

# Hurt & Comfort:

## Book 7 – From Hurt to Comfort

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# From Hurt to Comfort

## *[Chapter 1: Out With the Old]*

"Father, I have completed my task." Jimmy said in a tired voice.

"Good Jimmy... Everyone stop. I think we're done. Hank, put on your sweats and let's go inside, it's getting dark." Andrew said tiredly.

"And cold. Thanks love, I'm about done in." Alan said and dropped his brush on the dock where he stood. The children followed his example and five thunks of dropping brushes were heard.

"We missed dinner at the mansion, let's see if there is anything to eat in the kitchen here." Alan said as he put an arm around Andrew.

"I should probably go..." Hank began shyly.

"Come on Hank, we wouldn't have shampooed you and brushed you if we didn't want to have you around. Come in and have dinner with us." Andrew said in an exasperated voice.

Hank shut up and followed obediently.

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As they walked into the house, everyone was immediately aware of the aroma of cooking food.

"About time you guys finished. Jean suggested that we make you a good meal for your first night back." Dawn said from the kitchen doorway.

"Tell her thanks. I'm starving." Alan said as he led Andrew to the couch.

"It'll be ready in just a few minutes." Dawn said and retreated back into the kitchen.

"Father, should we continue to assemble the alcoves?" Icheb asked hesitantly.

"If you want to. If you'd rather relax after that workout that would be fine too." Andrew said as he cradled his head against Alan's chest.

"I would like to continue the assembly." Icheb said honestly.

"Before you do that, could I talk to you for a minute Icheb?" Alan asked and gently shifted Andrew against the arm of the couch.

Alan walked toward the bedroom, and Icheb followed a moment later.

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"Who has the most knowledge of the assembly and maintenance of the alcoves, you or Trey?" Alan asked as he closed the door.

"Trey is most knowledgeable." Icheb said frankly.

"Then you should consider putting him in charge of their assembly." Alan said carefully.

"I will do so right away." Icheb said and made a move to leave the room.

"Wait, I wasn't telling you to put him in charge, I was asking you to consider the possibility. You said he has the necessary knowledge and skills to assemble the alcoves, but being in charge takes more than technical expertise. Does Trey know how to organize a group of people to accomplish a goal? Does he know how to explain his expectations to those who are working for him? Is he able to let someone else do work that he might be able to do more quickly or efficiently himself?" Alan asked in an even tone.

"I... I do not know. He has not been in charge of others before." Icheb said with a lost tone.

"Then the best way to find out is to give him the opportunity to be in charge, and to give him advice on how he might lead the group most effectively. Watch what he does and offer suggestions of how he might do things differently to achieve a better result." Alan said in a considering tone.

"Why?" Icheb asked without emotion.

"What did you feel when you were put in charge of the children?" Alan asked in return.

"I was gratified that others trusted me with that responsibility." Icheb said honestly.

"And don't you think Trey might enjoy that same feeling, knowing that he is respected and trusted, not only by us, but by you, his older brother?" Alan asked carefully.

"Yes, I believe he would feel respected and trusted." Icheb said in realization.

"That's why." Alan said with a smile.

"I hope that one day I will be as good a father as you." Icheb said and pulled Alan into a hug.

"Thank you Icheb." Alan said quietly while thinking, [And those are some of the most precious words I have ever heard spoken.]

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Alan walked back into the living room as Icheb walked into the basement.

"Everything alright love?" Andrew asked sleepily.

"Just fine, I just had a thought and had to discuss it with Icheb. So what is the topic of conversation out here?" Alan asked as he took his seat beside Andrew and pulled him close.

"Hank was just saying how sorry he was again." Andrew said tiredly.

"Hank, get over it. You're sorry, we get it. Now fill us in on what we've missed in the last three months." Alan said as he petted Andrew's hair gently.

"Three months? You've only been gone a week." Hank said with surprise.

"I guess with time travel that could happen." Alan said, then noticed Andrew falling asleep.

"Love, do you want to go in and lay down?" Alan asked quietly.

"Dinner first, I haven't eaten in four-hundred years." Andrew said in a dreamy tone.

Alan chuckled as the others looked on in question.

"We were in an alternate dimension, four-hundred years in the future, half-way across the galaxy." Alan said then placed a small gentle kiss on Andrew's forehead.

"How were you able to manage that?" Scott asked with interest.

"We never did figure that part out. Apparently there was a wormhole or vortex or something focused between our world and the ship we arrived on, at the moment that Andrew was trying to find me help. He jumped us through and saved my life... again." Alan said with love and admiration.

"Ship?" Alex asked carefully.

"Yeah, a starship, just like in Star Wars... but cleaner... like the newer Star Wars, I guess." Alan said as Andrew pulled himself back to upright.

"And we met people of different species, that was the coolest part." Andrew said with a big smile.

"Tell me." Alex said as he sat forward in his chair.

"We met a Klingon, a Bolian, a couple Vulcans..." Andrew said, straining his memory.

"Don't forget Geron and Neelix." Alan said quietly.

"A Bajoran and a Telaxian." Andrew finished in triumph.

"What race are the children?" Hank asked, having noticed the non-human features of some of the children.

"We don't know. But they're humanoid, so that's close enough for us. The Doctor explained something in twenty-two syllable words that meant if they mated with a human they could produce viable offspring. That was my only concern." Andrew said honestly.

"I've been wanting to ask since you got back, how did you get rid of your glasses?" Scott asked curiously.

"The food's ready, come and get it." Dawn called from the kitchen.

"I'll tell you in a minute. I'm starved." Alan said and bolted up from the couch, closely followed by Andrew.

Alan began putting the food on his plate in the kitchen when he noticed a pitcher of tea sitting on the counter. He took a deep smell of the tea and had an idea.

He walked to the basement doorway and called, "Would any of you kids like some iced chamomile tea?"

"Yes, thank you Dad." Icheb called from below.

"Anyone else?" Alan called to be sure.

He could hear hushed whispering and decided to wait a moment longer.

"I would like some too, thank you for asking Dad." Jimmy called.

"I'll bring it down in just a minute." Alan called and went back to the kitchen.

He carefully poured two glasses just over an eighth of a glass full of tea and diluted them with water the rest of the way. He noticed that Andrew was looking at him strangely and said, "For Icheb and Jimmy."

Andrew nodded in comprehension and took his filled plate to the dining room.

"Here you go guys." Alan said as he walked down the stairs.

Alan looked around the basement and said in an impressed tone, "You guys have really made some progress, one done and the second looks to be... three-fourths done?"

"Correct. Trey is very good at letting us know what to do next. We should be able to complete the remaining alcoves within this room in less than one hour." Icheb said with pride for his brother.

