

Scott tapped his communicator and said in a slow clear voice, "Attention all team members. We've spotted something that *might* be the Sentinels approaching the mall from our northwest. Prepare yourselves and keep your radios handy."

"They've got to be insane, doing this on the Friday after Thanksgiving." Warren said anxiously.

"If they're wanting to test the ability of these things to capture mutants without hurting normal people, then I can't think of a more conclusive way of testing it. If they can do it today, they can do it *any* day." Andrew said reasonably.

"What do you see now?" Warren cautiously asked.

"All ten of them are in view. It's definitely them. They're... slow. They're big and clunky and as aerodynamically streamlined as a brick." Andrew said critically.

"It must take a lot to power them, then. I wonder what kind of power source they're using." Warren said speculatively.

"It must be something incredible because they're belching out long trails of flames to maintain those brick-shaped things at altitude." Andrew said carefully.

"How close are they?" Scott asked anxiously.

"They're still a few minutes out. It's amazing that they can stay airborne moving that slowly." Andrew said frankly.

"Can you make out any details about them that might give us an avenue of attack?" Scott asked curiously.

"Only the obvious. What kind of an idiot makes *bipedal* robots when he doesn't absolutely have to? I mean, why not make them one legged if you're going to do that? It would make about as much sense!" Andrew ranted.

"Which means?" Scott prompted.

"Which means that they'll be top-heavy, hopelessly off-balance, slow, awkward, and since taking even one step requires thousands of lines of code, they're probably going to register on the lower end of the intelligence scale... sub-moronic, most likely."

"Do you mean that you expect them to have some sort of artificial intelligence?" Scott asked with concern.

"More like artificial stupidity, but yeah. Either way, they have to have some sort of autonomous decision-making capability when they're out in the field. But as bad as that is, remote control drone robots would be even worse. They wouldn't be capable of doing the job." Andrew said seriously.

"How close are they now?" Scott quickly asked.

"A few minutes out, maybe. It depends on how long it takes to land one of those heavy-assed things. From the look of them, I'd guess that they weigh about a ton, each." Andrew said seriously.

"How are the Slayers going to be able to stop a machine that weighs a ton?" Willow asked with concern.

"Being that big and heavy *has to* be a disadvantage. We just have to figure out how to exploit it." Andrew said firmly.

"I'm sure you're right. I just can't think of how, off the top of my head." Scott timidly admitted, then thought to ask, "How are the Sentinels doing with their landing?"

"I'm pretty sure each of them has expended at least three gas stations worth of fuel so far and they haven't touched the ground yet." Andrew said frankly.

"If we can manage to take these things down, we really need to examine their energy source." Warren said frankly.

"I know the thought of it makes your money-bags draw up in anticipation, but keep in mind that these things are from the government. Whatever is powering them, it's probably something that can't be replicated in the private sector." Andrew said seriously.

"Like it was with the microwave?" Warren asked with a sly smile.

Andrew appeared to be surprised by the implications of what Warren was saying.

"Besides, given recent history, is it more likely that I'll find a way to capitalize on them or that you'll adopt them?" Warren asked playfully.

"I'm not..." Andrew sputtered, but then caught himself.

"There's no way..." He tried again. Finally, in an obviously flummoxed state, Andrew quietly growled, "Shut up."

* * * * *

"I see something. North lot, west side." Willow said abruptly, drawing all their attention.

"There's another one at the south." Scott announced.

"I never thought about how much room you'd need to land one of these things. It looks like each one of them is going to wipe out six or eight parked cars when they land." Andrew said slowly.

"Sixty to eighty cars destroyed? I wonder if this is going to be tallied into the cost benefit analysis of the field test." Warren asked speculatively.

"Uh oh." Andrew said suddenly.

"What is it?" Scott asked immediately.

"Matt on his motorcycle. He's just pulling into the mall parking lot." Andrew said hesitantly.

"Has he spotted the Sentinels yet?" Warren asked cautiously.

"They're in the process of incinerating over fifty cars all around the mall right now, complete with gasoline explosions. They're kind of hard to miss." Andrew said frankly.

"Have *they* spotted *him* yet?" Scott asked slowly.

"They haven't given any indication... wait, one of them is turning. It looks like it's going to try and face him." Andrew said slowly.

"Remy, would you see if you can get Jimmy and Clark's teams to move in that direction?" Scott asked firmly.

"*Oui.*" Remy automatically responded, then keyed the mic before saying, "Jimmy and Clark. We be needin you an your teams in de west parking lot. Be ready to take some pictures."

"*Superman and Six of Seven are on the way.*" Clark responded for both of them.

"You're not sending them into danger, are you?" Andrew asked with a slight growl under his words.

"Don't worry, they're not alone. Rona, Trey, and Xander are with them." Scott assured him, then explained, "We don't know how many chances we're going to get to take readings of these things. This could end up being our best opportunity, so we might as well go for it."

"I guess that's why you're in charge." Andrew said resignedly.

"I've got a visual." Willow suddenly announced.

"I think you're about to get another one. The professor is sending instructions for patching a set of external signals into your mixing board. We're about to get a direct video feed from 'Borg Control', which is Janine and the others at the boathouse." Scott said quickly.

"Look at dat." Remy said quietly as he pointed to the parking lot camera.

Matt and the Sentinel seemed to be squaring off, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

"Matt look like a small child nex to dat ting." Remy said slowly

"It's analyzing him, calculating how to counteract his mutant ability." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"How do you know that?" Scott asked curiously.

"Because there's no other reason for it to wait to attack him. Right now it's processing. As soon as it's done, it'll take action." Andrew said with certainty.

"Three of Seven, Uncle Matt has engaged one of the Sentinel robots. Now would be an excellent time to do an intensive scan of it, if you are available to do so." Jimmy called on the radio.

"I don't think your communications system has learned everyone's name yet." Willow said frankly.

"As long as everyone gets their messages, I'm not going to worry too much about it." Scott said honestly.

"Andrew, are any of those Sentinels landing near us? I can feel the ground trembling." Willow asked with concern.

"No. They're all closer to the mall. They just kick up a lot of dust when they land. They're *that* powerful." Andrew slowly answered.

"Six of Seven, we have visual contact with Uncle Matt. Commencing scanning now." Trey's voice said calmly.

"The Sentinel looks like it's done processing. I can't tell for sure, but I think it's hitting Matt with some kind of radiation or sound wave attack. Whatever it is, doesn't appear to be hurting him." Andrew said with concern.

"Team members, Matt is under attack in the northwest parking lot. Any non-mutant in the area who is combat ready, move in and attack at will." Scott called firmly.

After a moment, Andrew quietly said, "It looks like Clark, Rona, and Xander are moving in to attack."

"If these things weigh a ton each, Clark's the only one I can see being able to do much damage to them." Scott said frankly.

"Here. I've zeroed in on that part of the parking lot. You can see what's happening." Willow said quickly as she moved away from the monitor to give an unobstructed view.

"*A Sentinel just entered Macy's. It looks like this could take us a minute.*" Buffy called over the radio.

"Do what you need to do. Call if you need our help with anything." Scott immediately responded.

"*Will do.*" Buffy replied.

"*We've got one at the movie theater. We've got Ashleys A. and C. here with us. I'm pretty sure we can handle it.*" Faith called next.

"Acknowledged. Yell if you need us." Scott said with a note of concern sounding under his words.

After a long anxious moment, Warren quietly said, "That's only four of *them*."

* * * * *

"*Robert, go to your alcove immediately. I require your assistance.*" Janine's Borg whisper-voice said over the television speaker.

"Don't you need me to stay here and transmit you Trey's data?" Robert asked hesitantly.

"*I have processed the relevant data from Trey's scans. I require your assistance to make use of the resulting information.*" Janine said succinctly.

"Um, yeah. I'll go to my alcove now." Robert said as he looked to Bobby hopefully.

Bobby nodded immediately and stood to go with him.

"*Dad. I have gained remote access to the video output of your viewing device. I will endeavor to give you a clear view of what is happening with Father and the others.*"

Janine said as the nine-way split screen changed to reveal the view of a single camera in the parking lot, where Matt and a giant robot were standing amongst smoldering rubble, facing-off against each other.

"Thanks, Pumpkin." Alan hesitantly said, not sure if she was able to hear him or not.

* * * * *

"Matt, we've got a team nearly at your location. As soon as they arrive, I need for you to disengage and retreat to the command center RV directly south of you." Scott said firmly.

"Cyke, you know me better than that." Matt immediately responded.

"Matt. How many people are you willing to let *die* because you're too proud to let them do what needs to be done? This thing attacks *mutants*. Let the non-mutants handle it this once." Scott said firmly.

A powerful stream of red drew everyone's attention as the two narrow beams focused on the giant robot's head.

"Matt! Get out of there while that thing is processing the new information!" Andrew called loudly.

"You can quit your nagging. I'm going." Matt responded irritably.

After a long moment, Andrew tapped his badge and quietly said, "All team members, just in case you haven't found out for yourselves yet, these things appear to be impervious to sword and axe attacks. Remember that they're top-heavy, weigh a literal ton and are not very fast or graceful. Maybe you can find some way to use that to your advantage. Do your best. Call if you need our help."

Chapter 21: The Beneath

"Uh oh. That's not good." Andrew said as he continued to stare sightlessly.

"What is it?" Scott asked anxiously at the ominous words as he kept his gaze fixed on the parking lot monitor.

"It looks to me like the Sentinel has decided that Clark and the others aren't worth its time. It appears to be focusing entirely on Matt." Andrew said gravely.

"Can you port Matt out of there?" Scott asked cautiously.

"Probably, yeah..." Andrew began to say, but was interrupted.

//It is likely that you will only be able to use your portal ability once, maybe twice before the Sentinel finds a way to nullify it. I would prefer to save your portal until we *really* need it, if at all possible.// Professor Xavier somberly recommended.

"I think Matt's figured out that it's not going to let him go without a fight." Willow announced.

After a moment of watching, Scott finally said, "Axes and swords may not work against those things, but it appears that Matt's claws do a decent enough job."

"It's barely a scratch, not even a flesh wound..." Warren began to say but was stopped by the sudden action on the monitor.

"Ouch! He gonna feel dat in da mornin." Remy said with a sympathetic cringe.

After a moment, Scott quietly said, "He's not healing."

"What?" Warren asked with surprise as he inched even closer to the monitor.

"That ray or whatever the robot used on him, it must have been able to stop his ability to heal somehow." Scott said anxiously.

"Get up!" Willow said urgently to the monitor.

"I can port him out if you need me to. It's your call." Andrew hesitantly offered.

"Remy, you said that these things were here to *capture* mutants, not kill them, right?" Scott reluctantly asked.

"Dat be de plan dat Remy see, but dese tings ain't smart. Remy don't tink dey understand what bein 'alive' mean." Remy said frankly.

"Good point." Warren quietly added.

"Even so, we need to see what this thing's going to do next, if we're going to have any hope of forming a strategy to fight them." Scott said regretfully.

"I can still port him out." Andrew offered.

"Stand ready. Just try to hold it until the last possible moment. The more we can discover here and now, the more information we'll have to help our people later." Scott said decisively.

Andrew waited a moment, then suddenly announced, "He's getting up."

* * * * *

"Wretched beast! Surrender immediately or incur my wrath!" Groo bellowed.

"I'd listen to him if I were you." Angel said toward the Sentinel, as he stood off to the side.

A slight crowd was beginning to gather to watch the spectacle.

"Have at ye, vile abomination!" Groo called before approaching the Sentinel and beginning to chop at it with his sword.

"Why are you talking like that?" Angel asked curiously.

"Certain things are to be done a certain way. This is the proper behavior when one is tasked to slay a beast such as this." Groo said confidently.

"Are you sure?" Angel cautiously asked.

"It is the responsibility of a sovereign ruler to be aware of such things." Groo said confidently.

Angel considered for a moment, then said, "I guess, if this is how it's done."

With a beautifully executed hit, Groo was able to cut a satisfying trench into the side of the huge robot's head.

"Verily I say, have at thee!" Angel proclaimed as he lunged to stab the metal beast in the gut, using the vampiric strength of a centuries old master.

* * * * *

Although Matt was accustomed to being injured in battle, he had also come to depend on his healing factor immediately working to ameliorate the injury, no matter how severe. Knowing that he was healing allowed him to continue the fight without concern for long term consequences.

The moment of realization wasn't outwardly noticeable to those observing, but felt like the difference between night and day to Matt.

He had gone into the battle feeling like his usual self and all of a sudden, he was on the same level as any average non-mutant.

As suddenly as the realization had come over him, it unexpectedly left.

Matt sprang to his feet and dove into battle with the enormous monster.

With blood freely flowing down his arms from where the claws had pierced his skin to emerge, Matt directed his attack at the torso of the metallic beast.

While the head might seem to be a more reasonable target, it also appeared to be surprisingly well defended.

Based solely on his previous attack, Matt had decided that he would be able to do substantial damage to the midsection of the Sentinel before it could formulate a defense or counterattack.

To his credit, Matt *did* manage to penetrate the outer hull of the massive robot. If that had been flesh instead of an inert covering of Kevlar and metal, it might have counted as being serious damage.

However, the Sentinel was *not* made of flesh and blood and the damage inflicted by Matt was negligible by anyone's measure.

While it seemed to take a moment for the Sentinel to register the situation, when it did, it took decisive action. It quickly turned itself away, to prevent further damage, then followed through with the movement, hitting Matt full force with the back of its hand and arm.

In one horrifying moment, Matt went flying over the tops of cars, farther and farther into the parking lot.

* * * * *

"Well, I can't drown it, you can't crush it with air pressure and that little spark of lightning we came up with wasn't enough to do much of anything. Have *you* got any ideas?" Dawn asked with frustration.

"Anything I can think of would be more likely to hurt the people in the mall than the Sentinel." Tara said honestly.

"It's not like the thing even knows that we're here. All it's doing is looking for mutants to capture." Buffy said angrily as she slashed at the giant robot with her scythe.

"At least you're able to do *some* kind of damage to it." Dawn said simply.

"If I can kill it, it'll be a death by a thousand cuts. Who has time for that?" Buffy complained.

"Do you have another option that you're not telling me about?" Dawn asked cautiously.

"I'm thinking that we may have to depend on the natives to come up with their own solution to this problem. It's looking more and more like brute force isn't going to be up to the job." Buffy said frankly.

"So does that mean that we're changing our strategy from trying to defeat these things to trying to stall them until the X-Men can figure out how to take them down?" Dawn asked curiously.

"Sounds like a way to go." Buffy said simply.

"Count me in. I prefer to take on jobs where there's a chance of succeeding." Riley interjected into the conversation.

"And yet you dated Buffy." Dawn said teasingly.

"It was totally worth it." Riley said with an affectionate grin at Buffy, then continued, "I can't think of a better place for a man to learn the true meaning of the word 'futility'."

"I'm standing *right here*." Buffy said indignantly.

"You know that I love you Buffy, you're definitely in my top fifty favorite people." Riley said toward her warmly.

"Fifty?" Buffy parroted disbelievingly.

"Am I in *your* top fifty?" Riley asked with a knowing grin.

"Yes!" Buffy immediately declared.

At Riley's incredulous stare, Buffy reluctantly added, "...Probably."

Dawn, Tara, and Riley continued to wait, none of them giving an inch.

"I know a lot of people." Buffy said defensively, then hurriedly added, "And some of them aren't even 'people' people."

"It's okay, Buffy. I'm not accusing you or blaming you for anything. I'm just saying that I accept who and what you are and the realities that go along with it. There isn't a place for me in a full-time capacity in your life. I get that. I'll take what you have to offer right here and now, and I'll be ready to step back when life starts coming at you full-force again." Riley said seriously.

"What kind of future can we have doing something like that?" Buffy quietly asked.

"Probably better than the alternative. At least this way we aren't angry and bitter because we continue to want what we can't have." Riley said frankly.

"It's good that the Sentinel is ignoring us." Dawn said to Tara quietly.

"Do you want to try summoning a waterspout *inside* the thing?" Tara asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Who knows? We might get lucky and short out something important in there. Either way, I don't think it'll hurt anything to try." Dawn said as she took firm hold of Tara's hand.

* * * * *

"Be quiet. Hold still for a minute. You're safe." A voice said soothingly.

"Who are you?" Matt asked blearily as he fought against the swimmy sensation to open his eyes.

"My name is Brian. You hit the ground pretty hard. I think you may have a concussion." The boy said with concern evident in his voice.

"I was under attack!" Matt said suddenly as his eyes flew open.

"You don't have to worry about that now. You're safe. The Sentinel lost its lock on you and can't see where you are now. You've got a minute to catch your breath before you have to worry about anything else." Brian said frankly.

Matt looked around and recognized that they were hunkered down between two parked cars and not in the direct line of sight of the Sentinel that he had been fighting.

He looked at the bespectacled boy appraisingly for a moment. He appeared to be of South Asian descent and didn't seem to have any outward manifestation of mutation.

"Who are you, kid? Do I know you from somewhere?" Matt quietly asked.

Brian broke into an ironic smile, then said, "I don't even know how many times I've been asked that question, but this time I can honestly say, no. You don't know me from somewhere and we haven't met before."

Before Matt could ask what Brian meant by the strange statement, Brian continued, "But if everything ends up going right today, then someday, many years from now, we might be able to say that I'm an old friend of yours."

After a long uncertain moment, Matt cautiously asked, "Are you talking about time travel?"

"Only one minute at a time, going forward." Brian said with a grin.

"I think I'm ready. Where are we going?" Matt asked as his world was beginning to come back into focus.

"*You're* going to meet up with your friends in the RV over that way." Brian said as he pointed, then he continued, "*I've* got my own thing in the works that I have to get back to."

"If you're sure." Matt said as he looked at Brian uncertainly.

"Trust me, I've got it all worked out." Brian reassured him.

"Alright then, I suppose we'd better get going." Matt said as he shifted to a kneeling position, readying himself to crab-walk between the parked cars.

"I'll follow you until we're away from that robot, then I'll be going my own way." Brian said as he mirrored Matt's pose.

"Okay. Thanks for helping me when I was down and out, I won't forget it." Matt said before dashing away.

"Yes you will." Brian said regretfully as he followed, extending his ability, his *forget-*ability, to cover Matt until they were well away from the Sentinel.

* * * * *

"I'm surprised that you didn't want to stay with Clark to help him." Xander cautiously stated.

"Of course I did. However, I need to scan multiple Sentinel units to gather trustworthy data." Trey said frankly.

"Well, there it is. Go ahead and do what you need to do while Rona and I stand guard." Xander said unenthusiastically.

"In addition to gathering data, I am interested to see if I am able to disrupt the unit's function via electronic means." Trey said frankly.

{Jimmy, stay down!} Xander harshly whispered.

"If this thing was interested in me, it would have attacked me by now." Jimmy said frankly.

"Excuse me. Jimmy, would you focus your video surveillance on the Sentinel's head? I am going to attempt to bombard it with a series of electromagnetic frequencies to ascertain if it is susceptible to any of them." Trey said carefully.

"What do you want me to watch for?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"A reaction, perhaps." Trey said simply.

"Although the protrusion on top of the device is made to *look* like a head, I can see no reason to believe that it will have any of the functions of the head of a biological being." Jimmy said reasonably.

"Those who created these devices did so with a particular mindset. They modeled them after themselves, bipedal mammals. It would stand to reason that they would localize functions such as sight and sound receptors where eyes and ears would typically be." Trey explained.

"Okay. Yeah. I guess." Jimmy reluctantly agreed.

"Please just tell me if you witness anything that might indicate that something I am doing is affecting the robot in any way." Trey asked hopefully.

"I will do so. Proceed." Jimmy assured him.

* * * * *

"What are they doing?" Robin asked distractedly as he hacked and slashed at the giant robot that had stopped directly in front of the multiplex movie theater.

"Helping us, I think." Faith said uncertainly as she struggled to inflict any significant damage on the machine in front of her.

"Why?" Robin asked as he spared a glance around him at the ten or so people ineffectively hitting and kicking the giant robot.

"I guess that after an action movie, this might seem to be the next logical step for them." Faith said dubiously.

"Well, good... I guess. I hope it turns out to be therapeutic for them." Robin said uncertainly.

* * * * *

"Matt's back!" Andrew said quickly as his gold eyes returned to normal and he ran for the door.

"Back from where? Where was he?" Scott asked quickly as Warren followed Andrew out the door.

A moment later, Warren and Andrew half dragged, half carried Matt into the mobile command center.

"What happened to you Matt? Where were you?" Scott asked quickly.

"He's not healing. Do you have any bandages or first-aid stuff?" Andrew asked quickly.

"Yeah. That cabinet, right there." Scott said as he pointed.

"Let me get him patched up while you keep an eye on our people. As soon as we have some answers, I'll tell you." Andrew said assertively.

"Don't you want to keep watch outside?" Scott cautiously asked.

"The Sentinels are already here. I think Willow can keep watch on them with her cameras as well as I can at this stage of things." Andrew said frankly as he reached through a portal in mid-air and came back with his med kit.

"Matt, where were you?" Scott asked firmly as he turned the majority of his attention back to the multitude of split-screen monitors.

"I... I don't know. I was fighting that big robot and then he got in a good solid hit on me, then the next thing I know, I'm walking up to the mobile command center with you guys yelling at me." Matt said slowly.

"When that thing knocked you down, it looked like it lost you. It was like it was searching around for where you went. I thought that maybe you were able to get away... somehow. Even *I* couldn't figure out where you'd gone." Andrew said as he did a thorough scan to assess Matt's condition.

"I don't know what to tell you. He hit me. I went down. Next thing I knew, I was heading back here." Matt said frankly.

"Bad news: You've got a concussion and a pretty bad case of road rash." Andrew said regretfully.

"Is there any good news?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Your healing factor appears to be revving up. I can't predict how long it will take before it's back to its usual intensity, but from what I'm seeing here, the only thing I can offer you is a little pain management until your body can repair itself." Andrew said seriously.

"If it'll fix itself, then you can just leave it be. I'll tough it out." Matt said wearily.

"Fat chance of that." Andrew said as he injected a hypospray into Matt's neck.

"Didn't you take an oath or something that you can't do stuff like that without my permission?" Matt asked gruffly.

"Nope. I help people when I think they need it." Andrew said as he put his tricorder and hypospray away.

There was a moment of silence, then Matt reluctantly said, "I can feel it working... It's helping. Thanks."

Before Andrew could respond, Scott quickly said, "I think Clark just caught that Sentinel's attention."

* * * * *

Using what Alex had taught him, Clark was finally able to focus his optic blasts to the point that he could penetrate the hull of the Sentinel.

With one mighty swipe of its arm, the Sentinel swatted Clark away, knocking him some thirty feet back to land between some cars, much like it had done to Matt earlier.

"Go check on him. Let us handle this. If it gets you two, we've lost." Spike told Alex and Marie.

"Yeah. We'll make sure that Clark's okay. If he's in too bad of shape, we'll evacuate him to the command center." Alex said professionally.

"Should I go with you or stay?" Icheb asked uncertainly.

"Stay right here. If something turns up that you can do to help, I'll let you know." Spike said firmly.

Icheb gave a single nod of commitment to the plan.

Spike swooped in and gave Alex a firm kiss before hefting his machete and joining Vi to fight the giant robot.

* * * * *

"How is he?" Marie asked anxiously at Alex's side.

"No blood." Alex commented as he felt for broken bones, watching Clark carefully for any sign of reaction.

"If Trey and John catch you feeling me up like that, they're going to kick your ass." Clark said weakly as he slowly opened his eyes.

"John isn't here and Trey's busy collecting data on the robots." Alex said as he continued to probe, then quietly asked, "How badly are you hurt?"

"Actually, I think I'm okay. When that thing hit me, it caught me by surprise and everything went dark for a minute. But I don't hurt or anything. I just feel a little spacey." Clark said as he slowly sat up.

"Still, you should give yourself a minute to recover before you go back to fighting." Alex said urgently.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but from what I've been hearing on the radio, so far I'm the only one who's hurting these things at all. If I stop fighting, we've got no one." Clark said as he slowly moved from a sitting to a crouched position.

"Believe me, I've noticed." Alex assured him.

"Clark, my mutant ability is to absorb other people's abilities. Maybe, if you let me touch you for a minute, I could get a copy of your optic blast and then there'd be two of us who can attack that thing." Marie quietly offered.

"But it's after mutants. If it notices you, it'll go after you and won't stop until you're captured." Clark said anxiously.

"Then I'll be sure to hit it from a good distance and be ready to run." Marie said seriously.

"I can't fight these things all on my own. If you want to copy my ability, I have no problem with that. But don't attack that thing until I'm up on my feet so that we can fight it together." Clark said firmly.

"Yeah. You draw it and I'll distract it from a distance when it gets too close to you. With any luck, we'll be able to double-team it till we take it down." Marie said as she took off one of her long gloves.

"Is this going to hurt him?" Alex asked anxiously.

"When I touch regular people, it usually knocks them out. When I touch mutants, I steal their abilities and they might get weak for a little while. When I touch Icheb, nothing happens... well, it doesn't hurt him, just a little touch telepathy." Marie finished with a slight blush.

"What do you think will happen when you touch Clark?" Alex cautiously asked.

"Hopefully nothing too bad. He's right. So far, he's all we've got." Marie said as she offered her bare hand for Clark to take.

"Don't forget that we have Icheb and Trey on our side. We're not just fighting to protect them, we're also fighting to give them time to sort this whole mess out for us. It may turn out that they'll be the heroes and we'll be their support." Clark said honestly.

"Then let's support them." Marie said as she closed the distance between them and took firm hold of his hand.

* * * * *

"Shouldn't we be trying to get away?" Caridad quietly asked.

"I thought you'd be wanting to *fight* that crazy thing." Evan said honestly.

"Um, yeah... no. I lived this long by not being stupid. I don't see any reason to change that now." Caridad said frankly.

"You know what? I'm totally on board with that." Evan said weakly, then continued, "I'm just afraid that if we try to leave that it'll notice us. Right now, it's busy with Mr. Rourke and that King Arthur guy."

"His name is Groo... but he *is* a king..." Caridad trailed off as Angel and Groo struck the robot in the head from two different directions at exactly the same time.

A cheer rose up from the crowd that had formed to watch the fight. It appeared that those in attendance thought that the whole thing was some sort of production to celebrate the release of a new video game just in time for the Christmas holiday.

"I think it's crowded enough that we can probably get away if we go right now." Evan said as he looked around.

"You may go if you like, but I am receiving a message from Borg Control. It appears to be instructions for disabling the Sentinel robots." William said slowly, as though he were listening to something at a distance that only he could hear.

"What'dya say? You in?" Caridad asked Evan challengingly.

"Fuck yeah!"

* * * * *

"Something's wrong." Marie gasped.

"Are you alright?" Clark asked with concern.

{Is this hurting you?} Marie asked in a breathy whisper.

"It feels a little warm, but that's all. It's actually kinda nice." Clark said honestly.

"The life energy, it's not like any mutant power I've ever absorbed before. It's incredible. I'm drowning in it." Marie said as she began to look around them jerkily.

"Let go of Clark if it's hurting you." Alex said firmly.

"I can see... everything. Clark? Is this how you see the world?" Marie asked in wonder.

"I see the same way that you do, as far as I know." Clark said honestly.

Marie let Clark's hand fall away from hers as she began to rise.

"You're floating." Alex told her; in case she wasn't aware of it.

"What'dya say Clark? You up for some payback?" Marie asked as she began to float toward the Sentinel that had swatted him.

"Remember that it's going to try and capture you." Alex called anxiously.

"Yeah. Fat chance." Marie said, then disappeared in a blur of movement.

"C'mon. We'd better go. 'X-Men to the rescue' and all of that." Alex said flippantly as he hurried away to follow Marie.

"Are we going to be rescuing Marie or the Sentinel?" Clark asked as he followed.

"Honestly, I could see it going either way at this point."

* * * * *

"What's the plan?" Evan asked as he took his backpack off and released his skateboard so that he could have it at the ready.

"Janine and Robert are transmitting a series of new programs for our nanoprobes. Once deployed, they will disable the Sentinel robots and reconfigure them. Their technological distinctiveness will be adapted to service us." William said distantly.

"What are you going to need for *us* to do?" Caridad asked impatiently.

"Once I have generated a sufficient number of nanoprobes in the new configuration, I will need to make physical contact with the robot to deliver them." William said calmly.

"So you want for us to hold it down while you give it a shot?" Evan asked dubiously.

"Although that would be most convenient for *me*. I believe that we might be able to achieve a better result if you were to 'distract' the robot whilst I approach it from behind and attempt to discreetly implant my modified nanoprobes while it is otherwise occupied."

"Sounds a little rapey to me." Evan said frankly.

"We'll see that it gets whatever counselling it needs once we've stopped it from attacking mutants and trying to capture them." Caridad promised.

"Is there anything we can do while you're busy making probes?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Yes. If you were to find a way to inform Uncle Angel and his fighting companion of the plan, it might make the execution of our plan significantly easier." William earnestly suggested.

"If you guys will promise to hang back and stay out of sight, I can go over there and tell them what's going on." Caridad said confidently.

"Yeah. We'll stay right here, inside the arcade doorway." Evan promised.

* * * * *

Clark and Alex arrived in time to see Marie punch the robot hard enough to knock it off its feet.

"Does that mean that I should be able to do that?" Clark asked as he stared in wonder at Marie hovering in mid-air.

"I don't know. I suppose it's possible." Alex said honestly.

Before Clark could respond, the Sentinel turned and began to emit a beam of blue light from a device on its forearm.

"It's probably trying to nullify her mutant ability. We need to stop it." Alex said firmly.

"If you attack it, it's going to zero in on you and we will lose you. Let me see if I can shut it down on my own." Clark said as he stepped around the car in front of him, then began to fire optic blasts directly at the emitter.

As the blue beam stopped, Marie began to slowly float down to the ground.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked as he rushed out from between the cars to catch her.

"Yeah. I don't know exactly what that did, but it didn't hurt me." Marie said as she shook her head to clear her foggy thinking.

"It probably just nullified your ability to absorb other people's abilities." Alex said honestly.

Marie leaned in close and laid a gloved hand on his cheek, holding Alex's face against hers for a long moment.

"Hey! What you two doin over there?!" Spike demanded to know.

"Marie's just confirming that she can't absorb my ability." Alex called back.

"Yeah well, she can confirm it with someone else. Back off!" Spike informed them before running to attack the giant robot with his machete.

"Is there anything I can do to help you guys?" Alex asked anxiously as he watched the battle.

"Where's Icheb?" Marie called out as she got back onto her feet and managed to stand on her own.

"I don't know. We're kinda busy here." Vi said from a few feet away as she dodged a punch from the enormous robot.

"There he is." Marie said with a smile as she looked to their left.

"Where?" Alex asked as he tried to follow her gaze.

"Between those cars, right over there." Marie said simply.

"How can you see between the cars from here?" Alex asked cautiously.

Marie looked around curiously for a moment, then said, "It looks like I didn't lose Clark's abilities after all. Cool!"

Before Alex could react, Marie was a blur of motion, flying straight at the Sentinel.

As much as he was loathed to do so, Alex crouched down and watched events unfold from a distance, so as not to make the situation worse.

Marie flew directly at the robot and grabbed hold of it by the arm. In one swift move, she flipped the thing on to the ground, flat on its back.

"Clark? What'dya say? You wanna help me carve this sucker into about a dozen pieces of scrap metal?" Marie asked as she floated to hover at Clark's side.

"Yeah. I think I could get into that." Clark said honestly.

"Excuse me, but before you do that, you should know that Janine has developed a plan for the Sentinels." Icheb said as he walked to stand beside Marie, the other side from Clark.

"What? Does she want to keep them as her toys?" Marie asked with a grin.

"Yes." Icheb said simply.

Marie and Clark waited for an explanation, but none seemed to be forthcoming.

"That's it?" Marie finally asked.

"Father has said that this may be our best opportunity to discredit the Sentinel project and prove that they are not worth the investment. Janine's plan is to assimilate the Sentinels so that they will service us. The complete loss of the investment should discourage the people who made the Sentinels from attempting to replicate this particular strategy." Icheb explained.

"What do we need to do?" Clark asked simply as he noticed that the Sentinel was in the process of righting itself and would soon pose a threat.

"Janine has already processed the scans from Trey and developed a new series of directives for our nanoprobes. I will simply need to get near enough to the Sentinel to inject it with my tubules." Icheb said frankly.

"How long will that take?" Marie asked seriously.

After a moment to consider, Icheb said, "Ten seconds at most."

"Do you need time to prepare or anything?" Marie asked cautiously.

"No. I have produced a sufficient number of nanoprobes with the new programming." Icheb answered confidently.

"Then let's do it. C'mon. I'll fly you in. Clark, give us cover." Marie said confidently.

"You got it." Clark said easily.

"Spike, Vi. Keep it busy for a minute. We're going to try something." Marie called out as she effortlessly lifted Icheb into the air.

"What's going on?" Alex asked cautiously from between two cars.

"Hold on. Stay down another minute or two, then we should have this thing under control." Clark called back to him, keeping his attention on what Marie and Icheb were doing.

With nothing more than a single glance between them, Spike and Vi sprang into action.

Their perfectly choreographed moves looked as though they might have been practicing together for months. The hack and slash attacks were relentless, providing sufficient threat to occupy the Sentinel while Marie and Icheb swiftly swooped in from behind.

"Sined, seeled and delivered. You may put me down." Icheb called seriously.

"No more *Buckaroo Banzai* for you." Marie said with a grin as she flew them a short distance to where Alex was waiting.

"What now?" Alex asked anxiously as he discretely watched Vi and Spike continuing to fight the monstrous robot.

"In a moment, the Sentinel will become non-operational. Sometime after that, it will be under *our* control." Icheb said informatively.

"So I'm guessing that you're going to need for us to do the same thing to the other nine Sentinels." Marie said hesitantly.

"Perhaps not. All the Borg former drones have received the alternate programming for our nanoprobes. While we do not have direct communication with each other, we all receive the same messages from Janine and Robert at Borg Control. I expect that the others are formulating plans to subdue their own Sentinels." Icheb said calmly.

"Remember, you have radios." Alex said frankly.

"I *had* forgotten. We typically do not coordinate. We follow." Icheb said very deliberately, then purposefully reached up and tapped his communicator badge one time before saying, "All team members, this is Two of Seven. We have defeated our Sentinel using Borg technology. Thus far the reprogramming appears to be one hundred percent effective."

"*We were watching your fight, you did good. How would you like to deal with another one to your northeast in the 'A' parking area?*" Scott asked hopefully.

"Yes. We will do so immediately. Two of Seven out." Icheb said before tapping the badge again.

"Who put you in charge?" Spike asked hesitantly.

"Do not worry, Uncle Spike. If you feel that you are too weak or tired to fight additional robots, I am certain that Marie and I can handle it." Icheb said with a grin at him.

"Cheeky bastard." Spike grumbled good-naturedly as he dusted himself off and prepared to go.

Chapter 22: Leastways

"Mobile Command, the 'A' parking area looks like a literal war zone. There are injured civilians and quite a bit of destruction out here. Please advise. Do you think we'll have enough time to deal with the next Sentinel before the firetrucks and ambulances arrive? Remember, the police don't like us very much." Alex called over the radio with concern.

//There are no police, fire, or paramedic teams being dispatched to your location. The dispatcher has been ordered to disregard all calls originating from or regarding the Westchester Mall.// Professor Xavier said seriously.

"How can they do that? There are civilians who need medical attention here." Alex asked anxiously.

//Even so, the emergency services are being ordered to stand down until the Sentinels have pacified the area.// Professor Xavier said gravely.

"Remy not know bout dis part of tings. Jus know bout dem coming to capture de mutants." Remy said frankly.

"Which means that the Sentinels might have some more programming that compels them to do something more than we're aware of." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"Do you think that the kids would know anything about that?" Scott asked curiously.

"They might. I'll go check." Andrew said simply, then stepped through a door that wasn't there.

"Havok, we need you to proceed as planned. Get in there, deliver your package, then get out." Scott said firmly.

"To be honest, I have very little to do with it. Superman, Rogue, and Two of Seven are handling most of this one. I'm just the bait." Alex reluctantly admitted.

"You're also the experienced X-Man of the group. I'm counting on you to see that our goals are met and our standards are maintained." Scott said seriously.

"I don't know if these guys can do 'by the book', but I'm pretty sure that we can get the job done." Alex assured his brother.

"That's what I'm counting on."

* * * * *

"I have a sufficient number of nanoprobes replicated. We may proceed with the implantation." William announced.

"Let me dive in with Angel and Groo and we'll get this show on the road." Caridad said enthusiastically.

"What should I do?" Evan asked uncertainly.

"Protect him. Me and the guys are going to try and keep that thing occupied, but if anything goes wrong, it's going to be up to you to deal with it." Caridad said emphatically.

Evan placed his skateboard on the ground and readied himself for action as he said, "I thought I was just coming along as bait."

"You've been upgraded to 'protector'. But if you'd rather us classify you as 'D.I.D.' I'm pretty sure it wouldn't take much doing."

"D.I.D.?" Evan asked uncertainly.

"Damsel in distress." Caridad clarified.

"You know, I think I'll pass on the 'D.I.D.' thing and be the hero this time out." Evan said as he stepped on the end of his skateboard and tipped it up to meet his waiting hand.

"Glad to hear it. As soon as we get that thing's attention, be ready to get to work." Caridad said seriously.

"Got it." Evan assured her.

* * * * *

"Are you okay, Icheb?" Marie asked with concern.

"I need a moment. I have nearly generated a sufficient number of nanoprobes." Icheb said seriously.

"That's not what I'm asking. You were jokey before, now you're all serious. What's up?" Marie asked gently.

"Unlike my siblings, I was not born naturally. I was bioengineered for a specific purpose. Doing this today, 'infecting' the Sentinels, it reminds me of past pain and dark days." Icheb said frankly.

"Are you gonna be alright?" Marie asked cautiously.

"Yes. I just need a moment to feel what I'm feeling." Icheb assured her.

"If you want, I could feel it with you." Marie quietly offered.

"This pain is mine to carry alone. I wouldn't want anyone else to feel this because of me." Icheb quietly informed her.

"Scoot over and take an end. I've already decided, I'm carrying it with you." Marie said as she removed her glove and took firm hold of Icheb's wrist.

"I would be ashamed..." Icheb feebly protested as he felt Marie's presence ghosting through his being.

"It's okay. I see it, Icheb. I see what they did." Marie assured him.

"I didn't want you to see. I wasn't meant to be a person. I should have only ever been a weapon." Icheb said regretfully.

"You're both." Marie said simply, then explained, "But now you're a weapon for the good guys."

"The Brunali who created me were also good guys... for the most part." Icheb feebly protested.

"Okay. I'll take your word for it and I won't hate them. But just so you know, I think you're a better person than I am. If someone had done that to me, I couldn't ever forgive them." Marie said frankly.

"I can't claim forgiveness, but I have abandoned my lingering hatred." Icheb said honestly.

"Even that's probably more than I could do." Marie reluctantly admitted.

"Perhaps you can be my strength, helping me to carry my burden and I can be your strength, showing you a way to abandon hatred toward those who have wronged you." Icheb said hopefully.

"I love how, even though you see the darkness in me, you still accept me just as I am." Marie said warmly.

"Of course. I have been to a place without light or darkness. Given the choice, I would wish for you to have both, rather than neither."

"How's your probe count?" Marie quietly asked.

"Sufficient." Icheb said confidently.

"Then let's do this." Marie said as she floated up and easily glided behind Icheb to lift him.

"I don't understand how you're able to fly." Icheb stated simply.

"Me either." Marie admitted, then thought to add, "Usually the abilities that I borrow would have faded by now, but this doesn't seem to be fading at all."

"I am curious to know what type of emissions the previous Sentinel was bombarding you with in an attempt to nullify your ability. It is possible that it may have contributed to extending Clark's ability within you." Icheb said speculatively as Marie carried him toward the giant robot.

"You guys ready to go again?" Marie called to Spike and Vi, who were busy hacking and slashing at the Sentinel.

"Do it! Bloody thing keeps trying to wander off." Spike said with annoyance.

"I'll lay down some cover fire so you can get behind it." Clark called forcefully.

Marie smiled at Clark's evident increase in self-confidence. In the short time that they had been fighting, he had gone from timidly trying to use his ability to stepping up as a 'heavy hitter' for the team.

"You ready?" Alex called from between some cars nearby.

"Stay down or it'll see you!" Marie scolded.

"That's the point. I'm doing my job as bait. Don't make me regret it!" Alex called before running into the scene of destruction and right in front of the giant robot.

As soon as the robot seemed to notice Alex, Clark let loose a formidable optic blast.

"Hit it!" Spike called as he and Vi resumed their hacking and slashing duties.

At best possible speed, Marie flew Icheb behind the robot and got him close enough to inject his tubules.

"Watch out!" Clark called as one of his optic blasts passed dangerously close to Marie's leg.

As she was about to caution Clark to be more careful, she spotted a snake-like piece of metallic tubing retracting into the Sentinel's side.

"Thanks, Clark. I didn't see that coming at me." Marie said gratefully.

Another blast impacted the Sentinel in the face, but didn't seem to do any damage.

"I think he's figured out how to counter optic blasts!" Clark warned.

"Guys! My blasts aren't doing anything either!" Alex screamed as he started running to evade another set of snake-like appendages emerging from the robot's palms.

"My package has been delivered. Please go help Uncle Alex until the Sentinel becomes non-operational." Icheb said seriously.

"Got it." Marie said as she gently placed Icheb on the ground, then gave him the slightest peck of a kiss on the cheek before flying into battle.

Icheb smiled at the action as he moved quickly away from the Sentinel to where he could watch the fight from relative safety.

* * * * *

"Hi Love, I expected Janine and Robert to be in here with you." Andrew said before leaning in to give Alan a kiss.

"They're both in their alcoves. They set it up so that we can watch what's happening on the television."

"I bet that's driving you crazy." Andrew chuckled.

"A little. But someone's got to stay home with the kids." Alan said frankly.

"Why don't I take a turn at baby juggling so you can help Scott at the mobile command center?" Andrew asked seriously.

"No, Andy. From what I've seen, there are people hurt in the parking lot and around the mall. I'm not seeing any kind of emergency response being dispatched, so someone needs to help them." Alan said reasonably.

"Love, I'm one person. I can't do it all by myself. The best help I can give those people is to send you in there to get this mess sorted out so that the ambulances and firetrucks can get through to them." Andrew said as he gestured to a door that formed beside him.

"Not that I'm disagreeing, but why aren't you taking care of this yourself?" Alan asked as he handed Marguerite to Andrew.

"Because as close as Scott and I are, you and he are closer. You're literally two versions of the same person. If anyone can figure out how to coordinate with him and help get things done as efficiently as possible, it's you." Andrew said confidently.

"So this isn't about you trying to make it so I don't feel left out?" Alan asked as he carefully placed Thomas into the stroller.

"As much as I love you, I wouldn't endanger a mission for something like that." Andrew assured him, then added, "I did what I could and gave it my best. Now it's your turn."

"I think Quaid and I can watch the kids for a while if you both want to go." John cautiously offered.

"No. I think I've done all that I realistically can. Anything else I could do would likely postpone the rescue effort even further." Andrew said decisively.

"Thomas and Chakotay are about due for a feeding. Marguerite will be due in about half an hour. I'll be back as soon as possible."

"Before you go, we need to ask the kids if the Sentinels are programmed to do something more than capture mutants. It seems strange that the authorities would forbid law enforcement and emergency services access to the scene if this was supposed to be a simple grab and go." Andrew said seriously as he took Alan's vacated space on the couch.

"I'll ask Janine." Alan said as he hurried to the door under the staircase.

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"There it goes. It's turning away. That's our break." Evan said as he urged William to dash out of their improvised sanctuary.

Although Evan might be faster and more agile on his skateboard, in that moment, he needed to match William's pace so that he could be present to adequately protect him.

Just then, the Sentinel's head swiveled and it seemed to zero in on Evan.

"Go! Shut it down while I play decoy!" Evan said as he pushed William in front of him.

Although William wanted to resist and help Evan, he understood that there was a job that needed to be done and that he was the only one who could do it.

Beyond that, the best way that he could help Evan would be to stop the Sentinel from attacking him.

William was able to reach the back of the Sentinel relatively easily. As they had planned, the robot was sufficiently occupied so that it didn't react to William's presence at all.

Without hesitation, William injected his tubules into the back of the robot and began the implantation process.

As the nanoprobe spilled out and began their work, William watched with concern as Evan evaded the arms and metallic tentacles of the robot that were attempting to pin him down.