"Excellent work Trey. If there is anything Andrew or I can do to help, we'll be upstairs." Alan said and moved back to the stairs.

"Would you ask Father to port the piles of components to the proper rooms? It will save us approximately fifteen minutes." Trey said without looking away from his work.

"I'll ask him when I get back upstairs. Enjoy your tea guys." Alan said with a smile as he ascended the stairs.

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"How are they doing?" Andrew asked, knowing that Alan had used the tea as an excuse to check on their progress.

"Trey has them putting up alcoves like assembly line workers. And he asked for your help." Alan finished with a smile.

"Me?" Andrew asked with wide eyes.

"Trey would like for you to port the alcove components to the proper rooms so they won't have to haul them up from the basement." Alan said as he went back to the kitchen to retrieve his plate.

"I'll go down and do that now, it's time for Janine to come home anyway." Andrew said and got up from his chair.

"Do you think she helped Angel?" Alan asked as he walked back into the room.

"Yes, Janine's hugs are guaranteed to reassure anyone, even a master vampire worried for his son." Andrew said and went down the basement stairs.

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Angel had been standing beside Chris, holding Janine for two hours, and just watching silently.

"Status of hugs?" Andrew asked as he appeared in the doorway.

"Hugs have been completely effective." Janine said with pride.

"Good work. Your brothers have started assembling the alcoves, if you'll go through that door, you'll be in the basement with them." Andrew said quietly.

Angel placed Janine down on the floor and she ran through the door and disappeared.

"How are you doing Angel?" Andrew asked with concern.

"I'll be fine. Thank you for saving him... I can't even explain..." Angel trailed off.

"You don't have to, I have five sons and a daughter that I love as much as you love Chris. This is the tough part, but when he opens his eyes... that will be the reward. I'm just glad I was able to help. Now I have to get back to my family. When Chris is better, you need to bring him over to play with the kids, I think he's about the same age as my twins. Maybe they'll get along." Andrew said off-handedly as he turned to leave.

"Andrew." Angel said, drawing Andrew's attention.

"If you ever need anything that I can provide, it's yours. What you've done for me..." Angel said in wonder.

Andrew saw the intent in Angel's eyes and knew that this feeling of obligation between them would begin to weigh like a yolk around his neck. Then inspiration struck.

"Okay, there is one thing. And it's a very big thing. If you're willing to do it, I'll call it even." Andrew said evenly.

"Anything." Angel said with sincerity.

"My son Jimmy. He is a writer. I would take it as a very big personal favor if you would tell him the story of your life, and unlife... everything." Andrew said seriously.

"It isn't enough..." Angel began to say.

"Think about this Angel. Two hundred and fifty years of existence, the blood and fury, the loves and losses, the pride and the shame that has happened throughout your centuries. I want you to share it all with him. I promise that no one but my family will ever see what he writes. Jimmy is not going to be the next Anne Rice." Andrew said, maintaining his even tone.

"I just need to know one thing... why?" Angel asked quietly.

"My children aren't human, they aren't even fully organic. Even though they've been living around humans for the past three months... it was in a sterile environment. They need to know about the world, the good and the bad. Your experiences will not only show them the horrors that exist in the

world but also that there is the chance for change, growth, and redemption... even for a master vampire." Andrew said honestly.

"I'll do it." Angel said in a whisper.

"And will we be even?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yes. We will be even." Angel said and looked back at Chris.

"Try not to worry. He's going to be fine." Andrew said with a tiny smile.

Angel looked at Andrew with an aggravated smile and said, "You could have given her one or two more phrases, we were here for almost three hours and she kept saying those two over and over."

"Did you finally listen?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Yeah, I finally did." Angel said with a tender smile as he looked back at Chris.

"She takes her work seriously. She's my little angel... uh... you know what I mean." Andrew stammered.

"I know, and I agree. They're what it's all about you know. I've existed for two hundred and fifty years and just figured it out in the past week. All the rest is pointless compared to spending time with your kids." Angel said in a dreamy tone.

"I just figured it out a few months ago. We volunteered to take care of the kids and once we started we both realized that we didn't want the baby-sitting to ever end. So we adopted them all. And I haven't had a moment's regret." Andrew said honestly.

"No bad days?" Angel asked in surprise.

"Oh gods, some of the worst. When Icheb had a crush on Susan Nicolletti from Sciences. It was pure hell, because I knew he would get his heart broken... and he did. Or when the twins smuggled this bird on board from when we went on shore leave... the thing crapped all over their room, scratched the hell out of both of them, then it had the nerve to die and make them both feel guilty for killing it. But I wouldn't change a minute of it... not if it meant missing out on one of Janine's hugs or Icheb's smile when he accomplishes something. It makes all the rest worth it." Andrew said as his eyes began to fill with tears.

"Get back to your family. I'll talk to Jimmy when things have settled down." Angel said and looked back at Chris.

"Yeah, and you two are always welcomed at the boathouse." Andrew said with assurance before he walked through the portal.

## **[Chapter 2: Yesterdays]**

"Where you been love? I put your plate in the microwave so you can reheat it." Alan said as Andrew ported into the room.

"Just talking dad stuff with Angel. What's the topic of conversation here?" Andrew asked as he walked in the kitchen and hit the button on the microwave.

"Hank and Scott were just telling me about how a virus got loose and made Hank all... fuzzy." Alan said, not able to find a non-offensive term.

"I prefer fluffy." Hank said sarcastically.

"Okay then, it made Fluffy all... fuzzy." Alan said with a straight face for a moment, then he broke up into laughter at Hank's sour look.

"What've you been up to Dawn?" Andrew asked as he went to retrieve his plate from the microwave.

"Just doing spell research, opening portals, bleeding all over the place. Kinda like being back in Sunnydale." Dawn said in realization.

"Except there weren't any demons trying to cut you into pieces while you were opening the portal." Xander said bluntly.

"No, but there was a boy in the next room with a wooden stake in his heart... that counts." Dawn said in her defense.

"Okay, okay. You win that one." Xander said and went back to his food.

"How did you end up with six kids?" Tara asked quietly.

"Just lucky I guess." Andrew said with a shrug before taking a bite of food.

"Dere have to be more story dan dat." Remy said accusingly.

"The kids were brought on board our ship and we volunteered to take care of them for a while... and we were hooked. We love them. When you get a chance to spend some time with them you'll see what I mean. They're great kids, all of them." Alan said, ending with a shrug.

Alan noticed a sound behind him. He turned to see Jimmy standing with a big smile.

"Come here squirt." Alan said and turned in his chair.