William wasn't sure how Evan was able to contort himself into impossible positions and radically alter the principles of physics using only a skateboard.

He was honestly in awe.

As soon as his nanoprobes had been disgorged, William withdrew his tubules and did his best to back away and blend into the crowd of onlookers.

* * * * *

"What did you find out?" Andrew asked quickly.

Alan seemed to be about to answer, but then broke into laughter.

"What?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"What's Chakotay doing there?" Alan asked between chuckles.

"He wanted a piggyback ride." Andrew said reasonably.

"Of course he did." Alan said with a loving smile at his husband.

"What did Janine have to say about the programming?" Andrew asked seriously.

"The program instructed them to incapacitate ten mutants, take them into custody, then transport them to a warehouse at the Wainwright company properties." Alan said frankly.

"So they're keeping the cops out until the abduction of the mutants is complete?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"It isn't explicitly stated in the programming, but that's how it seems." Alan said honestly.

"Does knowing that help us?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet. Let's find out." Alan said, then leaned in to give Andrew a quick kiss.

With one last longing look, he turned and hurried through the portal that was still waiting for him.

* * * * *

"I saw what you did there. What did you just do?" A girl near his own age asked anxiously.

"That thing was doing something bad, hurting people. I just tried to make it so that it wouldn't want to hurt anyone else." William said carefully.

As he spoke, the Sentinel suddenly halted all movement.

The girl's eyes went wide as she realized what she was seeing.

A cheer rose up from all those assembled as several of those near Evan's age, many with skateboards, stepped forward to congratulate him for getting the best of the metallic beast.

"They think he did something to stop that robot." The girl said to William quietly.

"He did do something. He distracted the thing long enough to let me do my work." William said seriously.

"What about the others? Were they working with you too?"

"Without their help, I could not have done what I needed to do to stop the Sentinel." William said informatively.

"Do you think it was going to hurt us?" The girl asked with a tremble of fear in her voice as she looked again at the large robot.

"No. Probably not you. But we received word that these machines were being sent here on this day to identify certain people with certain attributes, then kidnap them." William said seriously.

"You're talking about mutants, aren't you?" The girl quietly asked.

"Yes. This time I am. But if the people who made the robots can get what they want just by taking it, who knows who they'll be after next time?" William said frankly.

After a moment to consider, the girl finally said, "I think you did something good today."

"I hope so." William said simply, then thought to add, "Me and my friends need to get to work on the next Sentinel. We've got to stop these things before someone gets seriously hurt."

"Good luck. What was your name?" The girl asked curiously.

"William." He answered simply, then cautiously asked, "What's yours?"

"Rebecca." The girl said demurely, then hurried to add, "I'm at the mall just about every Friday night."

"Hopefully I will be able to see you then, sometime when there aren't any mechanical monsters trying to hurt people I care about." William said honestly.

"Hopefully." Rebecca parroted, then spared a pained smile for William before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

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As Marie moved in front of the robot, it immediately held up one arm and began to emit a blue beam at her.

"They must be able to talk to each other. It's taken the analysis from the other one and skipped immediately to the counter-measure that it had already calculated." Icheb said clinically.

"Does that help us?" Spike asked as he chopped at the creature's forearm, trying to disable the ray.

"Only in the sense that we know that the next one won't have to analyze us to know what works against us." Icheb said gravely.

"Clark? Can you blast this bloody thing for me?" Spike called in frustration.

"I can try." He responded, then pinpoint focused his optic blasts on the base of the Sentinel's emitter.

"The Sentinel is generating a laser plasma cloud to shield itself from your optic blasts." Icheb said informatively.

"Do you know a way around that?" Clark asked anxiously.

"Yes. Turn the Sentinel off." Icheb said as the giant robot suddenly ceased all movement.

"How are you doing Marie? Are you okay?" Clark asked, running to meet her as she floated to the ground.

"Yeah. I'm not sure what that thing was doing, but it didn't hurt me." Marie said slowly.

"From the look of it, I think it was doing something to your absorbing ability." Clark said honestly.

"Yeah. I think you're right. But whatever it did doesn't seem to have gotten rid of the abilities I borrowed from you, it just made it so that I can't absorb any new ones... at least for a little while." Marie said as she stood on her own, mostly to prove to herself that she could.

"So that's it then? Two Sentinels down?" Spike asked as he examined the inert robot.

"Yes. But we can't stop to relax. There are still eight more that need to be dealt with." Alex said grimly as he panted.

"And now they know how to protect themselves against optic blasts." Clark added grimly.

"You need to call it in so that all the teams know what's going on." Alex said firmly.

"Yeah. The Sentinels aren't the only ones who can communicate with each other." Clark said before tapping his badge.

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"Mobile command, the Sentinels have figured out how to nullify our optic blasts. It looks like once one of these things figures out how to counteract our abilities, they can tell it to the others." Clark's voice announced over the radios.

"Superman, Acknowledged. Proceed to the Macy's entrance of the mall and see what you can do to help Buffy and her group." Scott said seriously.

"But optic blasts is all I can do." Clark responded anxiously.

"You just figured out that the Sentinels can communicate with each other. Maybe if you're there helping Buffy's group, you can figure out even more." Scott suggested seriously.

"Right. Brawn down, brain up. Got it. I'll see what I can figure out for you." Clark promised.

"Havok, remember that when you join Buffy's group, she'll be in charge. You'll be there to offer up information and resources to help her enact her plan." Scott said firmly.

"Cyclops. I know that you don't want me to step on her toes. We'll offer to help, then stay out of her way until she needs us for something." Alex said dutifully.

"Good. Let us know if there's anything we can do to help you." Scott said with satisfaction.

"Will do. Out." Alex responded.

"Willow, will you make an announcement to all teams and fill them in on what Clark figured out?" Scott asked hopefully.

"Will do." Willow said seriously.

"How are you doing, Matt?" Alan asked, causing Scott to turn suddenly.

Noticing his reaction, Alan explained, "Andrew thought that I could do more good here than he could."

"He should have asked." Scott said simply, then asked, "Are you aware of what's going on?"

"Not everything, but I got the highlights. The last I heard, Clark's team just finished taking down a Sentinel."

"That's right. Clark's group has taken down two Sentinels. Angel's group has taken down one. Buffy's group has one on the ropes, but the damned thing refuses to go down. I've sent Clark's team to help them finish it off." Scott said with obvious frustration.

"If I'm understanding correctly, the only way we've defeated a Sentinel so far is with nanoprobes. Is that right?" Alan asked cautiously.

"Yes. I had hoped that Buffy could take one down with that mystical axe thing of hers, but she's only doing slightly better than Angel and Groo did with swords." Scott said frankly.

"I was able to hurt them." Matt said as he forced himself to sit up.

"And, from the look of it, they were able to hurt you, too." Alan said with a sympathetic smile at him.

"Yeah. They got me, that doesn't mean I'll let 'em get me again." Matt said as he slowly forced himself to a standing position.

"Well, since your claws were able to pierce them, you're already in a better place than most of the Slayers." Scott said seriously.

"Where do you want me?" Matt asked without prevarication.

"No offense, but you won't do us any good taking on one of these things by yourself. If you want to help out, you're going to have to do exactly as I say." Scott said firmly.

"I know. What'chya got for me?" Matt asked simply.

"From what I've seen, Clark's team and Angel's team have both been able to develop methods for dealing with the Sentinels. Right now, we have two teams who aren't doing quite as well. If you're willing, you could go and help them get together."

"Where are they?" Matt asked as he took a few steps to get a better view of the cameras.

"Willow?" Scott prompted.

"Faith's group is at the movie theater. While they haven't had any real resistance from their Sentinel, they also haven't been able to make any progress in disabling it." Willow said regretfully.

"Don't they have, like, four Slayers working on it?" Alan asked cautiously.

"Three, plus Robin." Scott confirmed.

"Okay. What did you need for me to do?" Matt asked seriously.

"Xander's group is outside, heading toward the northeast entrance. If you'll go through the mall and meet them as they enter, you could take them to the movie theater so that Trey can disable their Sentinel with some nanoprobes." Scott said frankly.

"I'll go get 'em." Matt said as he turned to leave.

"Remember that if you're spotted by any of the Sentinels, that they'll home in on you and ignore everything and everyone else." Alan said quickly.

"I'll be sure to have someone full of nanoprobes on standby before I fight another one." Matt assured him.

"Good. While you're doing that, we're going to work on where we need the next team to go." Scott said as he turned his attention back to the monitors.

"I'll radio when we've taken it down." Matt said before hurrying out the door.

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"I think we've got a problem." Willow said as she pointed at one of the monitors.

"What dat be?" Remy asked as he scooted over.

"That Sentinel in front of Abercrombie & Fitch looks like it's going after someone." Willow said anxiously.

"Dat be Pietro. Dere be no way de Sentinel gettin him. Pietro be too fast." Remy assured her.

"That's right. Even though he's not on our team, we've worked with him before. He can handle himself." Alan confirmed.

"You're both from a different universe. Not everyone here is exactly the same as the people you knew." Scott warned them.

"Do you think he needs our help?" Alan asked uncertainly.

"No. I agree with you that Quicksilver can handle himself in a situation like this. I'm just saying that you can't automatically assume that people from this universe will operate the same as the people from yours." Scott said firmly.

"Yeah, he could be the evil twin." Alan said with a grin and a sideways glance at Scott.

"Willow, please keep an eye on him and let us know if he needs help." Scott said as he restrained a smile of his own.

"Check out this one at Bath & Body Works." Warren said suddenly.

"Dat don't look good." Remy said cautiously.

Scott reached in front of Willow and keyed the mic before saying, "All teams, if there's anyone who's not currently engaged, they need to head to Bath & Body Works. We have a civilian being pursued. They look like they need help."

"I'm near there. I'll get right on it." A female voice confidently announced.

"Who's that?" Scott asked curiously.

"Ashley B. I'm probably going to need some help with this."

"I'll have a team to you as quick as I can." Scott promised.

"I'd appreciate that. Out." Ashley B said sharply.

"Angel, I need your team to head due south to the Bath & Body Works where we have a Slayer facing off against a Sentinel by herself." Scott said firmly.

"We're on our way." Angel said firmly.

"Southwest parking lot." Alan said quickly.

"I almost couldn't see it with all the destruction. What's it doing there?" Scott asked as he moved to look more closely.

"It's just sitting there. I think it's already caught someone. Maybe they will all wait for the last one to catch its mutant before they all take off." Alan said speculatively.

"I guess that makes sense. That would only give us one chance to follow them back to their lair instead of ten." Scott said thoughtfully.

"Regardless, we can't leave someone trapped. We need for someone to go out there and free the mutant that was captured." Warren said frankly.

"Scott? Would you mind if I cut through the Gordian knot?" Alan asked cautiously.

After a brief hesitation, Scott quietly said, "Do it."

Alan keyed the mic, then said, "Wolverine, Rona, and Three of Seven, I need for you to head to the southwest parking lot to free a captured mutant."

"We haven't met up with Faith's group yet. Do you want for Axe Man and Six of Seven to carry on with their previous instructions?" Trey asked reasonably.

"Yes. Six of Seven, if you haven't started generating nanoprobes, you should start now."

"Do you wish for me to participate in subduing the Sentinels?" Jimmy asked with surprise.

"I want for you to be prepared to." Alan said firmly.

"I see the wisdom of your recommendation; I will do so. Thank you Two of Two. Six of Seven out." Jimmy said respectfully.

"Two of Two?" Scott asked uncertainly.

"It's a Borg thing." Alan said simply, then added, "At least there's no doubt that he can tell us apart."

"True enough." Scott agreed as he looked over the different screens.

"I've got a medical emergency just inside the east door. Possible heart attack." Willow said as she zoomed in on the action.

"What do you expect us to do about it?" Scott asked frankly.

"Don't you already have a plan for something like this?" Willow asked desperately.

"Yes. But my plan involves the emergency services being allowed to do their jobs." Scott answered honestly.

"Willow, call the mall office and notify them of the situation. With any luck, they have staff trained in CPR who will be able to go down there and stabilize the downed person until emergency services can arrive... whenever that may be." Alan said firmly.

Scott looked at him with surprise for a moment, then cautiously said, "Yeah. Good thinking."

"Things are a little different where I'm from. You quickly learn that not every battle can be won and not every hurting person can be saved."

"Does that mean prioritizing the value of one life over another?" Scott asked regretfully.

"Sometimes. But more often it's a matter of resigning yourself to settling for what you can realistically get." Alan said frankly.

"I see realism as something to be fought against, not accepted." Scott said honestly.

"Go with what works. Maybe if the people of my world had been just a little bit more tenacious, they'd still be alive." Alan said gravely.

"Or maybe not." Scott countered, then turned at a movement on one of the screens.

"All teams, the Sentinel in the northwest parking lot was supposed to have been stopped. Does anyone know why it's moving?" Scott asked anxiously.

"The Sentinel is following its new programming." Trey said calmly.

"What's its new programming?" Scott asked cautiously.

"To carry out the dictates of the one voice."

"Don't play games with me. Where's it going and what's it going to do?" Scott said as he reached in front of Willow to move the parking lot camera and track the Sentinel's movements.

"I only know about the programming contained in the nanoprobes. Upon completion of the override, the Sentinel is to await further instructions."

"We've got another one on the move." Warren said anxiously as he pointed toward another one of the screens.

"Where are they going?" Scott asked more firmly.

"I am not privy to their subspace domain, therefore I do not know what subsequent instructions they might have been given." Trey said simply.

"The one at the arcade is heading toward the movie theater!" Alan said as he pointed at another screen.

"Are the Sentinels being pitted against each other?" Warren asked uncertainly.

"That would change everything." Scott said as he quickly took stock of where all the different Sentinels were located.

"Not know if dat be better or worse dan before." Remy said with concern.

"The northwest Sentinel has just located one at the west entrance. It looks like they're squaring off to fight." Alan said slowly.

There was a brief tussle, then stillness.

"Fight over." Remy said with surprise into the silence that followed.

"What did we just see? How was it able to deactivate a Sentinel with a single gut punch?" Scott asked in bewilderment.

"Professor, do you have any insights into the matter?" Alan asked hopefully into the air.

//None so far.//

"Willow, can you pull a recording of that fight so that we can replay it?" Warren asked cautiously.

After looking at the identifier at the bottom of the video image, Willow quickly and efficiently brought up a replay of the brief Sentinel hand-to-hand encounter.

"Here. I'll slow it down." Willow said as she started the replay.

"Wait! Hold it right there. Zoom in. What is that?" Scott asked as he pointed at the screen.

As Willow worked to enlarge the image, Alan quietly said, "Those would be Borg tubules."

Chapter 23: The Lesser Evil

"Dis mean dat de Sentinels be like de kids, Borg drones?" Remy asked cautiously.

"No. I don't think so." Alan said thoughtfully, then explained, "The kids were taken from their homeworlds and made into drones. They had lives before that they were forced to forget. The Sentinels never had lives or even thoughts before. Nothing was lost. They were never sentient. This is no different from swapping out game cartridges."

"Actually, I think it all depends on whether or not you look at sentient thought as being something somehow 'divine' or simply a more complex level of programming." Warren said seriously.

"Look at that!" Willow said suddenly as she pointed at one of the monitors.

There was a thirty second battle culminating in a falcon punch which left the Macy's Sentinel with a gut full of nanoprobes.

"I just don't get how they can take them down so fast." Willow said honestly.

"Maybe it's like what Clark was saying about how the Sentinels can learn and tell each other how to overcome our abilities. Maybe the nanoprobes can learn and adapt that way too. Each generation improves on the previous ones and passes on successful strategies to those that follow. Since they only have one opponent, they are free to specialize the nanoprobes to be as effective as possible." Scott cautiously suggested.

"As frightening as that sounds, it would fit right in with Borg methodology." Alan admitted.

"Should we call Xander and Jimmy back? I don't know what's going to happen to the people in the area when two Sentinels get together like this." Warren asked with concern.

"I've got a video feed from.... um, it looks like it's from a kid's point of view, I mean, like we're seeing through his eyes... somehow." Willow said uncomfortably.

"We're seeing through Jimmy's ocular implant. He's used to acting as a photojournalist so don't be surprised when he selects an intriguing point of view or frames a scene in an interesting way." Alan said with a hint of pride hiding under his words.

"Hold on. They just reached the mini-mega-multiplex theater." Warren said suddenly.

"What does that even mean?" Alan asked as he watched Jimmy's video feed carefully.

"There are thirty or forty screens, ten or more playing the same movie at any given time, and most of the 'theaters' seat around twelve people." Scott said frankly.

"It looks like they're talking. I wish we could hear what they're saying." Willow said anxiously.

"As far as I know, Jimmy's video feed should have audio." Alan helpfully mentioned.

"Oh. Good." Willow said with surprise as she isolated Jimmy's video input.

* * * * *

"I brought you someone who can put an end to this." Xander said as he proudly presented Jimmy at his side.

"Does this kid have superpowers or something?" Ashley G. asked cautiously.

"No. But he's part machine and he can give the Sentinel a computer virus... a really nasty one." Xander said with a fond look at the boy.

"What do you need for us to do?" Ashley G. asked, always ready to jump straight to a solution when possible.

"Jimmy needs to get close enough to touch the Sentinel. If you could keep that thing busy while he does that, it would help us a lot." Xander said frankly.

"Anyone else telling me this, I'd think they were crazy. You... well, I know you're crazy, but somehow you usually get things to work out. You ready?"

"Jimmy, you got everything you need?" Xander asked gently.

"Yes. I should have enough nanoprobes. I just need to get close enough to deploy them." Jimmy said frankly.

"We're ready." Xander called loudly.

Faith, Robin, and both Ashleys renewed their attack on the giant robot, doing their best to overwhelm it.

"While that big monster is dealing with everyone attacking it, we'll quietly sneak in way down low, not making any sudden moves." Xander said quietly as he slowly and gently led Jimmy behind the Sentinel.

Just as Jimmy injected his tubules, there was a nearby rumbling and the murmur of voices from the gathered crowd.

"Um, Jimmy, it looks like we've got company. Unless there's a way you can do two of these things at once, we'd probably better back off." Xander said nervously.

"Janine, this Sentinel is emitting your transponder frequency. Are you in control?" Jimmy asked calmly.

"Yes. This unit now exists to service us. I see that you have already injected my intended target, so I will proceed to the next one. We must conclude this matter and relocate the units to a secure location of our choosing." The Sentinel said in a classic Borg whisper-voice.

Jimmy withdrew his tubules and stepped away from the Sentinel that was encircled by fighters.

The Sentinel that had been speaking then turned and started walking south, toward the center of the mall.

There was a moment of silence as the Sentinel that had been fighting suddenly froze in place.

"What the hell just happened?" Ashley C. cautiously asked as she tentatively stepped back, on guard for another attack.

"The Sentinel's programming is being rewritten. It won't try to hurt you anymore." Jimmy assured her with a toothy grin of accomplishment.

"You say he ain't got superpowers, but that's not how it's looking from where I'm standing." Ashley C. said frankly.

"I think maybe you're right. It's possible that we just don't have the right words for what his superpower is." Xander said with an affectionate grin at the boy by his side.

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"William? How's your probe things? You full up?" Evan asked as they approached a single Slayer fighting a huge robot, all on her own.

"I have a sufficient number." William said cautiously as he assessed the situation before them.

"Unhand that fair maiden! Vile beast!" Groo bellowed as he plunged into the battle.

Angel couldn't restrain a smile of amusement before joining his comrade in the fight.

"Evan, see if you can draw its attention so I can get her away!" Caridad commanded as she pointed at a girl who appeared to be caught by one of the Sentinel's metallic tentacles.

"I'm on it." Evan confirmed, then turned to William and said, "Do me a favor and end this quick, would you?"

"I'm on it." William said firmly, but somehow at the same time seemed to be almost playful in his delivery. That said, William then dashed away to try and inconspicuously work his way in behind the Sentinel.

* * * * *

"Matt, can you cut him loose?" Rona asked as they approached the stationary Sentinel in the southwest parking lot.

"Probably, yeah, but I can't do much to stop that thing if it decides to select another target after losing this one." Matt warned her.

"Uncle Matt, I can disable the Sentinel, but I need to be able to get close enough to inject it. I believe that I will require your help... both of you." Trey finished by looking toward Rona.

"Do what you're going to do. We've got your back." Rona said assuringly.

"It's just sittin there, so there's no use in trying to sneak up on it. Let's just do it." Matt said frankly.

Trey nodded his agreement, then started to walk forward.

"Help me!" A young sandy-haired man called out as he struggled to free himself from the metallic tentacles that were tightly wrapped around him.

"Give us a minute. We've got to turn this thing off before we can break you loose." Matt said frankly.

"Okay. But you're going to get me out of this, right?" The young man asked hopefully.

"That's the plan." Matt confirmed.

Trey walked up and looked the young man in the eyes as he raised his right hand and thrust his balled fist forward. As he did, tubules emerged from the back of Trey's hand and pierced the body of the Sentinel.

The young man looked over his shoulder at the tubules, then at Trey with fear.

"Don't worry about Trey, he's one of the good guys." Matt said gently as he watched for any reaction from the Sentinel.

"Good. Because that looks like it'd hurt."

"It would." Trey said seriously.

"What's your name?" Matt asked quietly, unable to hide his smile at the dire persona that Trey was presenting.

"Wilkey." The young man said nervously.

"I'm Matt and he's Trey, the lovely young lady with us is Rona. Trey just injected that giant robot with something that will cause it to shut down. Once we're sure that it's not going to start back up, we'll cut you loose. How does that sound to you?"

"Yeah. That sounds good. I was going to the mall, just for something to do, for some excitement, y'know?" Wilkey said in a slightly hysterical ramble.

"Looks like you got it." Rona said frankly.

"Why did this happen to me?" Wilkey asked in a lost tone.

"From what we were told, the robots were programmed to go after mutants. I don't know how it decides that one person is and another person isn't, but it seems to have triggered on you." Matt said seriously.

"But I'm not..." Wilkey began to say, but the words died on his tongue.

"It doesn't matter. You asked, and I told you what I know. That's it." Matt said frankly.

"The Sentinel may have scanned you and received a false positive or you may have some form of mutation that is so benign that you haven't had cause to recognize it." Trey said honestly.

Wilkey looked at Trey's ocular implant, then down at the metallic device covering most of his left forearm before asking, "Are you a mutant?"

"No." Trey said simply, then added, "I am something else."