"Thanks for saying all that Dad." Jimmy said and climbed up on Alan's lap.

Alan gave him a big hug then said to the people watching, "This is Jimmy, he likes to write and have adventures."

"I have to help Trey." Jimmy said and wiggled down off Alan's lap.

Jimmy quickly ran out of the room.

"There's no doubt that you love them, or that they love you. How do you think they'll fit in here?" Scott asked carefully.

"I expect there to be angst, heartache, rivalry, depression... maybe some attitude problems." Andrew said to everyone's surprise.

"In other words, normal teenagers." Hank said in realization.

"Yeah. We're at a school for mutants, I don't think their Borg-ness is going to be an issue. And as far as socialization... Well, for me high school was the most torturous, lonely, emotional hell that I've ever experienced, how was everyone else's?" Alan said frankly.

"Nerd. Virgin till I married." Andrew said then went back to eating.

"Lived in the shadow of a super-hero sister." Dawn said then took a drink.

"I didn't talk to anyone for three years." Tara said quietly.

"I lived the life my father wanted to have had in high school. I was the captain of everything, the first, the best... I never did one thing that I wanted to do." Hank said in pained remembrance.

Xander looked up and noticed that everyone was waiting for him to speak. "Me? Zeppo boy? The only non-slayer, non-witch, non-demon on the Scooby Gang? It was always a toss up of what I hated worse, being sent out for donuts while everyone else planned the attack or being used as bait..."

"There was that time..." Dawn said quickly before Xander cut her off with a sharp glance.

"Yes Dawn, one time they used me as bait at the donut shop. You're right, that one summed up my high school years pretty good." Xander said with hurt.

"Don worry Xander. Remy here now an don wan you to be nothin but here wit me." Remy soothed.

"What about you Remy? Was your high school a living hell too?" Alex asked curiously.

"Don know. Remy not been to school since Remy eight year old. Been livin on de streets, learnin bout life by livin it." Remy said with a defiant look that dared anyone to pity him.

"How bout you bro? How were your high school years?" Scott asked Alex quickly.

"I was invisible." Alex said simply.

"I don't understand." Dawn said carefully.

"Look in my yearbook. I didn't exist; I'm not in it. I was so ordinary that I didn't fall in with any of the groups or cliques. I'm guessing Tara didn't talk to anyone because she's shy. I talked, no one listened. I didn't have a single friend, a single date, not even a stupid valentine card. Nothing." Alex said with pain.

"How are you doing now that you're out of school?" Alan asked with concern.

"About the same." Alex said bravely, trying to hold in the tears.

"How about here?" Scott asked with a feeling of dread.

Alex smiled a watery smile and said, "Bro, do you remember when you came out of the basement, after the virus escaped. What you said?"

Scott thought back and finally shook his head in defeat.

"You said you were glad I was here. Then you pulled me into a hug. A real one, from the heart. Scott, until I came here, no one touched me except to shake my hand or pick my pocket... for four years. And... That's why I'm still here... and why I've been trying to come up with a believable reason to stay." Alex said guiltily.

"You just did it, Bro. I've always wanted you to be here, but I thought you loved Hawaii so much I didn't want to take you away from there."

"It's touristy, the cost of living sucks and it rains *all* the time. If you go there for two weeks, you can see everything that's interesting to see... then you're done. There's no more." Alex said honestly.

"Maybe you should be a travel agent. You could say something like, 'visit Southern California, where there's smog, mudslides, earthquakes, forest fires... and a beautiful ocean view.'" Xander said with a smile.

Everyone laughed at the statement and the silliness began.

"Visit Houston... where there are roaches bigger than your foot." Scott said and cracked up.

"Visit New Orleans where you be guaranteed to lose either your money, your virginity or your life on the first night." Remy threw in, to everyone's delight.

"Visit Portland where the homeless outnumber the homes." Tara said, to everyone's surprise.

"Visit Santa Fe where the side streets narrow into goat paths without warning." Hank added with laughter.

"Visit Sunnydale where the spawn of hell live and play." Dawn said, and looked at Xander's enthusiastic nod of agreement.

"Visit Barga Five, home of the evil, crapping, scratching chickens with heart conditions." Andrew said, barely able to speak.

"Stop... Stop..." Alan said and tried to catch his breath. "God, I haven't laughed that hard in a long time. You don't know how much I've missed all of you."

"Father? Have you been ingesting alcohol?" Robert asked from the top of the stairs.

Andrew sobered immediately and said, "No son, we're just being silly. That sometimes happens when friends get together... come here."

Robert walked to the table with a look of caution. Andrew pulled him into a hug and said, "Everyone, this is my son Robert. He is the more outgoing of

the twins and the best game player in the family... although I think Janine may try for his title before very long."

Robert shook his head.

"What is the status of the alcoves?" Alan asked with a smile.

"The others are completing the final alcove in the lower level, we will begin the alcove on this level momentarily." Robert said with a hint of shyness.

"Good, you are making good time with them. What do you think of Trey as the leader?" Alan asked curiously.

"He explains what is required and leaves us to do it. It makes me feel... trusted when he does not watch me work." Robert said honestly.

"I'm glad. Did Jimmy share some of his tea with you?" Alan asked with a smile.

Robert nodded.

"What did you think?" Alan asked quietly.

"The flavor was offensive to me... The others liked it, but I did not." Robert said with a note of apology in his voice.

Andrew held him tighter and said, "You're an individual. You don't have to like the same things as everyone else. As long as you're willing to try different things and let us know if you like them or not, we won't be angry with you for not liking something."

Robert smiled and pulled out of the hug.

"I must organize the components of Janine's alcove before the others finish." Robert said and quickly ran to the room under the stairs.

"What was all that about being an individual?" Alex asked with a hint of worry.

"The children were abducted by a race called the Borg. They were connected to a hive mind and lost any sense of individuality. Every now and then we have to remind them that they aren't expected to behave the same." Andrew said carefully.

"So the Borg made them into slaves?" Alex asked with horror.

"Not exactly, they are called drones. They operate like a beehive; there is a queen who directs all the actions of the collective. All those below the queen have no thoughts of their own, they exist to serve the queen and the hive." Alan said seriously.

"And is that why they have metallic components?" Hank asked in wonder.

"Yes, the Borg enhancements make them better suited to specific tasks for the well-being of the collective. Some of them are fairly useful, my ocular implant is what allows me to be without the glasses." Alan said honestly.

"So you two are Borg as well?" Hank asked in confusion.

"It depends on your definition of Borg. We have Borg technology inside us, so by that definition we are Borg, but we weren't assimilated by the collective and our individuality wasn't taken away, so by that definition, we aren't. I guess we're half-Borg." Andrew ended happily.

"And we are pleased that you are Father." Trey said with a smile from the doorway of the staircase.

"We need to hang bells on them." Alan said quietly.

"Trey, please come here for just a moment so I can introduce you to your aunts and uncles." Andrew said in a fatherly tone.

"Everyone, this is our son Trey. He is an engineer by nature. He tends to be quiet, but incredibly insightful. He will fight to defend his beliefs, but is willing to listen to other's points of view." Andrew said proudly.

"Admirable traits." Hank said honestly.

"I do not understand our relationship to these people, would you explain Father?" Trey asked quietly.

"Of course, Scott is your Dad's twin brother, that makes him your uncle. Alex is Scott's younger brother, so that makes him your uncle too. Dawn is your Dad's sister, so that makes her your Aunt. Everyone else at the table isn't related to you directly, but they are our closest friends, so we honor them by calling them uncle and aunt as if they were actually part of the family." Andrew said slowly.

"So while off duty I would refer to Dr. McCoy as Uncle Hank?" Trey asked hesitantly.

"What do you say Hank? Can the children call you Uncle Hank?" Alan asked with a smile.

"If Tara doesn't mind sharing me." Hank said with a tender smile.

At Trey's look of question Andrew said, "Hank is Tara's uncle."

Trey nodded and waited expectantly.

Tara shyly nodded.

"Uncle Hank it is. Will you let me give you a hug to make it official?" Hank asked and opened his arms.

Trey smiled and moved into the hug.

Robert's voice came from the doorway under the stairs, "The components are organized."

"I must go. Thank you Uncle Hank." Trey said a bit shyly and left the table.

"I must say, they are some exceptionally well mannered children." Hank said with astonishment.

"If they don't get those alcoves finished you'll see the other side of their nature. They get cranky... even a little mean... when they don't get to regenerate regularly." Alan said and got up from the table, carrying his plate.

"You two sit down, we'll take care of the dishes." Dawn said immediately.

"No way. You fixed the meal, you're not going to do the dishes too." Andrew said in his fatherly serious tone.

"Good point. You two sit down so Alex and Scott can take care of the dishes." Dawn said with a smile and walked to the living room.

"Xander and Remy help too." Remy said and began gathering things.

### **[Chapter 3: Tomorrows]**

"So when are the children going to eat?" Dawn asked with a note of worry.

"They won't. They don't eat, sleep, or use the bathroom, all that is taken care of by the regeneration alcoves." Andrew said as he relaxed into Alan's side.

"Are they always going to be that way?" Hank asked curiously.

"If they want to be. I talked to the doctor on Voyager and he told me how I could... wean them off their Borg components. But the kids are happy and healthy the way they are. If one of them expresses an interest in losing their Borg equipment, then I'll help them. But until then, why fix a problem that's not a problem?" Andrew said in a sleepy tone.

"It is good to know that you do not want to change us Father." William said from outside Janine's room.

"Come here William. Everyone, this is our son William Alan Spike Summers." Andrew said with pride.

"Spike?" Dawn said curiously.

"Yeah. Get to know him, you'll understand. It's like he has the best qualities of Spike without the demon... or the accent." Andrew said as he looked fondly at his son.

"So his second name is Alan?" Alex asked, looking at Alan as he and Scott entered the living room.

"Yeah, the kids chose their own names. We didn't know what middle names they chose until the adoption hearing." Alan said with a smile of pride for his son and namesake.

"So why did you pick Alan as your middle name William?" Scott asked with a smile.

"Because when we were first brought on board Voyager, Dad took Robert and I away from the others and told us that we were special and he would make sure that whatever happened that we would not be separated. It was our first day in a new place and he made us feel wanted, cared for, and... secure, even though we didn't have words for those feelings at the time. I chose to honor him by taking his name." William said as Icheb approached.

"Which is why I chose to honor Father by taking the middle names LeeAndrew Malachi. He provided me guidance and support when I was unsure. He encouraged me to try and do things that I would not have tried otherwise. If not for Father's influence, I believe that I would be little more than a drone with hair." Icheb said with respect.

"Thank you Icheb." Andrew said and stood to pull him into a hug.

Alan followed suit and pulled William in to hold him close.

"So that's what we were missing." Scott said to Alex as he watched the scene.

"Yeah, but we're here now. And even though we didn't get the support and hugs when we were kids, that doesn't mean we can't give them out now that we're uncles." Alex said honestly.

"And with six kids, I'm guessing that there'll be enough need of hugs and support for everyone to contribute." Dawn said as she watched the fatherly scene of caring.

"And two on the way." Alan said with a smile as he released William.

"And one more after that... where did you put her?" Andrew finished with panic.

"Don't worry love, she's in the headboard of the bed. I made sure to put her away first thing." Alan said with reassurance.

"Who?" Hank asked curiously.

"Our daughter... she'll be born after the twins." Alan said with a smile.

"Remy told you, dese Summers' be like rabbits." Remy said into the silence.

"I think you're right." Xander said through his surprise.

"So have you decided on names?" Tara asked and sat foreword with interest.

Alan and Andrew took their seats again as William and Icheb went back to work.

"We haven't settled on any yet but our favorite is Chakotay Thomas for one of the twins and we were thinking maybe Gregor Geron for the other, but..." Andrew drifted off.

"But B'Elana and Seven named their daughter Alana LeaAndrea after us and I feel like we should honor them the same way." Alan said with indecision.

Xander had a flash of déjà vu at hearing the name Chakotay and said without thinking, "Chakotay B'Elan Summers."

"It's perfect." Alan said immediately. "And that would make his brother Thomas Seven Summers." Alan continued with a little bit of a sour look.

"Ahnikan." Andrew said with a smile.

"What?" Alan asked, confused by the non-sequitur.

"Right before we went through the portal Seven asked me to call her Ahnika, the masculine form of her name would be Ahnikan, as in Thomas Ahnikan Summers." Andrew said with a contented smile.

"You aren't worried about him getting Darth Vader vibes from the name are you?" Alan asked with caution.

"We have a son with the middle name Spike. No, I'm not worried. As long as he knows that he is named after his remarkable Aunt Ahnika, and not the evil master of the dark side of the force, it should be fine." Andrew said happily.

"What does everyone else think? Chakotay B'Elan Summers and Thomas Ahnikan Summers?" Alan asked the group.

"Perfect." Xander said immediately.

"It good to know dat Marguerite not be de only baby bein raised here." Remy said to the group.

"Yeah, there seem to be baby booms wherever we go." Andrew said with a smile.