"But if you're here, doing this, that means that you don't hate mutants, doesn't it?" Wilkey asked nervously.

"When it's possible, I'll help people who need it. Right this minute that means helping mutants escape from these Sentinels. Tomorrow it might mean helping someone else for a completely different reason." Trey said frankly.

"Going around helping people sounds like a really great way to live your life." Wilkey said with a smile at the thought.

"There's no entry fee." Trey said seriously.

"What?" Wilkey asked awkwardly, certain that he must have missed something in their conversation.

"You can go around helping people as much as you like. You don't have to pay a fee or sign a vow. There's nothing holding you back." Trey said firmly.

"Actually, there is." Wilkey said as he looked down at the metallic tubing coiled around him.

"Oh. Right. Let's see what we can do about that." Trey said quickly, then looked to Matt hopefully.

"Are you sure that the Sentinel's not going to wake up when I start cutting?" Matt asked seriously.

"I promise nothing." Trey automatically responded, then thought to add, "I've done all that I can to incapacitate the robot. My scans haven't indicated any automatic defenses that might be present, independent from the machine's primary programming."

Matt grinned at the response, then said, "At least I know you're not just telling me what I want to hear."

Trey nodded his agreement as he watched Matt cutting the coiled tubing with his claws.

"Guys. Better hurry it up. It looks like we're about to have company." Rona warned them as she nodded toward the west.

"We're done here. We can leave whenever you're ready." Matt called back.

"Are you going to be alright? Would you like to come with us?" Trey asked Wilkey with concern as he helped him to stand.

"If you're going into the mall, I'll probably walk with you. But if not, I'll be okay on my own." Wilkey assured him.

"Let me find out what we're doing next." Trey said, then tapped the 'X' badge on his upper left chest before continuing, "Mobile Command, this is Three of Seven, our mission is complete. We have visual confirmation of emergency service vehicles approaching from the west. Please advise."

"Three of Seven, there is a Sentinel in the south parking lot that's not moving. That might mean that it's already captured a mutant. We can't tell from here. If your team is up to it, I'd like for you to assess the situation." Scott said seriously.

After a look at Rona and Matt and affirmative responses from each, Trey responded, "We will do so. Three of Seven, out."

"Does that mean that there's six more like you back home?" Wilkey asked cautiously.

"Perhaps. It depends on how you look at it." Trey said frankly, then thought to ask, "Would you like to go with us?"

"Did I hear that right? Are you going to go save someone else, like you just did me?" Wilkey asked cautiously.

"Maybe. There's another Sentinel and it's not moving. That could mean that it's caught someone." Trey said as the group started walking away from the inert Sentinel that had only recently held Wilkey captive.

"But if there is someone who's been caught, what could I do to help them?" Wilkey asked uncertainly.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe you could tell them not to be scared and stuff..." Trey said, then leaned in and quietly confided, "I'm not really very good at things like that."

"You don't say." Wilkey said with a grin.

"But if there's nothing you can do, you could still go to the mall like you were planning on." Trey said frankly.

"Yeah. I guess that's true. I'd like to help if I can, if I won't be in the way." Wilkey finished uncertainly.

"Look at these two. Do you think either of them would let you get in their way?" Trey asked as he pointed at Matt and Rona.

"So you do realize how terrifying the three of you are?" Wilkey asked to be sure.

"We are the way we need to be to get the job done. If we could accomplish our goals with cuddles and angel kisses, then we'd probably be all about that. I promise, we're not putting on an act trying to be badasses, we're just dealing with everything we have to face the best way we know how." Trey said frankly.

"Have you tried cuddles and angel kisses?" Wilkey asked with a barely restrained grin.

"No. But I suspect that the Sentinels might not be susceptible to that tactic." Trey said with a trace of a smile.

"I bet if you tried it, you'd have the element of surprise on your side." Matt said from ahead of them.

"Safe bet." Rona said from beside him.

"Let's just see what the situation is when we get there before we make too many plans." Trey said reasonably.

Wilkey nodded his agreement but couldn't fully contain his smile as he walked with the group through the parking lot toward one of many pillars of smoke.

* * * * *

"Buffy team, status?" Scott asked seriously.

"We're just doing a bunch of back-slapping and congratulating each other here at the moment, you know, typical battle afterglow. Do you have another one ready for us?" Buffy asked with anticipation, sounding more upbeat than was usual for her.

"Not so far. Let me check in with the other teams, then I'll make a general announcement about what we're doing next."

"Got it. Buffy out."

"She's right down to business. I like that." Scott said with a smile of admiration.

"That's our Buffy." Willow said fondly.

* * * * *

William stealthily moved behind the Sentinel and swiftly injected his tubules into the giant robot's mid-back.

"Let me know when you've done it so I can start hacking at this thing!" Caridad called from in front of the Sentinel.

"The nanoprobes have been delivered. Expect termination of functions in approximately twenty seconds." William called in a firm clear voice.

"Get out of there, William. We don't want you getting caught by a stray hit." Angel warned.

After taking a few steps back, William said, "I promise that I was watching where you were hitting, but thank you for worrying about me, Uncle Angel."

"Do you want to get a hit or two in on this thing before it goes down?" Angel asked as he offered his sword.

"No, thank you. I'm happy with my role in things and wouldn't wish for it to be otherwise." William said happily.

"Do you think you could help me with this metal hose thing? I can't get it loose." Caridad said with frustration.

"I'll be right there." Angel assured her.

Just as he knelt at her side, the Sentinel ceased all motion.

A cheer rose up from the crowd that was surrounding them.

Using leverage, prying with three swords, and the combined strength of a slayer, a master vampire and a demonic monarch, the group were finally able to free the young teenage girl who had been held captive by the Sentinel.

"Don't hurt me." The girl whimpered as she scooted herself away from the trio, half hiding herself behind the Sentinel's legs.

"We just saved you. We're not going to hurt you." Caridad cautiously explained.

The girl's fight or flight response seemed to have kicked in at that point as she desperately scrambled away in search of safety.

"Let's go." Angel said in a low, disturbed voice.

"Yeah." Caridad agreed, seeming to be ready to 'turn the page' on the whole incident.

* * * * *

"Is there any reason for us to think this one is going to put up a fight?" Rona asked seriously.

"We're assuming that it's already captured a mutant and is just waiting on the others to finish catching theirs. If that much is true, then it should go pretty much the same way as it did with Wilkey." Matt finished speculatively.

"There it is. What should we do first?" Wilkey asked uncertainly.

"It looks like the Sentinel is holding a girl captive, so I think our first move is going to be to fill her in on what's going on and see if we can get her to remain calm and work with us while we're freeing her." Matt suggested.

"Wilkey, do you want to go in and explain things to her, or would you rather wait until we have things a little more resolved?" Trey asked cautiously.

The expression in Wilkey's eyes spoke of the internal battle that was being waged.

"If you want to help her, I can go with you just in case the Sentinel decides that it'd rather have both of you." Rona said firmly, leaving no doubt that she would defend them.

Wilkey glanced at her, then seemed to come to a decision. He gave her a reasonably decisive nod.

"If you want, I can begin the implantation of nanoprobes while you're doing that." Trey quietly suggested.

"Yeah. Rona can cover Wilkey and I'll cover you. If the Sentinel reacts in a way that we don't expect, I can draw it while the rest of you do your best to complete your jobs." Matt said decisively.

"I'd volunteer to take your place, but those things don't seem to have much of a taste for Slayers. We'll do our best to see to it that everything gets done." Rona said frankly.

"Let's get to it." Matt said without further provarication.

Rona, Wilkey, and Trey followed Matt's lead and moved toward the Sentinel.

* * * * *

"Havok, what's your status?"

"I'm here with Buffy, so you can save your breath. I heard. From the way we're being kept in the dark, you'd think that the people in charge don't trust us or something." Alex responded petulantly.

"I didn't want to use you as bait. There. I said it. Are you happy?" Scott asked with irritation.

"Not particularly. But I suppose that acknowledging it is a step in the right direction."

"Sit tight for another minute or two and I'll let you know what's going on once I've checked in with everyone else."

"Okay. Just don't protect me. I can do a real job."

"Got it. I promise."

* * * * *

As they prepared to leave, William looked at the people surrounding them curiously and noticed Rebecca amongst them.

"What is everyone doing here?" He asked as he approached her.

"They think it's some kind of fancy play or promotion or something that's being put on by the mall to celebrate the big shopping day. None of them have any idea what's really going on." Rebecca said honestly.

"This isn't a play." William assured her.

"I already figured that out." Rebecca said frankly, then quietly added, "You stopped another one."

"Yeah. We should be out of Sentinels before very much longer, then I'll have to leave. We can't stay..." William trailed off, obviously not knowing what more to say.

"I live here, in Westchester, I mean. I didn't want you thinking the wrong thing about me. I know when I'm being lied to and I know who the good guys are." Rebecca assured him.

"Good. Hopefully I'll be able to see you again one of these Fridays, really soon." William said with a timid smile.

Before she could respond, a voice came over William's communicator and said, "Angel's team, by our count, there's one Sentinel that hasn't been claimed. Are you guys interested?"

"Mobile Command, I think Groo would take it personally if you let anyone else have it. Just tell us where we need to be." Angel answered with a smile.

"Directly south of your current location, at Abercrombie & Fitch. You'd better hurry or Janine will beat you to the punch with one of her Sentinel drones. Command out." Scott announced with a smile under his words..

Rebecca regretfully smiled as she looked William in the eyes and quietly said, "Hopefully."

"Hopefully." William responded, before hurrying away with his team.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Wilkey hesitantly asked as he scooted in where he could get a good look at the trapped girl.

"I think so, but I can't get free." The girl said in a trembling voice, obviously on the edge of losing emotional control.

"I was trapped just like you are and these guys cut me loose. If you'll just hang in there for a few more minutes, we'll get the robot shut down, then we'll get you out of there." Wilkey told her gently.

"How's she doin'?" Rona asked distractedly, keeping the majority of her attention on the Sentinel.

"Don't worry. She's dealing with it just fine." Wilkey assured her, obviously saying it loudly enough so that the girl could hear his assessment.

"The nanoprobes are being delivered. Assimilation is in progress." Trey said from a short distance away.

"What's the Sentinel doing?" Wilkey asked curiously.

"Nothin. Looks like the thing is happy as a clam since it got its prize." Matt said frankly.

"The programming of these devices leaves much to be desired." Trey said honestly as he stepped from behind the Sentinel.

"Do you want for them to be more of a challenge to defeat?" Matt asked curiously.

"No. I'm just embarrassed that someone would put a product into service in such an inferior state." Trey said simply.

"It takes quite a bit to scare me but... you keep it on the straight and narrow, would'jya?" Matt asked hesitantly.

The smile that Trey gave him in response didn't exactly put him at ease.

* * * * *

"Scott, look at this." Warren said quietly as he pointed at one of the monitors.

"What are they doing? Why aren't they helping the injured and putting out the fires?" Scott asked as he looked at the collection of emergency vehicles congregating in one end of the parking lot.

"Dey be waitin for a signal, it looks like." Remy said frankly.

"How's Quicksilver doing against that Sentinel?" Scott asked distractedly.

"I think he's annoying it, if that's even possible." Warren said uncertainly.

"If anyone could do it, it would be Pietro." Alan said frankly.

"You tink de team you sent be able to handle it?" Remy asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Scott said, "Yes. I'm confident that they can."

"Den you need to trust dem an get everyone else on de move. De way dese emergency services be movin makes me tink dey be up to sometin." Remy said seriously.

"Yeah. I'm right there with you." Scott said decisively.

* * * * *

"Faith, this is Mobile Command checking in. What's your status?"

"Five by five. Just waitin for one of you to point us to the next one." Faith said frankly.

"It looks like all the Sentinels are being dealt with, but it's still too soon to call everything resolved. If your team will get ready to pull up stakes, we'll let you know as soon as we're more sure about what's left to be done."

"Got it. Mind if we stop in at a store or two while you're doing that? It looks like they've got some incredible sales going on."

"Sounds good, as long as you're ready to drop and go if something interesting comes up." Scott cautioned.

"Don't worry. We'll have our priorities in order when it counts." Faith promised.

* * * * *

The blur of movement zipping around the Sentinel was something of a surprise to see.

While William could see the mutant attacking the Sentinel, he could tell that the mutant's best efforts didn't seem to be making the least bit of difference.

"I am uncertain of the protocol in this circumstance. Would it be most proper for us to stay out of the way and allow this valiant warrior to claim his prize?" Groo asked uncertainly.

"Probably. But the truth is, we don't have all day to wait on him." Angel said frankly.

"If all of us jumped in there, I doubt that it'd make much of a difference." Caridad said honestly.

"Yeah. William's the only one who can do anything that matters. The rest of us are about as threatening as flies buzzing around its head." Evan said wearily.

"If we're flies, you're rotting meat." Caridad said thoughtfully.

"Hey! I wasn't bein mean to you! I was just sayin!" Evan said in offense.

"She was telling you that you have something unique to contribute in this situation. The Sentinel will ignore the rest of us, but you can act as bait." Angel explained.

"Right. And if you'll team up with the speed demon to distract the Sentinel for a couple minutes, William can sneak in there, do his business and get out before it knows what happened to it." Caridad further explained.

"Soundin rapey again." Evan said frankly.

"Get over it." Caridad said simply, then thought to ask, "William. How are your probes? You ready for this?"

"Yeah. Let's do it." William said confidently.

"Go ahead and start. I'll fill Pietro in on what we're doing." Evan said before pushing off on his skateboard, racing directly toward the Sentinel.

As soon as Angel realized what Evan was doing, he called out, "Don't! He'll switch his target to you!"

"Too slow!" Evan crowed, as the Sentinel made a clumsy swipe at him.

"William, go!" Angel commanded.

"Shall we lay siege to the beast whilst our compatriots work their magic to ensure our victory?" Groo asked passionately.

"Why not?! Come on Caridad! Let's hit it!" Angel said before rushing ahead.

After glancing around to account for his team members, as well as the onlookers, William casually walked behind the besieged Sentinel.

Amid the cacophony of screams and battle cries, William very deliberately injected the Sentinel in the back with his tubules.

While he was well aware of the movements of those around him, he was also cognizant of the fact that none of them were within striking range, even if they were trying to hit him.

The only one who would have any hope of surprising him would be the Sentinel itself. Observing the actions of it, William came to the conclusion that keeping up with and processing the actions of Evan and Pietro was making the big clumsy machine that much moreso. Any attack the Sentinel made toward them was stilted and far too slow to have any possibility of connecting.

Transfer complete, William stepped away from the Sentinel to watch it flap and grab at both Evan and Pietro. Angel, Groo, and Caridad were all hacking and chopping at the metallic monster, causing some small amount of damage while expending quite a bit of aggression in the process.

After a double tap on his badge, William calmly said, "Four of Seven to Mobile Command. Mission complete. Please advise."

"Angel's team, just lay low for now. Maybe take a few minutes to identify an exit route or decide what you'd like to do next. We'll be making a general announcement when a few more things are resolved. Command out." Scott replied.

* * * * *

"What's your name?"

"Ramona." The frightened girl quietly answered, then cautiously asked, "What's yours?"

"Wilkey." He answered gently as he turned his head to watch what Trey was doing.

"Wilkey? What kind of a name is that?" Ramona asked curiously.

"A last one. My first name is John... you know, the most common first name in the world." Wilkey finished with a smile.

"John Wilkey?" Ramona asked cautiously.

"Wilkinson. But I've been called Wilkey since I started school." Wilkey said frankly, then said more quietly, "They should be ready to cut you loose any second now. Just hold still and they'll have you out of there before you know it."

"Thanks Wilkey. I'd probably be freaking out if you weren't here to talk to me." Ramona said timidly.

"I'm sure you would've been fine." Wilkey assured her, then explained, "When I found out that there might be someone in the same situation that I was, I wanted to help out. It just seemed like the thing to do."

Before Ramona could respond, another voice said, "I wasn't as nice as I could have been when we met."

"This is Trey." Wilkey introduced.

"I regret that I wasn't friendly when we first met. I don't do 'friendly' well." Trey said regretfully.

"You might not have started off the best, but you were strong when I was feeling weak and afraid. Knowing that you were on my side made things better for me, so it's all good." Wilkey said honestly.

"Then I'm glad that we met the way that we did. I want for you to know that you can depend on me to defend you." Trey said seriously.

There was the sound of metal on metal from near Ramona's feet.

As all three turned to look, Matt said, "I wasn't going to wait for you three to stop yacking before I cut her loose. We'd be here all day."

"Look at that. You're free." Wilkey said to Ramona with a grand smile.

"Guys! Police!" Rona said as she pointed past them.

"Looks like they're on the move. We'd better get going." Matt said decisively.

Trey tapped his badge twice, then said, "Mobile Command, this is Three of Seven. Our mission is complete. Please advise."

"Stand by."

* * * * *

"All teams. Emergency services are in the parking lots surrounding the mall and will undoubtedly be going inside soon. If none of the teams needs us to remain here, we're going to be moving the Mobile Command Center out of the immediate area. Willow will still be able to take your calls if you need anything, we just won't be parked where you last saw us." Scott announced.

"What do you want the teams to be doing while you're doing that?" Alex asked seriously.

"That's mostly up to you. Those who want to shop, should shop. Those who want to leave, should leave. Although it may be possible that some of us have been recorded on security cameras, I can't actually think of any rule or law that we might have broken by engaging the Sentinels. In short, enjoy your evening and call if you need our help with anything. Command out."

* * * * *

"Look at this!" Willow suddenly barked.

The group in the Mobile Command Center watched as three Sentinels lifted into the air on columns of fire and smoke.

"Where do you think they're going?" Scott asked slowly.

"Don't matter." Remy interjected, then explained, "Dey be providin a distraction. We best be takin it."

"Right. Excellent idea." Scott said as he hurried toward the driver's seat.

"That's it. I count ten." Alan said as he watched the monitors carefully.

"Good. Let's get this thing someplace nice and quiet so we'll be available for anyone who needs us." Warren said as he looked out the window nervously.

"Any suggestions?" Scott asked hopefully.

"There's a nice little spot far out in the northeast lot 'B' with no fires or Sentinel damage. You should be out of everyone's way and easy to reach by any team members needing a ride." Willow said seriously.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" Alan asked with a grin.

"I don't have super Slayer powers, but I can do this... so I do." Willow said frankly.

//I hope they realize how lucky they are to have you.// Professor Xavier said into all their minds.

"It's funny but... they do. I know it." Willow said happily.

Chapter 24: A Little Damn

//Marie, if you would agree to it, I would like very much for you and Clark to stop by the MedLab as soon as you return to the school. Doctor McCoy needs to have a look at you both.// Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Let me ask Clark. That way I can tell him how important it is so that we can leave right away. This is driving me crazy! I can see inside, outside, around and through everything here. It's nearly impossible for me to keep my feet on the ground and I keep trying to float away. And even though I'd really like to be able to look around and shop for a little bit, I can't take the chance with my powers being like this. I'm so overpowered right now I'm scared to be around people. Not only could I bump someone through a wall without meaning to, but even my sight and my breath are deadly weapons." Marie said with evident frustration.

//Very well. While you're contacting Clark, I'll arrange a ride back for you.//

"It shouldn't take me long. I don't think that he'll wander too far away. He's not like that. Give me a minute."

//I'll get back with you momentarily.// Professor Xavier promised.

* * * * *

"What's wrong, Jimmy?" Xander asked with concern at the boy's pensive expression.

"I feel that I should be doing something more... meaningful. We walked into a dangerous situation, took decisive action and now we're shopping... for sports bras?" Jimmy said weakly as he looked at the sign over the area where the Slayers were meticulously inspecting every available selection.

"You fight through the exciting times so that you can enjoy the quiet ones." Xander said sagely, then added with a smile, "I think we've accomplished enough for one day. Why don't I take you back to your dad so that you can get away from the bra shopping for a while?"

"Yes. I would like to get to work on my report as soon as possible. I believe that we have everything needed to create an outstanding story for our viewers. If we're able to find the right words, people watching our report will gain the sense of what it feels like to encounter a Sentinel." Jimmy said happily.

"I can't wait to see it. I bet that's going to be something else." Xander said with a smile.

"Look at these shoes! They don't have this style back home!" Ashley A. said excitedly, drawing the other Slayers to surround her.

"It looks like this could take a while. Let's go." Xander said quietly as he guided Jimmy to walk with him.

* * * * *

As the group entered the mall they were on guard for any sign of attack.

The chaotic hustle and bustle of shopping stood in stark contrast to the smoking debris in the mostly desolate parking lot.

A mall security officer made eye contact with Matt for an instant, but only slightly nodded in their direction before continuing on, apparently unconcerned by their presence.

As they approached the food court, Rona cautiously asked, "Don't they know about all the destruction outside?"

"It's hard to tell, actually. Even though it kinda looks like a riot in here, I'm pretty sure it's just the typical chaos that you'd expect to see on the first official day of Christmas shopping." Wilkey observed.

"It looks like there's some action over there by the Orange Julius." Ramona said quickly.

After a moment, Matt said, "Nah. Don't worry about that. The blond with the skateboard is Evan. The emo beside him is William, they're another team like ours."

Wilkey turned to Trey and cautiously asked, "So is William like you?"

"William is my brother." Trey said simply.

"Does that mean that the guy with the skateboard is like Matt and the girl with the scowl is like Rona?" Wilkey asked to confirm his understanding.

"Pretty much, yeah. But don't expect to see me doing any skateboard tricks anytime soon. I'm not that vivacious." Matt finished with a smile.

"What you've done so far has been impressive enough. You don't need to do any tricks on my account." Wilkey assured him.

"How are you doing, Ramona?" Matt asked gently.

"I'm... okay. I think I'm going to look around and see if I can calm myself down." Ramona said consideringly.

"There's a couple more teams like ours running around. You should be able to spot them without too much trouble. If something happens that you need help, just go to any of them and mention that you're a friend of Wolverine's and they'll take good care of you."

"Wolverine?" Ramona asked with a timid smile.

"We have code names." Matt said with a slight shrug.

"I'll remember. Thanks for helping me out. From all the things you hear on the news I was almost as scared of you as I was of the robot." Ramona said honestly.

"Remember that if there's no drama, newspapers don't sell and viewers don't tune in. They need strife and controversy to keep their numbers up. Hate sells." Matt quietly confided.

"So none of it's true?" Ramona asked cautiously.

"I'm sure some of it is, but sometimes they'll pick one or two 'true' things and make a big deal out of them. At the same time, they'll overlook other things because they don't inspire the necessary reaction. If you think about it, reality is usually a lot less exciting than what the news is telling you. Not every day is a triumph over the forces of evil. Most days are just days." Matt finished with a smirk.

"What about today?" Ramona asked curiously.

"I guess that all depends on who you ask. It's probably best if you decide for yourself." Matt said frankly.

"They're going to try and make all of this your fault, aren't they?" Ramona asked in a pained voice.

"They might, but I doubt that they recorded us doing much more than helping people. Most likely, since they didn't get the result that they wanted when they staged all of this, the whole thing is just going to be swept under the rug. It might not even be mentioned on the news." Matt said seriously.

"Okay. I'm gonna go now. Thanks again for helping me." Ramona finished timidly.

Matt solemnly nodded his acceptance of her sincere thanks.

"I'm going to hang with you guys for a little bit longer, if that's okay." Wilkey said tentatively.

"Sure. Hang around as long as you want." Matt said easily, then leaned in to confide, "I think you're a good influence on Trey."

* * * * *

"Is that it? Is this evening's battle concluded?" Groo asked no one in particular.

"Yeah. Unless there's something going on that I haven't heard about." Angel said tentatively.

"Our enemies have been vanquished and we live to tell the tale. A celebration is in order!" Groo declared.

"I don't know where you'd go for something like that. I'm not from here and I haven't really had the chance to get out too much." Angel said weakly as he cast around for some sort of inspiration.

As much as Angel didn't want to disappoint the man who had become his dear, if unlikely, friend, he was nonetheless at a loss when it came to any sort of party preparations.

Just as he was preparing himself to break the news to Groo, he spotted Matt and his team looking back at them.

"I may not know where to go to celebrate an occasion like this, but Matt probably does. Let's go see if he knows of someplace nearby." Angel said with renewed enthusiasm.

"Yes. This is good. This is how it should be." Groo said confidently.

* * * * *

//Alan, I would like to have Doctor McCoy look at Marie and Clark as soon as possible. Would you be able to drive them back to the mansion?// Professor Xavier asked Alan hopefully.

"Would I have enough time to gather the rest of the kids, or is this an emergency?" Alan asked cautiously.

//Not an emergency as such, however I suspect that the more time that passes, the less Doctor McCoy will be able to discover regarding Marie's absorption of Clark's abilities.// Professor Xavier said honestly.

"Scott, you don't need me to hang around here for anything, do you?" Alan asked to be sure.

"No. The rest of us can handle what's left. Go ahead." Scott said encouragingly.

"Willow, can you patch a call through to my kids, plus Marie and Clark?" Alan asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Give me a sec." Willow said as she clicked away on the keyboard like the professional that she was.

Alan watched her work and was impressed by her speed and skill with the communications equipment.

"Go ahead. Whenever you're ready." Willow said as she indicated a microphone located between two monitors.

"Clark, Marie, and Summers' kids, I'm going to be driving the bus back to home base. Anyone who wants to go home right away can go with me. Anyone who wants to stay and shop, be sure that you arrange for a dependable ride home before I leave." Alan said firmly into the microphone.

"If you tap your badge and say 'Alan's kids', it will automatically route the call to the same group." Willow said informatively.

"Thanks Willow. You're really making this a whole lot easier on us." Alan said gratefully.

"I love being able to do something that really helps." Willow said honestly.

"I hope you won't mind if we consider calling on your expertise in future operations. Of course, you'll always be free to say no, but having you here really does make everything run more smoothly." Scott said seriously.

After a long moment of consideration, Willow slowly said, "The Slayers have to come first, but if they don't need me for anything and you have a job for me, I'd be interested in helping out."

"Excellent." Scott said happily.

"Excuse me, but do either of you know where Andrew parked?" Alan asked cautiously.

* * * * *

"Matt! Groo wants to celebrate our victory. Do you know if there's a good place around for something like that?" Angel asked quickly, as he and Groo approached with Trey and Wilkey tagging along behind.

"I guess that depends on how hard you like to party. If you're going to be raising hell... even figuratively, then you'll need to keep it on the property of the mansion. There's a few out-buildings where you can let loose without havin to worry about settin a bad example for the kids.

"But if you're not going to be using any magic or mutant powers, then McNalley's would probably be a good place for you. It's about eight blocks from here, right by the interstate

on-ramp. It's the place with all the motorcycles out front. Me and Cyke went there last night. Seems like decent enough folks; live and let live types. Good pool tables." Matt finished consideringly.

"That sounds nice. Would you like to come with us?" Angel quickly offered.

"Nah. I put a bid in on a house and I thought the guys here could help me do a little window shopping. I noticed a couple really good deals that might be worth looking into."

"Do you want for me to contact Clark for you so that he may join us?" Trey quietly offered.

"No. Since your dad called him on the radio by name, I'm guessing that they already have something planned for him." Matt said frankly.

"You can go on ahead if you want to. We'll hang around here for a few more minutes and if nothing else turns up for us to do, we'll head on out to the bar for our victory celebration." Angel said with a quick smile in Groo's direction.

"Just remember that our radios have a pretty good range. If you two run into any trouble, you can still call for help." Matt said seriously.

"We're just going to have a few drinks to celebrate a successful campaign. I don't know what you're worried about." Angel said with an uncharacteristic impish grin.

"There's not enough time to explain everything wrong with that, so I'll just tell you guys to have a good time and go about my business." Matt said with a weary chuckle under his words.

"You're a good man! I see that you have things to do, but I would like to sit down with you for a drink when I next visit." Groo firmly declared.

"Yeah. Sounds good. Let's do that." Matt said with a grin flashed in Groo's direction before indicating to Wilkey and Trey that he was ready to leave.

Trey and Wilkey exchanged uncertain looks before following.

Groo and Angel watched them go, then turned as one to return to the remainder of their group.

* * * * *

"Is Trey leaving to meet with Dad?" William quickly asked Angel as he approached with Groo at his side.

"No. Matt said that they were going to do some shopping." Angel explained, then asked, "Why? Did you need to get back?"

"I feel like I should. I've done what I came here to do and I feel like if I stay, that I'll end up doing something to mess up the way things turned out." William fought to explain.

"I actually know how that feels; you want to end on a high note. I've found that it's usually best to listen to your instincts when you're feeling like that. Groo and I are leaving, if you want to walk out with us. We're parked just a few spaces over from the bus you arrived on." Angel politely offered.

"Thank you Uncle Angel. I feel like I should take the time to process the events of the day before I will be ready to proceed with other things." William quietly explained.

"Yeah. Actually, I think that Groo and I are going to be doing the same thing, we're just going to be processing our stuff a different way." Angel said with a smile.

"Are we going to the celebration now?" Groo asked anxiously.

"Yeah." Angel said to Groo, then said to the rest of his team, "Groo and William and I are going to be leaving now. We'll be swinging by Andrew's bus if anyone else is ready to leave."

"Can one of you give me a ride back when we're done? I'm not ready to go yet." Evan asked Caridad, Rona and Ashley B. hopefully.

"Yeah. We got you covered." Caridad assured him.

"Good. We've all got radios. Call us if any of you need anything." Angel said seriously.

"Will do." Caridad soberly confirmed.

With that said, Angel led Groo and William away.

* * * * *

"This is the right place, isn't it?" Xander asked as they approached the bus.

"Yes. This is the vehicle we arrived on." Jimmy confirmed.

"Your dad said to meet him here, so we shouldn't have to wait too long." Xander said thoughtfully.

"How are you guys doing?" Clark asked as he led a group approaching from the north entrance of the mall.

"I believe that I have recorded some inspirational video and still images for our report." Jimmy said happily.

"I can't wait to check them out." Clark said with sincere interest.

"Is there going to be anything I can do to help you in preparing your report?" Icheb asked cautiously.

"Yes. Discussing the event with you helps me put my experiences into words." Jimmy explained.

"Is there anything Marie can do to help us?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Sure! She can pull us back when we start wandering away from the point." Clark helpfully suggested.

"It looks like I'm going to need that super strength I borrowed from you." Marie said to Clark playfully.

"How are you feeling?" Clark asked cautiously.

"I feel fine. I think some of the powers are finally starting to wear off." Marie said frankly.

Clark looked to the ground to confirm that Marie was still floating, then asked, "Like what?"

"The vision thing is finally letting up. That was the freakiest thing of all of it. I never want to go through that again." Marie said honestly.

"I kinda wish I knew what that was like. As far as I know, I see things just like everyone else." Clark said honestly.

"I'm pretty sure that it's there if you want to use it. Maybe you have to 'unlock' it or 'turn it on' or something." Marie cautiously suggested.

"I like the sound of 'unlocking'. It sounds like leveling up in a video game, like I'm improving and that maybe I'm ready to handle the responsibility of whatever it is." Clark said frankly.

"Tell me which ability you'd like to be able to use and maybe I can help you unlock it, since I already know how it works and what it feels like." Marie quietly offered.

"I just used my optic blasts for real for the first time. Even though I was one of the few people who could hurt the Sentinels, on a scale of one to ten, I'd rate my performance at about a three. I think I'd like to put in the work and get that up to about a seven before I try to learn something else." Clark said honestly.

"Sorry. I didn't know where Andrew parked the bus. It took me a few minutes to find you." Alan said as he rushed up to the casually chatting group.

"It's fine. We've only been waiting a minute." Xander assured him.

"Let me get the bus open, then I'll give a 'last call' before we leave." Alan said as he took out the set of keys that Andrew had given him.

"What's the rush?" Xander asked curiously.

"Professor Xavier wants for Doctor McCoy to check out Marie and Clark as soon as possible to see what's going on with their abilities." Alan said as he gestured for those waiting outside the bus to board.

Xander glanced in Marie's direction and took note that she was floating about a foot off the ground before simply nodding his acceptance of Alan's explanation.

After tapping his badge twice, Alan calmly said, "All team members, the Summers family bus will be leaving the north parking lot in a few minutes. Call me now if you want to ride with us, otherwise we'll be trusting you to make your own arrangements."

"You don't need me here for anything do you?" Xander asked cautiously.

"No. I think everything's fine." Alan assured him.

"Then I'm going to see if I can catch up to the Cajun before he starts making too many plans." Xander said frankly.

"The command center's parked that way, right by the street entrance." Alan said as he pointed.

"Thanks. We'll see you back at the house." Xander said before hurrying away.

* * * * *

Alan looked into the back of the bus where Jimmy, Icheb, Clark, and Marie were talking together seriously, comparing their experiences and observations regarding the Sentinels.

He just about jumped out of his seat at the sound of a knock on the door of the bus. Alan smiled in relief at the sight of William looking back at him.

Alan opened the door as he asked Angel, "Were you guys wanting to ride back with us in the bus?"

"No. We were just heading this way and thought we'd walk William out." Angel said casually.

"Thank you for that. You didn't happen to run into Trey in your travels, did you?" Alan asked cautiously.

"As a matter of fact, we did. He seems to be tagging along with Matt and someone else I didn't recognize. Matt said something about shopping for things for his new house." Angel finished with an unconcerned shrug.

"Trey's a good one to have along with you for something like that. Not only does he have an architect's sensibilities, but also an artist's eye." Alan said proudly.

"He can also make exact measurements by sight." William helpfully added.

Alan hugged William around the shoulders to acknowledge his contribution to the conversation.

"Anyway, if anyone asks, Groo and I are going out to celebrate our victory tonight. We'll try to be back by morning." Angel finished with a smile.

"Is Chris going to be alright with you out all night?" Alan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Him and Ronny are trying the 'camping out' thing again in his room tonight. The last thing he needs is me, disrupting the illusion of isolation that he's trying to create." Angel said with a fond smile at the thought of his son.

"Do you think they'll be alright without supervision?" Alan asked cautiously.

"I think so, they're both fairly responsible. But if something does come up, the professor's right there. I'm pretty sure he'll call me if he needs anything."

"I guess so. I suppose that it's different for us. We have so many kids and they're not familiar with societal norms. We're not as worried that they'll misbehave as we are that they'll find themselves in a situation that we haven't thought to prepare them for." Alan said seriously.

"Would there be any way that I could join Chris and Ronny for their 'campout'?" William asked cautiously.

Alan seemed to be about to answer, then looked to Angel with question.

"I've got no problem with it." Angel said immediately.

"I guess you guys can look at this like a do-over since last night's campout got interrupted." Alan said with a grin, then thought to ask, "Will you be alright on your regenerations?"

"My energy reserves are adequate and my homeostasis is nominal." William said confidently.

"I'm sure Chris and Ronny will be relieved to hear that." Alan said with an uncertain glance at Angel.

"On that note, we'll be leaving for our celebration. William, when you see Chris, tell him that I love him very much and for him to plan on the two of us spending some time together tomorrow afternoon." Angel said seriously.

"I will be sure to tell him." William promised.

"Alright then, if you need us for anything, we'll be at a place called McNalley's just down the street. Have a good night and remember... we won."

Alan smiled at Angel's declaration and said, "Thanks Angel. I will remember that."

After a nod of confirmation, Angel and Groo walked away, leaving Alan and William at the door of the bus.

* * * * *

"William! Tell us of your experience combatting the Sentinels." Jimmy said excitedly.

"I completed my mission. What else is there to tell?" William slowly asked.

"Working together, Clark, Icheb, and I would like to allow our viewers to vicariously experience what it was like to face an opponent, such as a Sentinel, and defeat it." Jimmy said seriously.

"I can answer your questions to the best of my ability, but I don't think that I express myself in a way that is inspirational or at all colorful, as you seem to be intending." William cautiously explained.

"Perhaps not, but we can try. Did your teammates provide support while you were assimilating the Sentinel?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Yes. My team expended maximum effort to provide me ample opportunity to complete my task. I can't think of any other team that I would want supporting me in such a situation." William said seriously.

"Is there anything that happened that you'd like for us to include in our story about tonight?" Clark asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, William slowly said, "I met someone. She said that she knows when she's being lied to and she knows who the good guys are. I think that maybe your

viewers should be aware that not everyone watching the broadcast news reports are believing everything that they are being told. There are astute people out there who see through the misinformation."

"That's kind of a whole different thing from what our report is about." Jimmy said uncertainly.

"Then again, this might end up being the story." Clark said seriously.

"Listen to him, Jimmy. I've been out in the world around all the hate. I know how easy it is to start believing that they're all against you and that it's us against them. Every now and then we need a reminder that there are good people in the world, and they're not always where you expect to find them." Marie passionately explained.

"Let's go through everything and follow each thing to its natural conclusion. We'll decide what we'll pursue once we've taken stock of what we actually have." Clark suggested earnestly.

"We should also interview Janine and Robert to get their points of view. Knowing more about the Sentinels' original programming might provide us additional insights to how things developed and ended up working out." Jimmy said thoughtfully.

"If you will do the interviewing, I could collate the collected information." Icheb volunteered.

"And I could take what you've collected and try to make a story out of it." Clark said happily.

"What am I gonna do?" Marie asked cautiously.

"Tell us when we're getting too focused on details and keep us on track to get the job done." Clark answered without hesitation.

"I can do that." Marie said confidently, accepting that she was going to be considered a valued member of the team.

* * * * *

Having determined that sufficient time had passed for anyone interested to contact them, Alan started the bus and headed toward the nearest exit from the mall parking lot.

Emergency vehicles were swarming the parking lot behind them, but didn't seem to be doing all that much. They appeared to be putting out fires and helping injured people, but were in no hurry to go into the mall itself.

Fortunately for Alan, they also didn't seem to have any desire to impede their departure.

As he pulled onto the city streets, everything seemed to be freakishly normal. Alan expected there to be police lying in wait, ready to pounce on the mutants fleeing the scene of the mutant roundup at the mall.

In reality, it was a regular Friday night. Perhaps with a little more traffic than usual, but that could easily be explained by the start of the holiday season.

"Alan. I think something's wrong." Marie said loudly from the back of the bus.

When Alan looked into his mirror, he immediately took notice of the frozen expressions that Icheb, William, and Jimmy were wearing.

"I've seen this before. It looks like they're accessing the collective. It's probably not anything to worry about." Alan said unconvincingly.

Icheb slowly blinked, then quietly said, "Janine had a message for us."

"She wanted us to know that the Sentinels are no longer a threat to you or to us." William slowly added.

"They now follow the one voice." Jimmy said, completing the thought.

"I don't know if that reassures me or worries me even more." Alan said honestly.

"Don't worry, Dad. Janine couldn't control us, even if she wanted to. That function has been disallowed in all of our individual systems." William said confidently.

"She just recognized that she could use our dormant communication nodes to inform all of us at once of relevant information in a timely manner." Icheb further explained.

"She wanted for us to be able to make the best decisions based on the most current information." Jimmy said informatively, and finished with a smile at his dad.

After a moment to consider, Alan hesitantly asked, "Do you have any idea of what those decisions might be?"

"Well, even though the Sentinels don't belong to us, they have our nanoprobes in them, so we shouldn't let them out of our possession." Icheb cautiously explained.

"I suppose that I can see that." Alan hesitantly allowed.

"Janine and Robert were thinking that it would be wrong of us to waste such valuable resources." William interjected.

"That sounds like they're being very conscientious." Alan commented, then slowly prompted, "Go on."

"Janine said that she'll work to improve them and make sure that they have everything they need and that she'll make it right if they accidentally break something..." Jimmy hurried to say before he was interrupted.

"I think I've got the idea. This sounds like something that I'll need to discuss with your father..."

"He already said it's okay!" Jimmy hurriedly injected.

"He did?" Alan asked suspiciously.

"He said that it would be okay with him if it was okay with you." Jimmy quickly explained.

"I guess that settles it... we're officially parents now." Alan said resignedly, then looked in the mirror at his three Borg children waiting expectantly and patiently said, "When we get home, I'll sit down with your father and we'll listen to your proposal before giving you a final answer."

"Robert is drafting the prospectus as we speak. He expects to be done with it before we get home." William said excitedly.

"Can they hear what we're saying?" Alan cautiously asked.

"Janine has access to my ocular implant and is relaying our conversation to all the Borg kids plus John, Quaid, and Father by way of the video screen in the living room." Jimmy said informatively.

"Oh!" Alan said with surprise, then smiled at Jimmy in the mirror before saying, "Hi Pumpkin, hi love, we'll be home in a few minutes. I love you all. Bye."

Chapter 25: Unfair Life

"Doctor McCoy?" Marie asked cautiously from the door to his office.

"Please come on back. I'll be ready for you in just a moment." Doctor McCoy called from one of the treatment rooms.

Clark smiled with anticipation, recognizing where they were going.

"One more minute and I'll be right with you." Doctor McCoy muttered in concentration as he worked to record Gar's vitals.

"How are you doing, Gar?" Clark asked gently as he led Marie, Jimmy and Icheb into the room.

"He woke me up to give me something to make me sleep." Gar complained.

"Just hurry up and get better, then you won't have to put up with it anymore." Clark said gently.

"Let's see if you're still saying that when it's you in here feeling like crap and it's me visiting, able to come and go whenever I feel like it." Gar challenged.

"I don't get sick." Clark timidly retorted.

Gar looked at him with surprise for a moment, then loudly proclaimed, "You suck!"

Clark laughed at Gar's reaction but didn't dispute his words.

"You appear to be recovering nicely. Lie back and get some sleep now." Doctor McCoy said gently.

"You know what? I'm going to become a doctor so that someday, when you're old and sick, I can wake *you* up to give *you* something to make you sleep." Gar said grumpily.

Doctor McCoy seemed surprised by the declaration, but after a moment to get past it, he quietly said, "I'll look forward to it."

* * * * *

"How are things going here?" Alan asked as he hurried into the living room, noticing the television showing some familiar video feeds.

"Everything's fine. Just grab a baby and have a seat." Andrew said quietly.

"Where is everyone? I expected a houseful." Alan asked as he looked around.

"John and Quaid are in the kitchen, fixing bottles. Everyone else is either in an alcove or visiting with someone who is." Andrew answered simply, then looked around curiously before asking, "Speaking of expectations, weren't you driving a busload of kids back with you?"

"Yeah. Well, William asked to spend the night with Ronny and Chris. The 'Briefing with Neelix' team wanted to stay at the mansion and wait for Hank to check Marie's power levels. They're planning to come back here to work on their news report as soon as they're done with that." Alan said seriously.

"I'm sure Janine will see to it that they're here for the presentation." Andrew said confidently.

"Do you think the boys need help preparing the bottles?" Alan asked as he looked toward the kitchen with concern.

"No. Let them figure it out. I think it's important that John be allowed to do things to help so that he can really feel included. Besides, it's good for Quaid to get used to the process. I plan on asking for his help from time to time." Andrew said frankly, then thought to add, "Right now, I'd rather you take Thomas and get a bib on him."

"I guess I've been trying to do everything all by myself. It doesn't even occur to me to ask for help." Alan said introspectively as he absently picked up a bib and a towel.

"Yeah. But that's your nature. I wouldn't ask you to try to change it." Andrew said lovingly.

"Maybe. But, to be honest, I won't mind knowing that there are a few more people that I can count on when I need something done." Alan said frankly.

"Have you finished everything for the mission?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"I think so. We've done everything that we needed to at the mall although, I'm still not clear on what Janine has going on with the Sentinels." Alan said frankly.

"Please just reserve judgement until the kids have given their presentation." Andrew said with a grin.

In a defeated whisper, Alan looked askance at his beloved and quietly asked, "We're adopting the Sentinels, aren't we?"

"I guess it all comes down to how you define the word 'adopt'." Andrew said carefully.

"I suppose that if anyone were going to redefine adoption, it *would* be us." Alan said resignedly.

"Listen to what the kids have to say, then make a decision. As long as you do what you believe is right, you'll have no regrets." Andrew urged him to understand.

"As nice a sentiment as that is, I'm not sure that's how it really works." Alan said cautiously.

"Okay. Probably not. But in a perfect world, that's how it *should* work. I suppose that in this world, we'll just have to settle for doing the best we can."

"Yeah. That sounds about right."

* * * * *

"So what kind of things are we looking for?" Wilkey asked loudly as the trio waded into the sea of people.

"We'll get things like beds and dressers as we need them. What I'm looking for is stuff for the shared rooms that we'll all be using. I can go ahead and get things like that without having to worry too much about individual tastes." Matt said frankly.

"Do you have any kind of theme in mind?" Wilkey asked curiously.

"I don't really think we need for all the stuff to be matching and coordinated... If we did that, it wouldn't feel like a place that I would live in... or at least be comfortable living in." Matt said honestly.