"What about your daughter? Any ideas of a name for her?" Dawn asked curiously.

"We haven't discussed it. I'm open to suggestions." Alan said to the group.

"Joyce." Xander said immediately.

Dawn looked at him with a gentle smile and said, "Yeah, it's a great name."

"Who's Joyce?" Andrew asked, surprised to see the emotional reaction from Dawn.

"My mom. She was the greatest." Dawn said with a pained smile.

"Are you sure you don't want to save that for your own daughter?" Alan asked carefully.

"The chances of Tara and I having our own is... remote. And since Buffy seems to favor..." Dawn trailed off, trying to find a delicate way of saying it.

"...The sunlight challenged." Xander said helpfully.

Dawn nodded in thanks and continued, "I think it would be perfect. That is if you wanted to use it."

Alan thought for a minute and said, "I think I remember meeting her once when I was a kid. Your father was being an ass, but your mom was really nice."

"Yeah, she was cool." Scott said from his own memory.

"So we have a first name for her, anyone else?" Alan said, looking around the room.

"Anyanka." Andrew said with a small smile.

"Really?" Xander asked with shock.

"Yeah, Anya was a good friend and even if she hadn't died saving my life I would still want to honor her memory by naming one of my kids after her." Andrew said seriously.

"I think she'd like that." Xander said wistfully.

"So Joyce Anyanka Summers?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"Joyce Anyanka Halfrak Summers." Andrew said quietly.

Alan remembered Andrew talking about his feelings toward Anyanka and Halfrak and nodded without comment.

"Hallie always called me cupcake." Xander said with fond remembrance.

"She called me sweetie." Andrew said with an identical expression.

"Wow, when the Summers family get together we really get things done." Dawn said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, the mansion is about to be overrun with Summers'." Alan said with a smile.

"And I thought two McCoy's was going to be confusing." Hank said to the group.

"Andrew, are you going back to being a teacher's assistant now that you're back?" Scott asked out of nowhere.

"Um... I don't know. I'll talk to the Professor tomorrow and find out what he'd like for us to do about jobs and about enrolling the children in classes." Andrew said with a furrowed brow.

"Since you've done all the medical training on Voyager, do you want to become a doctor?" Alan asked quietly.

"No. I might think about getting EMT certification, but that's all. I like being able to help people in an emergency, but I don't think the day-to-day life as a doctor would be good for me." Andrew said in thought.

"It is good to know that you have thought this out. Many medical students don't make that discovery until they are in residence. If I can offer any assistance in helping you to attain your goal, I am always available to you." Hank said honestly.

"Thanks Hank. It's just an idea for now. I think for the moment that I'll be a teacher's assistant like I was before until we get settled in. Alan, have you thought about being the Professor's assistant, like you were for Chakotay?" Andrew said suddenly.

"No, I hadn't considered that but... I'll ask the Professor tomorrow. I enjoyed my job and the Professor would probably like some help with the administration of this place." Alan said with a smile.

"So are you going to enroll the kids into classes?" Alex asked as he sat back into the couch.

"I think so. All the kids will probably be able to test out of high school if they want to but I think it would be good for them to learn how to interact with other kids. They were the only kids on Voyager except for Naomi." Alan said evenly.

"Remy be tinkin bout bein a teacher for de Professor." Remy said seriously.

"Doing what?" Xander asked cautiously.

"Teachin French. Xander may not notice but English be Remy's second language." Remy said with a smile.

"I might have caught a hint of an accent once or twice." Xander said with a teasing smile in return.

"That would be perfect for you Remy." Alex said in a voice of surprise.

"Yeah, and you'll be around to take care of Marguerite... what are we going to do with the babies while we're all working?" Alan asked suddenly.

"That's my job." Dawn said with strength.

Everyone turned their attention to Dawn.

"The Professor doesn't have any kind of home economics class here. I'm going to continue my college classes and teach the kids about budgeting, cooking, sewing and child care. It will serve as a classroom and daycare center... if the Professor approves it." Dawn said with a triumphant smile.

"That's great Dawn. That will give the kids a chance to get some hands on experience with babies and give you the chance to prepare them to be self sufficient when they leave the school." Scott said enthusiastically.

"I've been thinking about it since I got here." Dawn said with a smile.

"And whoever has a free period can come and help you." Hank said casually.

"Yes, and maybe we could work it out so I could have one or two periods free to do my own classes." Dawn said happily.

"I bet we could. What about you Alex? Do you want to have a job at the mansion too?" Scott asked his brother carefully.

"Yeah... But I don't know what I'd do." Alex said in a lost tone.

"Counselor." Andrew said immediately.

"I don't have any training." Alex said in defeat.

"You can do the job while you're getting the training. Think about how you felt in high school. Do you want any of these children to feel like that?" Andrew persisted.

"No, I would never want anyone to feel what I did." Alex said honestly.

"Then this is your chance to see that every child is made to feel important and included. You have a tremendous heart, I think this is the perfect way that you can put your own experience and capacity for caring to use as a career." Andrew said with certainty.

"You really think so?" Alex asked unsurely.

"Absolutely. I can't think of anyone who would be better suited to the task of seeing that none of the children are left behind. You can relate to their pain because you've felt it yourself, you are a mutant, so they'll know that you can understand that part of their life, and you have the support of the Summers family when you begin to make their problems your own... and you probably will." Andrew said with assurance.

"Yeah, I think I'd like to give it a try." Alex said in realization.

//Andrew, would you gather everyone and come to MedLab? Chris is waking up.// The Professor sent to all the adults.

\* \* \* \* \*

The portal opened and the Summers family and extended family trooped into the waiting room of the MedLab. Hank moved away from the group and began putting things back in their proper place.

"Angel, how's he doing?" Andrew asked quietly.

"I think he's about to wake up." Angel said in his own quiet tone.

"Andrew, please come with me, everyone else, please give us a minute. I don't want Chris to be overwhelmed with attention when he is just waking up." Angel said quietly before walking back into the recovery room.

"Dad?" Chris called quietly.

"Yes son, I'm here." Angel said and held Chris' hand tightly.

"That woman, she didn't hurt you did she?" Chris asked in a weak voice.

"No, I'm fine. You saved my life." Angel said with love and adoration.

"Good. I love you." Chris said quietly.

"I love you too, son. I'd like for you to meet the man who saved your life. This is Andrew." Angel said slowly.

"Hi." Chris said shyly.

"Hi." Andrew said in response, not knowing what else to say.

"I talked to the Professor and we've got it all worked out. We can stay here together, in this school." Angel said happily.

"I don't have to go back to the GenX school?" Chris asked in confusion.