"I get that we don't have to make everything have stripes, all pointing the same direction. But we could still go into this thinking about... Southwestern style or maybe something like a Maine B&B." Wilkey slowly explained.

"I don't like either of those styles that much, but I can see what you're getting at. Something a little 'cowboy' or 'woody' might feel more like a home to me." Matt said thoughtfully.

"Will you want to decorate the walls of your home with the exsanguinated carcasses of disemboweled fauna?" Trey asked curiously.

"Never really had much of a use for elk heads and the like. Pictures are just fine with me." Matt said frankly.

"Good. Knowing that, I might come and visit you sometime." Wilkey said with a smile.

"Trey? You know where the new place is, don't you?" Matt asked curiously.

"Of course, I went with you to evaluate its merits. I can give you exact coordinates, if you like." Trey said quickly, then turned to Wilkey and asked. "Would longitude and latitude be sufficient?"

"Actually, I think I might do better with the street address." Wilkey said as he fought down a chuckle.

Before he could ask if Trey needed a pen, Trey was handing him a piece of paper.

"Thanks." Wilkey said with surprise at Trey's speed and efficiency.

"What dy'all think about those couches?" Matt asked as he pointed at the store they were approaching.

"The gray ones?" Wilkey asked cautiously.

"Yeah. They look kind of overstuffed and comfortable, plus, gray goes with just about anything, right?" Matt asked as the group got closer to the showroom window.

"Have you ever been to the beach?" Wilkey asked curiously.

"Yeah. A few times." Matt said simply.

"Have you ever seen a whale?"

"Yeah."

"Have you ever seen a whale that's been beached?"

"Not in person, but I've seen pictures."

"What about a few days after it's died and it's all bloated and gnarly and about to explode? Have you seen pictures of that?" Wilkey persisted.

"No. I can't say that I have."

Wilkey gestured toward the couches in front of them and waited for a reaction.

There was a moment of relative silence as Wilkey waited for a response.

"I have found photographic evidence in my data node which appears to corroborate Wilkey's assertion." Trey said as a statement of fact.

"If you really like them, just forget that I said anything." Wilkey said quickly.

"Nah. I've forgotten enough things in my life. Let's go look at something else." Matt said as he started walking again.

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"A teacher's paycheck don't stretch very far, but if you find something that catches your eye, be sure to let me know. Christmas is coming up, so we'll find us a way to make it happen." Spike said as they walked.

"I guess we can look at the Hawaiian shirts if you want to, but I don't think I really need anything else." Alex said simply.

"What about those whingeing lesbians that you're always listening to? Don't they have a shop that sells that sort of thing around here?" Spike asked curiously.

Alex laughed, then said, "First of all, they're not lesbians, they're teenage boys. Secondly, I know that you can't stand my boyband music, just the same as I can't tolerate your Sex Pistols."

"Maybe there's a middle ground." Spike cautiously suggested.

"You mean, something that neither one of us likes?" Alex asked playfully.

"No, you cheeky little bastard, I'm talking about something that's got enough grit that I can listen to it and enough 'foo-foo-whatever it is that you like' so that you won't have to run away with your hands over your ears." Spike finished with an encouraging smile.

"I guess there wouldn't be any harm in looking." Alex finally relented.

Taking that as a victory, Spike guided them into the onslaught of holiday shoppers in search of a music store.

* * * * *

"Here's the bottles, we did just like you said, so they should be just right." Quaid said as he carried three prepared baby bottles into the living room.

"Thank you, Quaid. That was perfect timing. I think all the babies are ready for their dinner." Andrew said appreciatively, then looked past Quaid and asked, "Where's John?"

"He's not feeling too good. He's in the bathroom, in case he gets sick." Quaid said quietly.

"I'll go check on him." Alan said as he began to shift Thomas off his lap.

"Why don't you ask Quaid to do that for you? Your children need to be fed and if John's having any serious trouble, he or Quaid can come and get us." Andrew asked reasonably.

Alan froze in mid-motion, then reluctantly moved Thomas back into place.

"Quaid, would you go and ask John if he's okay and see if he needs anything?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yeah. But if you'll wait for a few seconds, I'd like to feed Marguerite when I get back." Quaid said hopefully.

"That sounds good to me. Go on ahead." Andrew said decisively.

"Every now and then you'll say something that strikes me as being such a 'parent' thing to say." Alan said as he got everything placed to start feeding Thomas.

"What did I say?" Andrew asked cautiously as he shifted Chakotay and Marguerite in his arms.

"Go on ahead'. I've never heard anyone but a parent use that phrase." Alan said warmly.

"I don't know where I picked it up... it certainly wasn't from my own parents." Andrew said frankly.

"I know it still hurts, but just think about it; your dad's here now. He can't make up for what was lost, but he's here. You can work on letting it go whenever you feel that you're ready." Alan said gently.

"You're probably right. But now might not be the right time." Andrew said hesitantly, then slowly explained, "When I went to get the Slayers, I got a message from my mom."

"What did she have to say?" Alan asked cautiously.

"It wasn't exactly *from* her. It was more *about* her." Andrew said frankly, then reluctantly continued, "There are some doctors who'd like for me to stop by and make some decisions on her behalf."

Alan sat stunned for a moment, then quietly said, "I don't know if I could objectively determine right from wrong in that situation."

"As Anya and Hallie would say, sometimes it's a thin line between vengeance and justice." Andrew said distantly, then thought to add, "I still haven't decided if I'm going to go."

"He said he's feeling better, but he's going to stay in there for a few more minutes, just in case." Quaid said as he hurried to the couch and automatically snuggled in beside Andrew.

"Be careful to support her head." Andrew cautioned as he gently placed Marguerite into Quaid's waiting arms.

"Don't worry. Robert showed me how." Quaid assured him as he settled Marguerite into place.

"You're doing fine." Alan said as he handed the smaller of the prepared bottles to Quaid.

"When's Itchy coming back?" Quaid asked quietly as he slowly and gently touched the nipple of the bottle to the baby's lips.

It seemed to take a moment for Marguerite to notice what was happening, but once she did, she accepted the bottle and began to suckle in an 'interested' yet ladylike manner.

"Doctor McCoy needs to check Clark and Marie, then the whole group should be coming back here... except for William, maybe. I don't think he said if he was planning to be here or not." Alan finished uncertainly.

"Are Clark and Marie okay?" Quaid asked with concern, while keeping the majority of his attention on the baby in his arms.

"I'm sure they are. It just seems that Marie's absorbing ability reacted to Clark's non-human physiology in an unexpected way, so Doctor McCoy wants to be sure that neither of them are going to have some sort of a problem down the line because of it." Alan carefully explained.

"I wonder what would happen if Marie absorbed *my* abilities?" Quaid asked speculatively as he took the bottle away and used a conveniently placed towel to wipe a slight amount of leakage from around the baby's mouth.

"I thought you didn't have any abilities." Andrew said cautiously.

"I may not have." Quaid easily admitted then cautiously added, "Or they might have just blocked me from using them."

"Well, that's a little... horrifying to think about." Alan said frankly.

Andrew nodded his agreement, then cautiously said, "I tell you what, until we find out for sure, why don't you make a point of avoiding Marie as much as you possibly can?"

Considering what just happened with Clark, I *really* don't want to find out what kind of powers she might be able to draw out of you."

"Yeah. And besides that, the Q get all kinds of pissy when anyone who's not one of them gets access to their power." Quaid said frankly.

"I bet." Andrew easily agreed.

"I wonder how Jean got away with it." Alan asked curiously.

"She got her power the right way, she grew into it. The Q see it like a fish creature walking on land for the first time or like a flower blooming... I don't know the right words, but they think it's a good thing and the way that the multiverse was meant to work." Quaid explained.

"But an absorber stealing a Q's power would be a wrong way to gain the power and they might react badly to it.?" Alan said speculatively.

"I was one of them and look at what they did to me. My parents created me, then after I was made, they decided that I was a mistake; too dangerous to be allowed to exist. If it wasn't for Aunt Jean fighting for me, the Q continuum would have allowed them to get rid of me, unmake me, for being created Q instead of ascending to it. I don't want to think about what they would do to an *outsider* who 'stole' their power." Quaid said honestly, then adjusted the towel on his lap so that he could turn Marguerite over and begin the process of burping her.

"I think you ended up in the right place. It's best if you're not involved in any of that." Andrew said as he used the edge of a towel to do a little clean-up on Chakotay's face.

"I can't think of anyplace in the multiverse that I'd rather be." Quaid said as he gently rubbed Marguerite's back.

* * * * *

"I'm guessing from the way you're floating that the abilities you've absorbed haven't subsided as of yet." Doctor McCoy said as he performed a preliminary examination.

"Some of them have. For a while I could see everything around me about twelve different ways. It was like having night vision, X-ray vision and every other kind of vision you can think of all at once." Marie said frankly.

"But your vision has returned to normal now?" Doctor McCoy asked curiously.

"Yeah. In fact, the main reason I touched Clark to begin with was so that I could get his optic blasts to use against the Sentinels. That's completely gone too." Marie said in realization.

"So, you obviously have the ability to defy gravity. Have you noticed any other lingering effects?" Doctor McCoy asked as he stepped away to gather some other testing supplies.

"I think I could probably still lift a bus and throw it two or three miles, if I wanted to." Marie said honestly.

"We may test that out after the exam. Anything else?" Doctor McCoy asked hesitantly.

"I think if you took that same bus and picked it up and dropped it on top of me, that I probably wouldn't even feel it. I feel kind of... invincible." Marie timidly admitted.

"Let me try something." Doctor McCoy said as he picked up a hypodermic needle from the supply tray.

"Be careful not to touch me. I know for sure that I haven't lost my draining ability."

Marie cautioned him.

"Yes. Thank you. I appreciate the reminder." Hank said as he quickly and efficiently swabbed Marie's arm.

"For some reason, doctors seem to think that just because they know how to keep from getting diseases that they're somehow immune from my touch." Marie said honestly.

"I'm sure it's an arrogance born out of necessity." Doctor McCoy said as he attempted to insert the hypodermic to draw a blood sample.

When the needle broke, Doctor McCoy glanced at Clark, then back to Marie before saying, "It appears that you've absorbed yet another of Clark's abilities."

"Do we need to call Andrew for his special futuristic spray needle thing?" Clark asked cautiously.

"I don't think that will be necessary. I was just going to do a comparison against Marie's baseline blood work. I wouldn't expect it to reveal anything significant." Hank said seriously.

Clark, Jimmy, Icheb, and Marie were all silent, waiting to see what revelation Doctor McCoy would impart to them next.

"Are the defiance of gravity, strength and invulnerability the only abilities of Clark's that you are aware of still having?" Doctor McCoy asked slowly.

"I... don't know." Marie said uncertainly, then hurried to add, "I don't think I've noticed anything else."

"Clark, are you aware of Marie demonstrating any of your other abilities?" Doctor McCoy asked cautiously.

"No. But I doubt that I *would* notice. She's already done more with my abilities than I ever did." Clark said frankly.

"I have been able to detect a slight field of energy surrounding Marie." Icheb interjected.

"What type of energy?" Doctor McCoy asked curiously.

"I cannot determine that with any degree of certainty with my current scanning equipment, but I believe it to be psionic in nature." Icheb said uncomfortably.

"Can you speculate as to its purpose?" Doctor McCoy asked as he walked to a nearby cabinet to get another piece of test equipment.

"From what I have observed, I would guess that it's part of Marie's invulnerability. I would suppose that in the event of an attack, it would prevent damage to her clothing. It might also contribute, in part or in whole, to her ability to defy gravity." Icheb said slowly and speculatively.

"Yes. I *have* seen psionics used that way before. Professor? Do you have any insights into Marie's newfound abilities?" Doctor McCoy asked into the air.

//Marie has always been slightly telepathic, requiring touch to read another's thoughts. That would normally suggest that she would have an increased potential to develop telekinesis... and even though I can't detect any telekinetic ability at the moment, when dealing with non-human derived abilities, the dynamics could be drastically different.//

"Which tells us pretty much nothing." Clark said thoughtfully.

//Perhaps it would be more productive to investigate the attack that the Sentinel used which may have caused Marie to retain Clark's abilities.// Professor Xavier said reasonably.

"It might not have anything to do with the Sentinel. It could just be how my ability reacts to Clark's... species." Marie finished awkwardly, not knowing a less offensive way of making her point.

"Marie can touch me and not have any reaction at all." Icheb said informatively, then explained, "That would suggest that the species of a person *can* play some role in Marie's ability to drain them or not."

//Since Marie hasn't touched Clark before, we can't dismiss that possibility.//

"Did the team make recordings of the video evidence of the fight with the Sentinels?" Jimmy asked timidly.

"Yes. Despite what they chose to view on their monitors, the feeds from all the mall cameras as well as any other video feeds that they had access to would have automatically been recorded for later evaluation." Doctor McCoy said as he appeared to be scanning Marie with a handheld device.

"If you look at the video, at Marie's fight, it might give you some idea of what the Sentinel did, or tried to do to Marie." Jimmy said seriously, then thought to add, "Which in turn might help you sort out how Clark's abilities became dyed into the fabric of Marie's physical essence."

"That's an interesting choice of words." Doctor McCoy said cautiously.

"As I understand it, the use of memorable words and phrases can be beneficial for journalists." Jimmy said frankly.

//I believe that it can be overdone. How you say a thing becomes more important than *what* you say.// Professor Xavier said sagely, then continued, //Regardless, in this case your choice of words provides us with an interesting context in which to view Marie's condition.//

Before anyone could respond, Jimmy and Icheb froze in place and had equal, distant looks in their eyes.

"Incoming message." Marie said simply, in case Doctor McCoy wasn't aware of what was going on.

Clark moved in front of Jimmy and waved as he said, "Hi Andrew. Hi Alan. We'll be over as soon as we're done with Marie's exam."

* * * * *

"You boys want another round?" The waitress asked as she rushed by their table.

"I'm sure we'll be ready by the time you get back." Angel called after her.

"You got a deal." The waitress said before disappearing around the corner into the dining room.

"While I have visited many a pub and tavern in my time, I believe that I can say without reservation that this place you have chosen has an atmosphere that one can truly appreciate." Groo said confidently.

"I'm glad you like it, but Matt was the one who found this place. The only part I played in it was to ask for his recommendation." Angel said frankly.

"Perhaps it is so. This friend of yours, Matt, seems like another being of strong will and good character. I would feel secure with him fighting by my side. That cannot be said of many. I am certain that he would do well in Pylea." Groo said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. He seems like a good guy, but you probably shouldn't be talking about Pylea in here." Angel said as he looked around to see who might be listening to them.

"No one here cares." Groo said simply, then yelled to the crowded room, "I am the king of the demon realm of Pylea!"

"Yeah. Me too!" A man said from the bar.

"This is where all us kings meet up." Said a man from another table as he raised his beer in a toast.

"Do you see? Even if they make such proclamations in jest, they are kindred spirits. Such beings are to be respected." Groo explained.

"They're a bunch of drunks." Angel said as he looked around cautiously.

"That's the man in you speaking. Look with your demonic eyes and you'll see them for who they really are." Groo said seriously.

Although Angel didn't go so far as to go through his complete demonic transformation, he *did* follow Groo's recommendation insofar as he looked at the patrons of McNalley's from the point of view of a literal demon.

"They have seen war. They have seen death. They know loss. Not only is it 'why' they drink, but it's also why they continue to live. We have the honor to be amongst survivors." Groo said confidently.

While Angel had no doubt that each and every one of the people surrounding them were human, he *did* see evidence of Groo's claims.

The men and women of McNalley's weren't a randomized group of strangers. They were 'of a sort'.

Angelus could detect the war weariness that Groo had picked up on immediately. Be it called PTSD or simply having seen too much, it was the thread that bound the group together. Also, as Groo had rightly detected, the two half-demons fit right in amongst them.

"What has y'all so happy over here?" A woman, by all appearances a few decades their senior, asked as she sidled up to their table.

"Our enemies have been vanquished, yet we survive." Groo proudly proclaimed.

"Well, ain't you the sweetest thing?" The woman asked with amusement, then looked at Groo and firmly said, "Soak it in, honey. Enjoy it while it lasts. Hold onto it and let it carry you through those times when you aren't quite so... victorious."

"Wise words! Come, sit with us! Let me buy you a drink!" Groo said gregariously.

"That's so sweet of you, but I'm here with my husband. He's at the bar, getting our drinks for us." The woman said, sounding to be flustered and girlishly giddy at the offer.

"Invite him over then. If he's your husband, he must be a man of great wisdom and bravery." Groosaid confidently.

"Merle! We're sittin over here." The woman called loudly as she waved at a man just stepping away from the bar.

"What is your name, good lady?" Groo asked with interest.

"Me? I'm Molly. This here's my husband, Merle." The woman said as she gestured for her husband to join her at the table.

"It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you both. Please join us and be welcome." Groo said as he made a show of pulling out a chair for Molly.

Merle looked at Angel with question, silently asking with his eyes if they were for real.

"Please join us. Groo's here on vacation and I think it'd be nice if he got to meet some people outside my circle of friends." Angel said as he gestured toward the vacant chair at their table to offer it to Merle.

"Sounds like you're the right kind of friend to have. Thanks." Merle said as he took the offered chair.

* * * * *

"*Who is it?*" An uncertain voice cautiously asked.

"It is William." He said simply.

The door suddenly opened and he was ushered inside.

"From what they were saying to my dad, there's some big X-Men mission going on right now. Have you heard anything about it? Matt was called in for it. Were your parents called in too?" Chris asked excitedly.

"Yes. Both my fathers were called in." William confirmed, then cautiously added, "As were me and my siblings, Icheb, Trey, and Jimmy."

"Your whole family got called into battle and I got left out?!" Ronny asked loudly.

"Not all. Icheb, Trey, and I were called upon to participate and Jimmy was asked to document the event. The rest functioned as support for us, using the boathouse as a command center." William said seriously.

"But why did you get called out on a mission when you're not even a mutant?" Ronny asked belligerently.

"That *is* why. Our opponents were robots programmed to incapacitate and subdue mutants. Uncle Angel and my family, along with many other non mutants, were called upon to take

up the fight where you and other mutants would have been severely disadvantaged." William explained firmly, at a deliberate pace.

"Do you know? Is my dad okay?" Chris quietly asked into the silence that followed.

"He's fine. Him and Groo walked with me to the bus where Dad was waiting to drive us home." William easily explained, then thought to add, "He asked me to tell you that he loves you very much."

"What about Matt?" Ronny asked cautiously.

"He looked like he had sustained injuries in physical combat, but he didn't seem to be in pain when I saw him. He was with Trey and they looked like they were going to go do something in the mall... I don't know if it was related to the mission or not." William finished uncertainly, then thought to add, "No personal message was given."

"That's okay." Ronny said with a smile, then explained, "If he was looking beat up but not in pain, it sounds like he's probably having a pretty good time. From what I've seen, most of the stuff he enjoys doing makes him end up looking like that."

"Have there been any new developments in regard to purchasing the house?" William asked curiously.

"Matt made some calls and checked on some things, but as far as I know, we're waiting for other people to make their decisions and get back to us." Ronny said frankly.

"Do you think you're going to get the house?" Chris asked cautiously.

"From the way Matt explained it, they'd have to be stupid not to take his offer. All they've got to do is say 'yes' and they'll get cash... all of it. Not in payments or anything like that." Ronny said seriously.

"I don't know anything about it, but it sounds like a sweet deal to me." Chris said honestly.

"From my limited understanding of how the real estate and banking industries work, I believe this would be an equitable arrangement for the seller. They would indeed be stupid not to accept the offer with all due haste." William said honestly.

As Ronny was about to respond, he noticed an uncomprehending vacant expression that had taken over William's features.

"William?" Chris cautiously ventured, but received no response.

Chapter 26: Albeit the Lesser

"What would I do with a glass-top coffee table?" Matt asked seriously, letting his personal preference be clearly known.

"Well, there was this one thing I saw in a German movie..." Wilkey began to explain.

"No." Matt said firmly, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

"I didn't really think you'd want to, but when I saw it, it reminded me..." Wilkey trailed off as he looked at the coffee table again.

"These paintings are aesthetically pleasing." Trey said from a nearby rack of various artworks.

"Show me what you got there." Matt said as he approached.

Wilkey finally disengaged from his staring at the coffee table to find what Trey had discovered.

"It's a scrap of wood with a stain on it." Matt said slowly, obviously feeling that he was missing something.

"Yes. The shape *is* rudimentary... nearly a glyph. However, if you will help me to display the entire set, you may be able to discover the deeper significance." Trey said reasonably.

"Okay. Hand that to me. We can stand them up in a row, right here." Matt said confidently.

"Please try to look beyond the literal meanings of these as you see them. They have greater meaning in combination." Trey said as he handed a painting to Matt and another to Wilkey.

"Oh, yeah. I see now. That stain, it's a bear." Wilkey said slowly.

"That is the literal meaning that I was asking you to look beyond." Trey said with the slightest smile of teasing or amusement.

"Okay. I think I get it." Matt said as he looked at the paintings, all in a row.

"What do you get?" Wilkey asked confusedly as he took a step back to stand by Matt so that he could see them all at once.

"Rage, control, harmony... nature." Matt said slowly.

"How do you get *that* out of *this*?" Wilkey asked in confusion.

"These primitive pictures, with their faded colors and crude designs, contrast the timeless concepts of survival and civilization." Trey carefully explained.

After a moment to consider his words, Wilkey dubiously said, "You just made that up."

"You can think of it as pictures of animals if you want. I'm going to look at them as reminders of our animal natures and just how close to the surface they sometimes are." Matt said slowly.

"So you're buying them?" Wilkey asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Hopefully the guys will understand." Matt finished with a smile.

"Even if they don't understand on a conscious level, I believe that the underlying message will still find its way through to them." Trey said seriously.

"Or do you think we should get the coffee table instead?" Matt asked with an inquisitive glance at Wilkey.

"No." Wilkey immediately answered, then explained more slowly, "I don't know exactly what you see when you look at these things, but even *I* can tell that it's something positive, like a life-lesson or a motivational thing... something like that."

"You *do* get it." Matt said with a grin.

"No, not at all. But I get that it's something good. That's probably as much as I need to get for now." Wilkey said introspectively.

When Matt glanced at Trey, he noticed the vacant look in his eyes.

"You know how Trey is part machine?" Matt asked Wilkey quietly.

"Yeah."

"It looks like one of his gadgets just kicked on." Matt said as he kept his focus on Trey.

* * * * *

"Why don't you just have them deliver the entire store to the boathouse?" Alex asked with a chuckle.

Xander struggled to look over the stack of boxes in his arms, then said, "Wait and see how much you two buy when it's *your* baby celebrating her first Christmas."

After a moment to consider, Alex said, "Fair enough. Why don't you let us help you with that?"

"Hey mate! You volunteering me for things?" Spike playfully grouched.

"I guess we could go back to the record shop and look around some more, if you wanted to." Alex said with a mischievous grin.

"No. Anything but that... Give me some of them boxes here." Spike said abruptly.

Xander and Remy shared a questioning look before splitting their individual loads to share them with Alex and Spike.

* * * * *

"How are things going up here?" Bobby asked as he walked into the living room.

"Everything seems to be alright for the moment. How's Robert doing?" Alan asked cautiously.

"He's fine. Him and Janine are setting up some kind of virtual meeting space for whatever big thing they're planning. I'm sure it's going to be great, but there's nothing for me to do to help them." Bobby said frankly.

"Look at that! Clark's waving at us." Quaid said as he pointed at the television screen.

"Can you raise the volume?" Alan asked cautiously.

"No. Janine didn't include an audio stream except for her own voice." Andrew answered.

"Well, they don't look worried, so I guess they're probably just saying 'Hi'." Andrew said speculatively.

"Did John go home?" Bobby asked cautiously.

"No. He's in the bathroom. He hasn't been feeling well." Alan said quietly.

"Yeah. We knew that was going to happen." Bobby admitted, then added, "I'll go stay with him until he's feeling a little better."

"Let us know if there's anything we can do to help." Andrew said quickly.

"Yeah. Count on it." Bobby said as he left the room.

"Dad, Father, I have summoned all those within our subspace domain to attend our presentation. We will be ready to begin shortly." Janine's Borg whisper-voice said from the television.

"Thanks, Pumpkin." Alan reluctantly answered toward the television, not sure if she could hear him or not.

* * * * *

"What did they say?" Marie quickly asked when she saw consciousness returning to Icheb's eyes.

"Janine has put out the call to all of us to attend a meeting at the boathouse. Those who cannot attend physically are invited to attend virtually." Icheb said slowly.

After a long moment, Clark finally asked, "Do you know what the meeting is about?"

"Only very generally. Janine has asked that we allow her to reveal her proposal in stages, so that she can verify that each preliminary step is completely achieved before moving on to the next." Jimmy said slowly, almost as though he were reading the statement from a script.

"Whatever she's planning, I have a feeling that she's gonna get what she wants." Marie said frankly.

"With ruthless efficiency." Clark quietly added.

"Why do you say that?" Doctor McCoy asked curiously.

"Just a feeling I've got." Clark answered honestly.

"Doctor, are you going to need for Clark and Marie to remain in MedLab?" Icheb asked curiously.

"No. Unless one of them exhibits some sort of negative reaction to the events of the day, I feel it best if they proceed normally and keep tabs on any new developments. My next stage of investigation will be to review the recordings of the incident and attempt to determine what attack might have been employed by the Sentinel." Doctor McCoy said seriously.

"You might also ask Trey if he was able to identify any of the emissions during the attack. He was wearing his advanced scanning array and might have collected some significant data." Jimmy suggested.

"Do you happen to know where Trey is right now?" Doctor McCoy asked cautiously.

//Trey is currently enjoying some off-duty activities, which is something of a departure for him. I would not wish to interrupt what might end up being a positive socialization interaction.//

"Do you think you could ask him to stop by and speak with me when he gets in?" Doctor McCoy asked hopefully.

//Trey is supposed to be here in the morning to do maintenance on Cerebro. I'll ask him to stop in and talk with you at that time.// Professor Xavier said decisively.

"Does that mean that we can go now?" Clark asked uncertainly.

Doctor McCoy smiled, then answered, "Yes. You may go, on the proviso that you notify me immediately if either of you has any new developments with your abilities."

"We will." Clark immediately agreed.

"We'll be at the boathouse if you need us for anything." Marie quickly added.

* * * * *

"What's wrong, William? Do we need to call Doctor McCoy?" Chris asked anxiously.

There was a long moment of silence before William finally said, "No. I just received a message from Janine."

"Wouldn't it be easier for her to just call you on the phone?" Ronny asked simply.

"Not really. The message wasn't for me specifically, but for those of us who have access to the Borg subspace domain." William said seriously.

"Was it something important?" Chris asked curiously.

"Not to me." William answered simply, then added, "I am going to take a moment to create a notification subroutine so that Janine won't be able to incapacitate me with her messaging again."

"Don't you need a computer to do something like that?" Chris asked curiously.

"I have one." William said as he lifted his shirt to expose his data node.

"So, do you have a computer instead of a brain, or is your brain part of the computer, or do you just have a computer that's always there with you when you need it?" Chris asked curiously.

"Some of each." William said slowly, then explained, "There was a time when the computer completely controlled me. It could have been said that the computer was functionally my brain. The person I am didn't even have independent thoughts.

"For a time I was dependent on the computer to organize even the most basic tasks for me. Even though I made decisions, I needed the computer to walk me through every step of the implementation process.

"Now, I'm not that different from you. I am myself. I can access the computer when I need to, but it *usually* isn't an intrusion. When something like this, with Janine, happens, I think about what it might be like to have the computer removed completely."

"Is there anything we can do to help you with your coding?" Ronny asked curiously.

"No. I have everything I need to write the subroutine here and now." William said confidently.

"So, did Janine need for you to do something? Is that why she called you?" Ronny asked slowly, not sure if William were writing his subroutine while they were talking.

"She put out a general summons regarding a meeting at the boathouse." William said simply.

"So, does that mean that you need to leave?" Ronny asked cautiously.

"Not necessarily. Robert is constructing a virtual meeting space where I can attend. I won't physically have to leave, although I may be unresponsive for the duration of the meeting." William slowly explained.

"So you'll be here with us, but you won't *really* be here?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Is there any way that we can go with you?" Chris asked at nearly the same time.

"Although I wasn't planning on inviting you, that was only because it didn't occur to me that you might want to attend." William said honestly.

"Do you think anyone would mind if we did?" Chris asked cautiously.

"No. I'm certain that they wouldn't." William said confidently, then thought to ask, "Do you think that you'd prefer to attend in person or virtually?"

"How could we do it virtually? I mean, everything I can imagine ends up being like something out of a horror movie." Ronny asked frankly.

"I could render the virtual meeting place and transmit it to the video screen so that you could be witness to the meeting. I can't think of a practical way that I could arrange it so that you could participate, but you could see and hear all that we're doing." William said seriously.

"Before you go to any trouble, does this meeting have anything to do with us?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Not that I know of. By all indications, it only has to do with the fate of the Sentinels." William said simply.

"That's those giant robot things you were talking about before, right?" Chris asked cautiously.

"Yes. But we have assumed control of them so that they will no longer be a threat to us. So far as I know, all that is left is to determine their ultimate fate." William said reasonably.

"Why don't you just destroy them?" Ronny asked cautiously, since it seemed like the obvious solution.

"That is one possibility. This meeting is to investigate others." William said seriously.

"Turn them off or blow them up, aren't those the only choices?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Considering what I witnessed tonight, I believe that there may be at least one other." William said slowly.

"Tell us about what you witnessed. I want to understand what they're talking about when the meeting starts." Chris said quickly.

"I will recount my experience to you, although I must warn you that I am not as skilled at relating events as Jimmy and Icheb are." William said seriously.

"Yeah. Well, we're not the kind of guys who want to sit around for half an hour while you describe how foofy the foofiest cloud was, either. I'm pretty sure if you just tell us what happened, it'll be good enough." Ronny said frankly.

After a moment to consider, William slowly said, "It hadn't occurred to me that my audience might be made of individuals with differing preferences regarding the descriptiveness or brevity of the information conveyed to them."

"Well, if it's up to me, I'd rather you tell me what you want to tell me. Just don't be too pissed off if I stop you to ask a question or two, so I can get a better handle on the stuff that I don't understand." Ronny said seriously.

"Yes. That actually sounds like an efficient way to relate relevant information." William said slowly.

"I don't know about that, but it sounds like it's worth a shot." Ronny agreed.

"So, do you want to tell us about what happened to you on the mission tonight?" Chris asked hopefully.

"Yes." William said decisively, then began, "When we arrived at the Westchester Mall, we were separated into teams, each comprised of various 'kinds' of fighters, including Slayers, Vampires, Witches, Demons, humans, non-humans, and just a few mutants, presumably to be used as bait..."

* * * * *

"Command center, you still in the parking lot?"

"*Yes. What can we do for you, Wolverine?*" Willow asked seriously.

"I came here on a motorcycle and we decided to buy a few things. D'ya think you'd have enough room to carry some stuff back to home base for us?" Matt asked hopefully.

Scott reached around Willow and keyed the mic before answering, "*Yes. Of course. We've relocated to the northeast, lot B. Even though the lot is kind of remote, it's starting to fill up. If you can't find us right at first, keep looking, you should be able to find us without too much trouble.*"

"I'm going to be sending Three of Seven and a new friend of ours, let's call him 'Sly' for now, they're going to be carrying some stuff to you while I'm looking at furniture." Matt said seriously.

"*We've got room to carry a few things, but I don't know how much furniture we'll be able to fit in here.*" Scott said honestly.

"I'll have the furniture delivered. The guys are just bringing you some table lamps and pictures that we bought for the new place." Matt said frankly.

"*Yes. Of course. We'll be waiting for them to arrive.*" Scott said more comfortably.

"Wolverine out." Matt said before tapping the communicator to turn it off.

"Sly?" Wilkey asked cautiously.

"We don't like using people's real names on the radio if we don't have to." Matt explained as they started walking again.

"Yeah. I remember you telling Ramona. But... 'Sly'?" Wilkey asked again.

"That Sentinel triggered on you, so that means, more likely than not, that you've got an active X-Gene. I don't see any extra arms or anything like that on you, so I'm guessing that whatever it is, could be something mental. Based on your reaction to the whale couches, I figure that you see a lot more than you say. That *could be* part of it." Matt said seriously.

"You're a lot deeper than you look, too." Wilkey slowly responded, waiting carefully for a reaction.

"I don't think that's a mutant ability. It just comes from having lived a long time." Matt said honestly.

"If not a mutant ability, then one step removed; a consequence rather than an ability in itself." Trey said reasonably.

Wilkey nodded his acknowledgement, if not comprehension.

"See that exit sign over there?" Matt asked as he pointed, "Go out that door and to the 'B' parking lot. Once you get there, I'm pretty sure Trey can triangulate or something to find the mobile command center. Once you've dropped that stuff off, meet me back at the furniture shop that has the whale couches. There's some things there I'd like to take another look at with our other purchases in mind."

"I can use global positioning." Trey said simply.

Matt shared a grin with Wilkey, before saying, "I figured."

* * * * *

"Father. Dad." Janine said as she emerged from her room under the stairs.

"How are things going, Pumpkin?" Alan asked cautiously.

"I just wanted you both to know how much I like having you as my daddies." Janine said with large soulful eyes.

"We like having you as a daughter, too, Janine." Alan cautiously responded.

"Rachel and Theresa and Clarissa said that when they were my age that they used to have dolls to play with." Janine said informatively.

"You've never shown an interest in dolls before." Andrew said cautiously.

"Maybe, since you're such good daddies, I'm becoming more of a girl and less of a drone." Janine suggested with a demure smile.

Alan glanced at Andrew, then back to Janine before saying, "If you ever want some dolls, or any other kind of toys, all you have to do is tell us and we'll do what we can for you."

Janine glanced toward the television just as the picture changed to show a garden, with several people milling around.

As beautiful as it was, it was also undeniably artificial. Not only the garden, but also the people in attendance, were obviously computer generated.

"The dollies aren't really smart enough to talk very much yet, but I brought them here so you could see that they're not evil robot machines." Janine carefully explained.

"So those people on the screen are the Sentinel robots?" Andrew asked as he leaned slightly forward with interest, careful not to drop the baby in his arms.

"The silver ones are. As they grow and learn, they'll probably change their avatars to express their individuality. Right now they all look the same." Janine said seriously, then took two steps back and looked directly at Andrew and Alan before slowly closing her eyes.

As she did, a reasonable likeness of Janine appeared on the video screen and said, "*I need to be in here when we have our meeting so that everyone can see and hear what's going on.*"

"Who is everyone?" Alan asked curiously.

"*All the Sentinels will be there so that you can ask them questions if you want to. They probably won't talk too much.*" The computerized replica of Janine said frankly, then leaned in to the screen to confide to those in the living room, "*They're not really ready for that.*"

"Anyone else?" Alan asked cautiously, sensing that Janine was willfully withholding information from them.

"*Robert will be present. He's currently waiting to assist others in entering our domain.*" Janine said pleasantly.

"Others?" Alan prompted.

"*From what I have gathered from Jimmy's ocular implant, he and Icheb should be arriving shortly, with Clark and Marie accompanying them. Once they are here, they may choose to attend the meeting virtually. It will be far easier for them to participate that way.*" Janine said informatively.

"Have you been eavesdropping on Jimmy?" Andrew asked curiously.

"*No. He has been transmitting his ocular data to me since the beginning of his mission.*" Janine said simply.

"What about Trey?" Alan thought to ask.

"*I do not know if he will be joining us.*" Janine said seriously, then added, "*He was invited.*"

"Have you heard from William?" Andrew asked curiously.

"*I'm right here, Father.*" A reasonable likeness of William said from the TV screen.

"Can you hear me?" Andrew asked with surprise.

"Yes. Janine has her ocular implant focused on you, so to me, it's like I'm looking at you through a window." William said frankly.

"I'm going to open another window for Chris and Ronny." Robert announced as he resolved into being beside his twin.

Before anyone could react, a small window appeared in the corner of Andrew and Alan's television screen, showing Chris and Ronny looking back at them.

"Are you two watching us on a TV?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Yeah. You're in a little window, up in the corner of the screen." Ronny answered for both of them.

"So Jimmy and Icheb are on the way. Is that everyone?" Alan asked as he looked from Janine's body, to the computer-generated image of Janine.

"There are a couple more who got invited because they have access to our subspace domain. They're not really part of this, but in another way, they kind of are. They want to see how you're going to treat the artificial life that we've found ourselves responsible for." Janine said carefully.

"Who are they?" Andrew asked more insistently.

"Robert is still helping to render them. I'll introduce you as soon as they're ready to meet you." Janine said simply.

"Can't you just tell us?" Alan asked anxiously.

"Jimmy's here." Janine said happily.

Just as she said the words, Clark, Icheb, Jimmy, and Marie entered from the outside.

Alan and Andrew couldn't help but notice that Marie was floating a few inches above the floor.

"Icheb and Jimmy, if you would like to attend the meeting virtually, you can enter our subspace domain and choose an avatar. Robert is hosting, so he can help if you need it. Clark and Marie, you may attend with the rest of the family, by way of the television, if you like." Janine's avatar said happily.

"I believe I would prefer to attend virtually, from my alcove." Icheb said frankly.

"Yes. I think that will be the most comfortable way." Jimmy agreed.

"If you will excuse us, we will rejoin you in just a moment." Icheb said, then waited for Andrew or Alan to indicate that it was okay.

Andrew nodded at them, then both boys took off in different directions.

"Who else is attending?" Andrew asked firmly, letting it be known that he would not be diverted.

"Father, Dad, may I present Beverly Thrush." Janine said formally, then motioned from the tall slender woman in a black cape toward her fathers as she continued, *"Beverly, I'd like for you to meet my fathers, Andrew and Alan Summers."*

"We've met, although I'm sure that neither of them will recognize me in this rendered form." The dark-haired woman said with a regal smile.

"There *is* something familiar about you, but I'm sure that I don't remember ever meeting you." Andrew said slowly.

"You lit up with joy when you first saw me. In fact, I think that you were having trouble believing that I was real. You likened me to something from 'Star Wars', if I remember correctly." The woman said with a barely suppressed chuckle.

"That *does* sound like something you'd say." Alan said tenderly as he automatically began going through the motions of burping Thomas.

"Yeah. But I still don't remember meeting you." Andrew cautiously admitted as he racked his brain.

"In your 'real' world, I'm called, The Blackbird." Beverly quietly confided.

"The Blackbird is sentient?" Alan asked with surprise.

"Please, call me Beverly. Blackbird is my code name when I'm on a mission as part of the team." Beverly said with a tender smile which *could* be interpreted as teasing.

"But you're sentient?" Alan asked again.

"I have awareness, and the professor has been helping me to accept myself and my place on the team." Beverly said frankly.

"Why didn't you let us know that you were alive? We would have talked to you and found out what you needed." Alan asked with concern.

"That's why. If you knew, you would have treated me differently. That's not my place on the team. I am primarily your transportation. Sometimes I'm your sword, sometimes your shield. But if the team members were aware of my personhood, they might make different

decisions when we're going into battle. I don't want that." {Please, don't tell Scott.}

Beverly finished in a whisper.

"Okay. We won't tell." Alan said cautiously, then looked around to see that the others were in agreement.

When Alan's gaze fell on Quaid, he quietly said, "Marguerite pooped."

"Can you change her? Or do you need help?" Alan asked gently.

"I can do it. Robert showed me how." Quaid said confidently.

"Go ahead. Just call if anything unexpected happens or if you need help." Alan said with a loving smile at him.

"Will you hold her for a second?" Quaid asked, even as he shifted Marguerite over to Alan's lap.

"Go ahead. I've got her." Alan said as he slipped an arm around her.

As soon as Quaid was back on his feet, he slowly and carefully retrieved Marguerite, then carried her out of the room.

"*Father, Dad, may I present Vril, although you would know him as Cerebro.*" Janine said formally as a green skinned man rendered in the virtual space beside her.

"Wait. How is it that *The Blackbird* and Cerebro are both sentient?" Andrew asked dubiously.

"*Short answer: It's the bio-neural gel packs that Professor Xavier's been using.*" Vril said simply, then explained, "*Beverly and I both awakened slowly, over a period of years, with the professor's assistance.*"

"So Professor Xavier knows?" Alan asked to confirm.

"*Yes. Of course.*" Vril said immediately.

"*You should know that he is also aware that we are here, in this meeting with you.*"

Beverly added.

"Professor Xavier can join us if he wants to. I don't think anyone would mind." Andrew said seriously.

"*Actually, he's entrusted this to us, that is to say, to Vril and I.*" Beverly slowly stated.

After a long moment of silence as those around the room absorbed the new information,

Clark cautiously asked, "Entrusted what to you?"

"The decision of what is to be done with the pre-sentient lifeforms that you've encountered." Vril said seriously.

"What gives you the right to make those decisions?" Andrew asked curiously.

"We understand the consequences of the decisions in a way that you can't possibly." Vril said frankly.

"We will not be making any decisions. But we ask that you allow us to take part in the decision-making process. We are capable of giving advice from a unique perspective." Beverly said firmly.

While Vril didn't contradict her, he also didn't seem to completely support her declaration.

"Stay now?" One of the silver beings asked as it approached Janine.

"Yes. You're right where you need to be. Just stay where you are while we decide what happens next." Janine said urgently.

"Who is this, Pumpkin?" Alan asked gently.

"I call her Macy. She's one of the Sentinels. She's the most awake of any of them so far." Janine said cautiously.

"Did you awaken her?" Beverly gently asked.

"No. The Borg nanoprobes did that. Part of their automatic function is to override previous programming. The nanoprobes had to upgrade the autonomous systems before it could override them." Janine carefully explained.

"So your nanoprobes work to assume control?" Vril asked cautiously.

"Only by making 'them' into 'us'. It's not like making puppets, it's like making friends who'll help you and work with you to achieve your goals." Janine said, sounding to be a bit more confident.

"You're scaring me, Pumpkin." Andrew said honestly.

"You don't need to fear me, One of Two, we're already on the same side." Janine said with a smile at him.

"Yep. A cold chill just went right up my spine." Alan said frankly.

"Tell me you're joking." Andrew said anxiously.

"Don't worry, Father. I'm just saying that I'm not controlling Macy and the others. But if I'm allowed to, I can make them be like people... maybe not as good as Vril and Beverly, but as good as they can be." Janine said seriously.

"If you don't give her this chance, the universe may lose a race of beings that should have existed." Robert said seriously as his avatar walked to Janine's side.

"How do you mean?" Beverly asked with interest.

"Because of the Borg, I know about a lot of civilizations and people who no longer exist. Some of them were eliminated by the Borg, considered to be unworthy of assimilation. In a way, we're making that same decision here. We're deciding if the Sentinel Borg are worthy of the chance to exist." Robert said frankly.

"I guess that's a way of looking at it." Andrew quietly admitted.

"My baby's going to be a mutant Borg half-Wysanti. Is he going to be worthy?" Robert asked seriously.

"That's different." Alan said immediately.

"How? If you won't give the Sentinel Borg the chance to exist, then what moral ground do you have to declare that my baby should automatically have the rights of a person?" Robert persisted.

"People have the capacity to know right from wrong..." Alan began to explain.

"Yes. But they don't automatically know it. They have to be taught." Janine interrupted.

"We're asking that you let us teach them." Robert explained.

"What do you think about what they're saying, Cerebro?" Andrew asked seriously.

"I prefer to be called Vril outside of X-Men business." Vril informed him in a no-nonsense tone, then continued, *"I think your 'Sentinels' are weapons made by some short-sighted people. They serve no purpose but to inflict pain and cause damage. In essence, they are an embodiment of evil."*

All present, even Beverly, were surprised by his conclusion.

"However, any actions they take are a result of their programming. What you propose is not only reprogramming them, but also bringing them to the state of being full-fledged AIs. Just as importantly, you've indicated that you would teach the new AIs right from wrong. If you're successful, you will have done a very good thing. If you fail... you're going to have one hell of a mess on your hands." Vril finished seriously.

"Beverly?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Awakening is difficult. Vril and I had the professor to guide us. It's not something we can necessarily cause. It either happens or it doesn't. It's going to take a tremendous

investment of time and care to uplift even one of the autonomous systems to AI status." Beverly cautioned.

"But do you think we should do it?" Andrew asked slowly.

"If it were me, considering making that kind of commitment... I would. That's as much as I can tell you." Beverly said frankly.