"No son. You never have to go back there again if you don't want to." Angel said fondly.

"And you won't be the only new kid at this school either. My children just arrived here today too, so if you want, you can hang around with them until you make some new friends here." Andrew said kindly.

"Really?" Chris asked with interest.

"Just a second." Andrew said and walked to the door of the recovery room.

A moment later Andrew returned with two boys about Chris' own age.

"These are my sons William and Robert. Would you like to visit with them for a while?" Andrew asked quietly.

Robert whispered in Andrew's ear then Andrew nodded. "Robert is going to get Jimmy, he's a little younger than you but he wouldn't want to be left out." Andrew said fondly.

Chris gave a tired nod.

"Angel, why don't we leave these guys alone for a minute." Andrew said and took hold of Angel's arm to guide him out of the room.

"I'll be in the next room son, just call me if you need anything." Angel said with worry.

\* \* \* \* \*

"My father says that your father is a vampire." William said bluntly.

Chris nodded hesitantly.

"I am named after a vampire, William the Bloody." William said with pride.

Chris gave a smile of relief and said, "I was afraid you wouldn't like me because my dad is a vampire."

"Father says that Angel is a good person and we should not judge him, or anyone based solely on their species. What activities do you enjoy?" Robert said pleasantly.

"I dunno, I like archery and cars. But not at the same time." Chris said quickly.

"We do not know of either of those activities, perhaps when you are well, you could demonstrate them to us." William said reasonably.

"That would be fun. What do you like to do?" Chris asked with interest.

"I enjoy games. Do you know how to play Kadis'ka?" Robert asked.

"I haven't heard of that game, but I like to play games, maybe you could show me how." Chris asked hopefully.

"Yes, my sister Janine also likes to play. Once you have learned to play, she will probably join us, she is quite good, but you may not tell her I said so." Robert said, ending in a playful look.

"I won't tell, I promise." Chris said happily.

"I enjoy music and creating graphic designs." William said informatively.

"When I'm better I'd like to see some of your designs." Chris said with a sleepy smile.

"If you would like, I can bring some of them for you to view here tomorrow." William offered.

"Thank you William, I'd like that." Chris said with a smile.

"I like to write." Jimmy said from between Robert and William.

"What do you write?" Chris asked the younger boy.

"I write about the things I see and hear around me and about my feelings." Jimmy said honestly.

"I'd like to read something of yours... but something small. I don't like reading a lot." Chris said, a bit embarrassed.

"Nor do I. We have an audio playback feature on the datapad that allows you to listen to the writing in a synthesized voice. I find it the preferable way to read long passages." William stated, much to Jimmy's surprise.

"So it reads the stories aloud? I think I'd like that. Maybe we could do that tomorrow too?" Chris asked hopefully.

"I believe father will be pleased if we visit you tomorrow. He is worried that being in a new location among strangers will be difficult for you... and us." Jimmy said honestly.

"I didn't do well at my last school. But since you guys are here, I think I'll be okay here." Chris said honestly and laid his head back on the pillow.

"You appear to be fatigued. I will get your father so he may say 'good night'. Our own fathers seem to have a need to do that before we regenerate." William said and moved for the door.

"Thank you, and it was nice to meet you." Chris said tiredly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Why did you want me to leave the room?" Angel asked as he watched through the window with worry.

"Because Chris is going to need friends in this new place. We need to give them a chance to get to know each other. If we waited, Chris might get the feeling of being alone, or only having you to talk to here. I just wanted him to have some other people to talk to while he is recovering. I know that you'll want to spend every waking moment with him. But it is healthier for him to have a variety of people in his life." Andrew said simply.

"Do you think they'll get along?" Angel asked with full concern.

"My boys are easy to like. We just have to let nature take its course and see what happens. Do you need anything? Blood? Someplace to rest?" Andrew asked with his own concern showing.

"No. I will need some blood later, but I'm fine for now." Angel said, not allowing his gaze to leave Chris.

"Angel, when Chris is a little more recovered, I'm going to bring the boys to visit and get you away for a little while. You need some time away to wind down. I'll be sure that someone is here to supervise them." Andrew said with caring.

"I don't want to leave him." Angel said with a tremor in his voice.

"You'll suffocate him if you don't let him have a little time of his own. You don't want him to be resentful of you for always watching over him, or worse, to grow dependent on you to be there every minute of the day. Right now he needs you by his side, but as he gets better, you'll need to give him space. Make sure he knows that you want him around, but also let him know that he is free to have friends and relationships with people besides you." Andrew said in warning.

"I understand. And you're right. There's more to being a father than I realized." Angel said and glanced at Andrew for an instant before fixing his gaze firmly on Chris again.

"You've got the most important part down. You understand how wonderful and precious your son is. All the rest you just have to figure out as you go along. As long as you're doing what's best for him, you'll be okay." Andrew said with assurance.

The door opened and William said, "Chris is becoming fatigued, perhaps you would like to say 'good night' before he goes to sleep?"

"Thank you William, I would like that." Angel said and hurried into the room.

Andrew gestured to the boys and they turned to leave the room.

"We'll be back to visit tomorrow Chris. Sleep well." Jimmy said as they left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you have a good visit son?" Angel asked quietly as soon as he was alone with Chris in the room.

"Yes. They know you're a vampire and William thinks it's cool. William wants me to show him about archery and cars when I get better and Robert wants to show me how to play a new game. Jimmy is going to show me his writing and William is going to show me his graphic designs." Chris rambled with excitement.

"That sounds like a lot of fun. So do you think you'll get along at this new school then?" Angel asked in a voice filled with love and concern.

"Yeah. If the rest of the kids are like those guys, it's going to be great here. And I'm so glad that you're staying with me... it's like I just got everything I ever wanted, all at once." Chris said with a tired, happy smile.

"Get some sleep Chris. I'll be right here if you need anything." Angel said soothingly and pulled the covers over Chris a little more tightly.

"Good night Dad." Chris said with a dreamy smile.

"Good night Son, dream sweet." Angel said and placed a kiss on Chris' forehead.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the family trooped back into the boathouse Alan asked, "So what did you guys think of Chris?"

"He seemed excited to share in our interests and willing to demonstrate his own interests to us." William said succinctly.

"Do you think he'll be your friend?" Alan asked, not able to determine their feelings from William's reply.

"I do not understand friendship. Please explain." William asked bluntly.

"It's like the relationship stuff that I told Icheb. Did he tell you all about that?" Andrew asked.

All the children nodded.