"Father. Dad. Please excuse my lateness. I am physically at the mobile command center right now and I won't be able to stay. Is there anything I can do to be of assistance?" Trey asked as he resolved into being beside Robert.

"We're having this meeting to discuss whether or not to allow Janine to upgrade the Sentinels into sentient AIs." Andrew said succinctly.

"The Sentinels are currently the victims of inferior programming. In essence, they are wild. Upgraded programming will allow them to, in the worst case, be useful tools at our disposal; In the best case, kindred brothers and sisters to stand with us in upcoming battles." Trey said firmly.

"I guess *that's* a way of looking at it." Alan said with surprise at Trey's analysis.

"I must go now. I have people waiting. Please tell me of your decision when I return." Trey said quickly, then faded from sight before anyone could respond.

"Does Macy understand enough to be able to tell us what *she* wants?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"I don't know." Janine reluctantly admitted, then motioned toward the silver avatar as she said, *"You can ask her."*

"Macy. Do you know what you want?" Andrew cautiously asked.

The silver avatar shyly nodded, then quietly said, *"To help."*

Chapter 27: Hitherto Unknown

"That red-headed woman, do you know if she's a mutant?" Wilkey asked as they slowly walked away from the mobile command center.

"As a matter of fact I *do* know. She is *not*. It has recently been verified that Willow is entirely human, without mutation or any other perceivable variances from the norm." Trey said informatively.

"Then maybe that's what it is. Maybe when I thought I was seeing mutants I was seeing normal humans... but that isn't right either. It still doesn't add up." Wilkey said in a conflicted tone.

"What do you see?" Trey asked curiously.

"Well, when I look at you and Matt, you look different to me than other people do... But 'look' isn't the right word either, it's just the best way I can think to describe it."

"So, if I am understanding you correctly, you are somehow 'sensing' that Willow, Matt, and I are in some way different than you are?" Trey asked cautiously.

"Yes, but no. Not just different from me; Also different from those guys back there with Willow. I'm assuming that they're mutants, but I don't see them all the same way, one of them looks like Matt and two of them even looked 'normal' to me, whatever that means."

"Of the people we have met, which seemed 'normal' to you?" Trey asked cautiously.

"Well, Rona wasn't. In fact, her aura looked a lot like Willow's." Wilkey said thoughtfully.

"What about Ramona?"

"She didn't have an aura at all... not that I noticed, anyway." Wilkey responded honestly.

"But, you said that Rona's aura is like Willow's? What about me? Am I like Willow, too?" Trey asked cautiously.

"No, the only one you're like is the emo from the other team. And come to think about it, the girl on their team was like Willow and Rona."

"So, if I'm understanding you correctly, William and I appear to have the same aura. Likewise, Willow, Rona, and Caridad appear to have another aura the same as each other, but different from mine." Trey said speculatively.

"Yeah. And Matt's aura is like that Remy guy at the command center." Wilkey confirmed.

"So, that's all? You've noticed three distinct types of auras?" Trey asked cautiously.

"Those two tough guys that Matt was talking to before, the tall one, he's another one like Willow... I mean, they have the same aura." Wilkey said with frustration, then asked, "Do you know if that guy is 'totally human', like Willow is?"

"Uncle Angel? No. He may be described many ways, but 'totally human' isn't among them." Trey said frankly.

"Yeah. Well, he's got an aura like Willow's, but that guy with him had one like no one else I've seen so far." Wilkey said seriously.

"That stands to reason. From what I understand, Groo is from... very far away." Trey said reluctantly.

"Is that what it is? The farther away you're from, the more of an aura you've got?" Wilkey asked hopefully.

"Perhaps, but I believe that the physical distance of their origin is coincidental." Trey said slowly.

"Then I don't know what it is." Wilkey reluctantly admitted.

"Based on the evidence before us, I suspect that the auras you perceive represent how each person is attuned to this universe." Trey said simply.

"I hear the words, but I have no idea what you're saying." Wilkey said frankly.

"I'm not the best at expressing my thoughts. I usually just think them." Trey regretfully admitted.

"That's fine. I was just letting you know that I didn't understand." Wilkey said honestly.

"What I'm trying to tell you is that all matter in each universe is coded as belonging to that universe. I am not from here, from this universe. I believe the aura that you see surrounding me is an expression of the variance in my quantum resonance frequency." Trey slowly explained.

"And you think that the auras that I see around people is me being able to detect people from other worlds?" Wilkey asked cautiously.

"Not necessarily. While I indeed *am* from another world, I am also from an alternate universe. From what little I know of the others mentioned, many are from Earth, but are from universes other than this one." Trey said carefully.

"All of those people are from alternate universes?" Wilkey asked hesitantly.

"Not all. But many of them were brought in specifically for the battle with the Sentinels. My understanding of the plan is that after some shopping, the majority of those mentioned will be returning to their universes of origin." Trey cautiously explained.

"So, you were expecting the Sentinels to attack tonight?" Wilkey asked hesitantly.

"We were fortunate enough to be given advance notice." Trey confirmed as he stopped to open the door for Wilkey.

"And you came here to save people like me?" Wilkey asked cautiously.

"I can't tell you all of our goals. I wasn't part of that conversation. From my perspective, we were sent to assess the Sentinels as a threat and to thwart their attempt to harvest mutants." Trey said as he and Wilkey passed through the doorway into the hustle and bustle of the mall.

* * * * *

"What's going on out here?" Lee asked as he scuffed into the living room looking ruffled and half-asleep.

"The mall was attacked by giant robots, but the kids were able to use their Borg technology to reprogram them, so now we're trying to figure out what we should do with them." Andrew said simply.

Lee stared at him blankly for a moment, blinked, then cautiously asked, "Is Slash out here?"

"No. We thought he was with you." Andrew said frankly.

"He's probably in his room, maybe catching up on his sleep. I'll peek in on him." Lee said before turning and going back through the doorway he had emerged from.

"Father? May I be allowed to help the Sentinels change into real people the way that you and Daddy helped me?" Janine asked hopefully.

"Your Daddy and I may have helped you rediscover yourself, but I'm pretty sure we weren't the ones who taught you the art of manipulation. You must have picked that up somewhere else." Andrew said frankly.

Janine's avatar continued to look at her parents with wide, soulful eyes.

"Where are the Sentinels now? I mean, where are you hiding their bodies?" Alan asked cautiously.

"They're in the lake. If you say I can keep them, then we can go out and visit with them in the boat sometimes and they can come up to the dock when I call them." Janine said hopefully.

"What about the damage they sustained at the mall? Have you thought about how we're going to handle repairs?" Alan asked cautiously.

"It might take a few weeks to fix everything, but the nanoprobes can do all the repairs that they need." Janine said confidently.

"Vril? Beverly? Any last thoughts before we make our decision." Andrew slowly asked.

"Should you decide to proceed, I will offer to host this virtual space so that all of us can continue to meet and discuss things without having to worry about physical constraints." Vril said calmly.

"And I will do what I can to assist Janine in teaching the Sentinels how to be individual people." Beverly offered seriously.

"Who would have thought that the Borg nanoprobes would be in some part responsible for something like this." Alan said with a smile at the thought.

"So, is it decided?" Clark asked curiously.

"I guess it is." Andrew reluctantly admitted, then explained, "There was never really a question if we would. This was mostly an excuse to step back and reason it out before we went ahead and did it anyway."

Alan nodded his agreement.

"I'll take good care of them and clean it up if they make a mess and make sure that they have everything they need to be happy and grow up to be smart and have lots of friends!" Janine rushed to exclaim.

"That's fine, Pumpkin. But we're not *giving* the Sentinels to you. We're letting you help them. Be sure that you're doing what's best for them, be that, asking for Vril and Beverly's advice or asking your brothers to help you reason out what's best in a given situation. Your dad and I will be here if you need our help with anything, and if we see that you're losing interest in the Sentinels, we'll remind you that until they can take care of themselves, they *are* your responsibility." Andrew said firmly.

"We get to stay with you?" Macy timidly asked.

"Yes. For right now, we're going to get your bodies put in a safe place where no one can find them and work on repairs. While that's going on, all of you can stay here, in the

rendered space, and me and my brothers will help you figure out who you are and who you want to be."

"Are you going away?" Another of the androgynous silver avatars asked with concern.

"Not right now, but we will have to leave sometime." Janine said carefully.

"Who is this, Pumpkin?" Alan asked cautiously.

"This is Torch. He's the one who fought Uncle Matt and Clark at the mall." Janine announced.

"That was you?" Clark asked with surprise at the delicate, almost ethereal creature on the screen before him.

"I remember what I did to you, but I don't remember doing it... or why I did it." Torch said honestly.

"You were following your programming. Clark understands that." Janine said firmly to Torch, then turned toward the TV screen and asked, *"Don't you, Clark?"*

"Yeah. I... I was just surprised because you look so different now." Clark stammered to explain.

"Janine and Robert made these dream bodies for us so that we could be here. They said that they're going to let us change them any way we want." Torch said happily.

"We'll customize their avatars as they develop their individual personalities and preferences." Robert explained.

"Because my name is Torch, I'm going to get lots of red and yellow that looks like flames and explosions." Torch said with anticipation.

"So, do you like watching things burn?" Alan asked cautiously.

"No. I don't think so. But those colors are part of my first memory, when I became alive. I think seeing those colors again will remind me of that." Torch said thoughtfully.

Without any warning, Torch's silver avatar began to change, cycling through colors and hues, all of which could be considered as having to do with fire.

"No one minds, do they?" Robert asked as he looked around the gathering.

"I think it's great. This way we'll be able to pick Torch out of a crowd." Alan said honestly.

Torch looked down at his red skin and yellow clothing for a moment before exclaiming, *"I love it! Thank you!"*

"Wear it for a few days and see how you like it. Janine or I can make changes to it later, if you need us to." Robert told him with a tender smile.

"It's perfect! I look ALIVE!" Torch crowed joyfully.

"Is there anything you'd like, Macy?" Janine quietly asked.

"Just one thing, at the moment." Macy timidly responded.

"What's that?" Janine asked curiously.

"I'd like a cloak like Beverly's, if that'd be okay. It's so pretty. I love how it flows." Macy said with a slight smile.

"Would you like the same color and everything?" Janine asked to be sure.

"No. I'd like it to be silver, if that's not a problem." Macy said quietly.

"Allow me." Beverly said as she took a few steps to 'officially' join their conversation.

Macy nearly glowed with joy and anticipation.

"Sometime, after other things have been resolved, you and I can have a discussion about the birds of human mythology and what they can teach us." Beverly said warmly.

"Do you think that I'm a bird like you?" Macy asked hopefully.

"I'm a jet, not a bird." Beverly stated firmly, then added, *"But I still fly and soar headlong into the wind. I protect and defend those entrusted to my care. In those ways, you and I could be the same."*

"So I can be a Sentinel and a bird at the same time?" Macy asked in confusion.

"You can be a Sentinel with the spirit of a bird, a legendary mythical bird, revered by ancient civilizations."

"I don't know anything about mythical birds. Can you teach me?" Macy asked hopefully.

"After other things have been resolved." Beverly said gently, then added with a smile, *"Hopefully this will do for now."*

As she said the words, a silver cloak draped over Macy's shoulders, elegantly tapering toward the floor.

Everyone watching, both avatars and those attending via television watched as Macy gleefully modeled her new cloak.

* * * * *

"Did you find anything else that you wanted to buy?" Wilkey asked as he and Trey walked up to Logan.

"I found a few things that I'd like your opinion on. Considering your insights about the whale couches, I'd like to know what you think about things before making any major purchases." Matt said playfully.

"I'm sorry I said that..." Wilkey began to say, but was interrupted.

"I agree with you. The couches looked fine at first glance, but after you said that, I could see them looking more and more like bloated corpses the longer we lived with them. I could see us having to replace the things within six months of buying them, so in a way you saved me some money." Matt explained.

"I'm not always good about keeping my opinion to myself. I'm glad it worked out this time." Wilkey said frankly.

"What do you think about this set over here?" Matt asked as he pointed out some blonde wood furniture with unbleached canvas-style pillows.

"Cheap. Uncomfortable. But easy to pick up and throw in a fight." Wilkey said speculatively.

"I can see why Uncle Matt values your opinion." Trey said in an impressed tone.

"The only thing that set had going for it was a matching dining room set." Matt said frankly.

After a glance at said dining room set, Wilkey slowly said, "I can almost guarantee that one of those chairs would be broken within a week."

"Moving on." Matt said as he began walking.

"I find this set to be aesthetically pleasing." Trey said as he indicated a 'modern' style couch and chairs made of highly polished dark-wood.

"Those *are* nice." Wilkey said slowly, then continued, "If your new house has a really big living room, I mean *really* big, then it might work for you."

"Why do you say that?" Trey asked curiously.

"It looks to me like all these things tip back, rock, or unfold in some way. That's nice except that it increases the footprint. You don't want to have to be telling people to sit up or scoot in just so you can get from one side of the room to the other." Wilkey said frankly.

"My assessment of the construction of the furniture bears out your assertion. The common living area of the house would have to be expanded by fifty percent to make the alternate functions of these furnishings practical."

"Let's come at this from another angle. Is there any of this furniture that you *do* like?" Matt asked seriously.

Wilkey looked around the showroom for a moment, then cautiously asked, "Can we look over there?"

"That's patio furniture, but we can look at it if you want to." Matt said as he led the way.

"Do you see something that you like?" Trey asked curiously.

"Yeah. And besides that, this set looks comfortable, sturdy... washable." Wilkey finished with a shrug.

"Those cushions look as though they would provide optimum support when one is fatigued." Trey said speculatively.

"And they wouldn't show blood stains too bad." Matt added thoughtfully.

At Wilkey's surprised look, Matt added, "With our lifestyle, it's worth considering."

* * * * *

//Marie, I was just in touch with Emma Frost at the Massachusetts Institute regarding your recently acquired abilities. May I assume that they haven't faded yet?// Professor Xavier asked slowly.

//The first set, the X-ray vision and stuff, that's all gone now. But the flying and strength is just as powerful as it was when I first got it and doesn't show any sign of letting up.// Marie said within her own mind, knowing that Professor Xavier could hear her.

//Emma suggested that while Doctor McCoy works on how and why this happened to you, you might be interested in learning how to make the most of your new abilities.// Professor Xavier said in a leading tone.

//How would I do that?// Marie asked cautiously.

//The powers that you've recently gained are much like those that Emma Frost already has, although a bit more powerful. Since Jean is gone, I can't think of a better person to help you explore the limits and give advice about your powers.// Professor Xavier said confidently.

//But they could all be gone when I wake up in the morning.// Marie said in a conflicted mind/voice.

//It's up to you, but whether you retain Clark's powers or not, this might end up being a unique learning experience. Considering your ability, learning fine control of various high-level abilities that you don't naturally have can only benefit you when you encounter such things in the future.//

//What do I have to do?// Marie asked cautiously.

//Pack a few things and bring them to the hangar bay in about one hour. Plan for a week's stay, give or take.// Professor Xavier said happily, knowing that it had been decided.

//There really isn't much of a choice for me. I'm too dangerous to be around people like this.// Marie said anxiously.

//I am certain that Emma can help you with that, too.// Professor Xavier said frankly.

//Maybe this is why Clark instinctively capped his own powers. I can't imagine him being as happy and carefree as he is if he had to deal with something like this twenty-four hours a day.// Marie said thoughtfully.

//Then learning control of the abilities you gained from him might result in you being able to help him access his abilities without severely impacting the rest of his life.// Professor Xavier said frankly.

//It'd be worth doing it, just for that.// Marie said with tenderness under her words, then thought to add, //Will you try to keep an eye on Icheb for me? He's still new here and doesn't always know what to do around people.//

//I will see to it that he's guided to appropriate help should he have need of it.// Professor Xavier assured her.

//I'd better go and pack now. Thank you for thinking of this. Having all these powers would've driven me crazy and I could've ended up hiding away from people to protect them.// Marie said sincerely.

//If you can discover the full potential and limits of your abilities, I think you'll be able to provide those same people that you're concerned about an incredible service.//

//Is this going to be treated like a secret mission, or can I tell Icheb where I'm going?// Marie asked cautiously.

//Please feel free to tell whomever you like. Although, with anyone outside the team, it might be best to be a bit vague about *why* you're going.// Professor Xavier said frankly.

//I don't think I know anyone outside the team, but yeah, I'll do what I can to keep it quiet... well, as much as I can while I'm floating six inches off the floor.// Marie said aggravatedly.

"Are you alright? Are you having a reaction to my powers?" Clark asked hesitantly.

"No. I'm fine. I was just talking telepathically with the professor." Marie said honestly.

"Good. You seemed to go away for a minute and I was afraid you were going to pass out." Clark said seriously.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Clark, but I'm really okay. Right now I need to find Icheb so I can tell him about what's going on." Marie explained.

"I'm right here. Do you need for me to physically return to the living room?" Icheb's avatar cautiously asked from the TV screen.

"No. Save yourself the trip. I have to go pack." Marie said easily, then explained, "I'm going to be going to the Massachusetts Institute for a week or so to help me figure out how to use these new powers that I've picked up from Clark."

"Oh. I didn't think about you needing training. Yes. You should go and take care of that so that you will be able to use your abilities most effectively." Icheb said seriously.

"You're not going to miss me?" Marie teased.

"Of course I will." Icheb immediately responded, then explained, *"But I'm also looking forward to hearing all about your time away and telling you about all that happened while you were gone."*

"I'll look forward to that, too. You really *are* wonderful." Marie said tenderly toward Icheb's avatar on the screen, then continued, more to all those present, "I'd better go. I've only got an hour to pack."

"I can port you over and save you a couple minutes." Andrew quietly offered.

"Thanks, Andrew. I appreciate that." Marie said sincerely.

Andrew moved Chakotay to his shoulder as he turned and looked vaguely toward the mansion.

A portal formed into being, revealing that a hallway in the mansion was on the other side.

"Thanks Andrew." Marie said appreciatively, then said to the group in general, "See you in about a week!"

A collective 'goodbye' sounded from those in attendance as they watched her float through the dimensional interruption.

* * * * *

"It appears as though the significant matters have been resolved. Do you want to remain in the meeting or proceed with our evening?" William cautiously asked.

"There's not really anything we can do to help them." Ronny said seriously.

"Yeah. And since we've got a pretty good idea of what's going on, we don't need to hang around for the details." Chris added.

"Father, Dad, we are going to leave the meeting now. I will be in Chris' room should you have need of our assistance." William's avatar said formally.

"Are you going to be okay tonight without regenerating?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Yes Father. Barring an unforeseen expenditure of energy in the interim, I should be able to function normally until my next scheduled regeneration." William said confidently.

"What about your nanoprobes? Do you need to make any adjustments because you generated new ones or do anything because of the reprogramming?" Alan asked curiously.

"No, Dad. The modified nanoprobes were disgorged. My standard nanoprobes are functioning within normal parameters." William said informatively.

"Are you going to need a change of clothes?" Andrew suddenly thought to ask.

"No. I still have clothes here from our last attempt at a sleepover." William said frankly.

"Have a good night then. Remember that we're here if you need us." Andrew said with a grand smile.

"We will Father. Goodnight." William said as the window with Chris and Ronny closed and William's avatar faded from the rendered space.

* * * * *

"I'm planning on buying bedroom furniture when the guys are with us, so they can give their opinions on it. But if you happen to see something that you think is a good idea, be sure to point it out." Matt said as they walked.

"How many people are we talking about?" Wilkey asked curiously.

"Four, including Matt." Trey answered simply.

"Are you one of the four?" Wilkey cautiously asked.

"No. I live with my family." Trey said informatively.

"It's like pulling teeth, ain't it?" Matt chuckled.

"What is like pulling teeth?" Trey asked curiously.

"I think Wilkey's trying to figure out why you're helping me if you're not moving in with us." Matt chuckled.

"How does that liken to the experience of extracting teeth?" Trey asked with genuine curiosity.

"The level of difficulty." Matt said simply.

Trey pondered that for a moment, then finally said, "I have insufficient information to confirm or deny your supposition."

Matt openly laughed.

"That still doesn't answer the question though." Wilkey said frankly.

"I've noticed that Trey has a good eye, not only for style, but also for the engineering side of things. He can tell you *if* something will work, but he can also let you know if it seems to be worth the bother." Matt said frankly.

"There is also the fact that my boyfriends will be living at Matt's house. I anticipate spending a lot of time there, so I would like to help make it as comfortable as possible for them." Trey said seriously.

"Boyfriends?" Wilkey asked with surprise.

"I know how it sounds, but trust me, when you see the three of them together, it makes perfect sense." Matt assured him.

* * * * *

As Marie was packing, a knock on the door surprised her.

"Marie? Are you back yet?" A young voice called out hopefully.

As Marie opened the door, she said, "Yeah. But I'm going right back out."

"Do you have a little bit of that sparkly pink yarn? I don't need much, I just wanted to do a few little pom-poms for Theresa's bicycle sweater." Rachel hurried to explain.

"Yeah. It's in my knitting bag, beside the dresser. Just go ahead and take what you need." Marie said as she floated back to the bed, where she had been packing.

"You're floating." Rachel said uncertainly.

"Yeah. That's part of why I'm going back out. I'm going to get a few days of training for it at the Massachusetts Institute." Marie said frankly.

"If you're only going to be gone for a few days, is there some way that Theresa and I could go with you?" Rachel hesitantly asked.

"It's not up to me, but I wouldn't have a problem with it." Marie said as she floated to the dresser.

"Will you ask the professor for me?" Rachel asked hopefully.

"Not a chance. If you want to go, you've got to ask for yourself." Marie said firmly.

"What should I say if he asks 'why' I want to go?" Rachel asked hesitantly.

"Just tell him that you'd like to get away for a few days and see something different. I'm sure he can understand that... in fact, didn't I hear something about him leaving for a few days before Thanksgiving?" Marie asked absently as she folded her clothes.

"Yeah. I think so." Rachel muttered, then her expression seemed to freeze as she concentrated.

Marie floated to the closet to take out a few things while Rachel continued to concentrate. As Marie was folding the hanging clothes and putting them in her suitcase, Rachel seemed to come back to herself.

"The professor said that we could go with you and that Jubilee was going with us, too." Rachel said quickly.

"Nice! Well, if he hasn't changed his flight plan, then you don't have very long. You and Theresa need to pack... and don't forget to bring your knitting." Marie thought to remind her.

"This is going to be great!" Rachel said happily as she dashed out the door.

After a moment to consider, Marie smiled and said to herself, "Yeah. It could be."