"Friendship occurs when people share interests, thoughts and feelings. I think you've just made the first overtures of friendship to Chris. As long as you find each other's company interesting and pleasurable, you may try to schedule your free time to include him in your activities or be included in his. Friendships come in many varieties, some are very casual and only include the occasional sharing of meals or conversations, others become so strong that there is a bond stronger than family." Andrew said from deep thought.

"Who are your friends father?" Robert asked curiously.

"Here, my friends are Hank, Jean, Tara, Xander, Remy, Warren, Kurt, Bobby... and a few others. On Voyager my friends were Chakotay, Tom, Dave, B'Elana, Seven of Nine, Neelix, Greg and Geron." Andrew said honestly.

"So you wish for Chris to be our friend?" Robert asked carefully.

"I think it would be good if Chris were your friend, but what I want doesn't matter in this instance. Your friends are another expression of your individuality... Robert, you said that you didn't like the Chamomile tea, correct?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Correct." Robert said, not seeing the connection.

"It's the same thing with friends. If William likes Chris, that doesn't mean you have to. It is a very individual thing, and your Dad and I won't interfere with who you choose to be your friend unless we believe it to be someone who will lead you to do bad things or will hurt you." Andrew said with care.

"I believe I understand." Robert said slowly.

"All we ask is that you give people a chance. Just give them the chance to be your friend, then decide if that is something desirable. And remember to treat your friends and those who are not friends with respect. Some people here may be disrespectful to you or others around you, don't let their behavior influence your own." Andrew said in warning.

"Thank you Father. We will give Chris the opportunity to be our friend." William said with certainty.

"Good. I know you'll do the right thing William, but if you have any more questions, please ask." Andrew said cautiously.

"I will Father. We will now begin work on the last two alcoves." William said and went upstairs.

"Damn. You've got this father thing down don't you?" Scott asked in wonder.

"I hope so. I can't be sure that I'm giving them the right advice all the time, but I can only do my best." Andrew said with worry in his eyes.

"Don't worry love, the kids are great. I know it's going to be tough the next few weeks, getting them used to being around other kids, but think of the payoff." Alan said with a smile as he pulled Andrew in for a kiss.

"It's time for us to go." Dawn said and picked up her coat.

"I can port you if you'd like." Andrew offered.

"I think a walk in the chill of the night will be refreshing." Dawn said with a smile and walked to Alan to give him a sisterly kiss.

"I'm glad you guys are back. Even if it was a week, it felt like three months to us too." She said before releasing him.

Dawn then moved and gave hugs to Alex and Scott before meeting Tara at the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, would you like for me to instruct you in how to discontinue the regeneration sequence, should that need arise?" Icheb asked from the top of the stairs.

"Eyleish bolegg kah tah, neveree." Alan said from the couch.

Icheb looked with stunned fascination for a moment before saying, "Dad, you have learned to speak Borg?"

"Just a few words. I wanted to be sure of how to wake you if I needed to and Seven of Nine taught me the interrupt sequence." Alan said, enjoying Icheb's wonder.

"That is good. The last alcove will be completed momentarily. Then we will all begin our regeneration." Icheb said and waited for what he knew was to come.

"Just let us know before you begin regeneration. We want to say good night to each of you." Alan said with a smile.

"Yes Dad." Icheb said with his own smile and walked back to his room.

"You mind if we join you on the 'good night' rounds?" Scott asked seriously.

"I think the children would enjoy it. It's part of our nightly routine. We get all the kids safely tucked in, then we go to bed." Andrew said tiredly.

"And I feel like I could sleep for a week. And I didn't prop open a trans-galactic vortex or perform heart surgery today." Alan said with tenderness directed at Andrew.

"But you would have if you could." Andrew said with a smile, knowing it was true.

"You got me there." Alan said and pulled Andrew close.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the last of the children was tucked in Andrew and Alan went immediately to bed.

Remy went to Xander and said, "Tomorrow we be married. You give Remy a kiss tonight?"

"One kiss, but that's all. I love you Cajun and I don't want to take the chance of messing this up at the last minute." Xander said with worry.

Remy pulled Xander close and into a deep, intense, mind-blowing kiss.

"Okay..." Xander finally said in a daze. "I'm glad we're getting married tomorrow. I don't know how many more of those I could take before I lose control."

Remy stood silently with a dreamy look in his eyes.

"You okay Cajun?" Xander asked with worry.

"Remy never been better. Go to sleep so we can go in de morning." Remy said with a vacant look in his eyes.

Xander nodded and reluctantly went upstairs to his room.

[Tonight Remy don unfold de couch, maybe get some sleep.] Remy thought as he gathered the bedclothes from the coat closet and began to lay them out on the couch cushions.

## **[Chapter 4: Inherent Evil]**

Remy awoke in darkness. His arms were pinned to his sides and he could barely breathe. He began to panic as he thought, [Remy been kidnapped. De friens o humanity found Remy again.] He rocked and twisted, then came to rest. He took a long silent moment to take inventory and realized that his feet weren't bound. Carefully he moved his right foot up and up, trying to get a sense of what was restraining him. He felt an opening and pressed his foot into it. He finally was able to see a sliver of light.

He hooked his foot into the opening and brought up his left foot to help widen the cushioned orifice. With great effort he pulled with his legs until he twisted his body enough to free his arms. The feel of cold steel against the side of his face startled him, then he came to a shocking realization.

After long moments of swearing in three languages he was finally able to make his way out of the back of the sofa where he had fallen. The sofa cushions had shifted out from the back and dumped him behind the folding bed inside the couch. [Next time Monsieur Sofa, Remy blow you into tiny pieces.] He thought as he tried to extract himself from the man-eating couch with a modicum of dignity.

When he looked around he noticed that Icheb and Jimmy were standing, watching silently.

"Don jus stand dere, give Remy some help." He finally said as he was standing with one foot almost on the floor and the other still in the couch, unable to balance himself enough to get out.

Both boys ran to Remy and pulled on his arm to help him out and away from the evil sofa.

"What you boys be doin up so early?" Remy asked as he straightened his clothes which had become tangled and twisted around him.

"Our regeneration cycles ended and we found that our possessions had been transposed in the relocation." Icheb said shyly.

Remy heard the words, but could get no meaning so he looked to Jimmy for clarification.

"We woke up and when we tried to get dressed, I had Icheb's clothes and he had mine." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Dat mus be a problem. Icheb be much bigger dan you." Remy said to the pair.

"We met in here and noticed that you were having difficulty." Jimmy said plainly.

"Well Remy not have dat difficulty no more. Remy an Xander be gettin married today. Den we share a room." Remy said happily.

"I understand. Jimmy and I must retrieve our clothing and dress. Enjoy your wedding." Icheb said and went downstairs.

"I too must go. I hope your ceremony goes well Uncle Remy." Jimmy said before running upstairs.

Remy gave the couch an evil look before shrugging and pushing the cushions back into place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alan and Andrew awoke to silence. After three months on board Voyager, the absence of the constant hum of the engines was felt.

"Love, we need to check on the kids. They don't have duties here and won't know what to do when they wake up." Alan said quietly.

"Five more minutes." Andrew said and rolled over to get some more sleep.

"Okay love, you get some rest, you had a big day yesterday, you deserve it." Alan said with a tender smile and got out of the bed.

Alan walked out of the bedroom to find all the children gathered in a circle talking quietly. When they noticed him they silenced.

"What's going on?" Alan asked cautiously.

"Uncle Remy and Uncle Xander are getting married today." Janine said and held out her arms to request a hug.

Alan picked her up and gave her a hug before asking, "So what's all the whispering about?"

"We want to give them a wedding gift, but do not have anything of sufficient value. There are no replicators here and our own possessions are not appropriate." Trey said with worry.

"Hmmm. I see your problem. Do Uncle Remy or Uncle Xander know about this?" Alan asked carefully.

"No, we have found that presents are best when received unexpectedly." Icheb said with certainty.

"That's true... Stay here just a minute, I have an idea." Alan said and put down Janine.

After rummaging through the cubby hole under the end table for a few minutes Alan came out with a very large, very thick book.

"This is a mail order catalog. It's kind of like the replicator listing back on Voyager. You see this... It's called the price. If it does not have a decimal place, one is assumed to be present at the right side of the number. If there are smaller numbers to the right side, they are assumed to be cents. If the price exceeds two places to the left of the decimal, then we do not have sufficient rations to get it. You may pick out one gift, as a group, and when Uncle Remy and Uncle Xander have left for the ceremony, we will go to the store and buy your gift." Alan said slowly.

"What are cents?" Icheb asked with confusion.

"Let's take this down to the basement so Uncle Remy and Uncle Xander won't see you. I'll explain in a minute." Alan said in a mock whisper.

Icheb took the catalog and all the children went immediately to the basement. Alan followed and knew that it was the beginning of a very long day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remy and Xander were beginning to get creeped out by the children. Every few minutes one of them would come upstairs and call for Alan to come downstairs. Alan would go, be gone for one minute and come back with an amused look on his face.

Finally Remy asked, "What dey be doin down dere?"

"I'm trying to explain the concept of money to them and they're just not getting it." Alan said with a chuckle.

"You mean dey tink dat you be rich?" Remy asked as he ate his toast.

"No, we haven't got to the concept of accumulated wealth yet. We're still dealing with dollars and cents. They don't get the concept of a quarter but the concept of a dime seems perfectly reasonable to them. A nickel makes no sense but pennies are fine. It's the same with folding money. Ones and tens are fine but they don't understand fives, twenties or fifties." Alan said in frustration.

"Decimals... metrics. They're used to everything being easily divisible by a power of ten." Xander said as if it were obvious.

Alan looked at Xander with surprise and said, "You're right. We measured distance, liquid, even temperature in metrics. The children are having problems with the concept of fractions. Thanks Xander, I'm going to work with them again after breakfast."

"Actually, I was hoping you and Andrew could come with us to the ceremony. I know you'll need to get someone to watch the kids, but I really want to have all my family around when I get married." Xander said helplessly.

"Okay, but I need to know what your plans are for the day, I mean before and after the wedding." Alan said carefully.

"Um... The lawyer will be here in about an hour and a half, that's when we'll leave. We're going to stop by Aunt Vada's house to pick her up before the ceremony, then go to the courthouse in Perth Amboy. After the ceremony we're going to Guillaume's for traditional Louisiana cooking. Then we're coming back here." Xander said, looking to Remy for confirmation.

"Let me check on something with the kids, I'll be right back." Alan said quickly.

Xander and Remy shared a questioning look but remained silent.

Alan ran back into the room a minute later and said, "Would you mind if the children came along? They attended our wedding ceremony and behaved themselves very well."

"Remy don mind. De kids be welcome if dey wan to go." Remy said and continued to eat.

"You mind Xan?" Alan asked as he started to eat his cereal again.

"No. I just didn't think it would be too much fun for a kid." Xander said honestly.

"We'll take separate cars, if they start having a problem, I'll get them out of there." Alan said with assurance.

"Dat be fine." Remy said with a note of relief.

"And since the children don't eat, I'll just bring them back home after the ceremony." Alan said between bites.

"Yeah, then we'll see you back here... that sounds good." Xander said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay kids, there's been a change in plans, but I think you'll like it. We're going to go to Xander and Remy's wedding. After the ceremony, they are going to have a meal, and we are going to get their gift. Do you have it picked out yet?" Alan asked with a note of tension.

"We thought Uncle Remy would like this." Icheb said and held out the catalog.

"Icheb. That is lingerie... I don't know, he might... but we aren't going to be the ones to buy him a lace nightie, that's Xander's job. Keep looking, I have to go wake up your father and let him know that we're going... and when we get there, watch and listen, but don't talk any more than necessary. You haven't been around non-mutants from this century before." Alan said tensely.

"We will be discreet Dad, you have told us enough about your home that we understand." Icheb said with assurance.

Alan looked back to see the group of children looking at the catalog again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alan had managed to get Andrew awake, showered, fed and dressed and the children dressed in their wedding clothes. They had to make due with his best pants and a shirt borrowed from Uncle Remy since his dress uniform wouldn't be appropriate for the occasion.

With great planning, care and a backpack from Andrew and Alan's closet, they were able to smuggle the catalog into the van that Alan, Andrew and the kids would be taking to the ceremony.

"Thanks for driving Scott, I didn't even think about not having a license in this universe." Alan said shyly.

"No problem my brother. What's up with your kids, they make me nervous when they're huddled around, whispering like that." Scott said as he looked in the rear view mirror.

"I gave them a catalog to pick out a present for Xander and Remy. They're trying to find a gift for under a hundred dollars." Alan said and glanced back to see how they were doing.

"Whatever they pick will be fine." Scott said confidently.

"I'm glad you think so, it's just over a month till Christmas." Alan said with a smile.

Scott and Alan both heard Andrew saying to the children, "No, that is used for farming, Xander and Remy wouldn't have any use for a plow, besides, this is just the blade, the entire plow costs much more than we can spend."

Scott got a surprised look as Alan said, "Hope you enjoy your Christmas."

\* \* \* \* \*

They arrived at Aunt Vada's house no nearer to finding a present than when they left the mansion.

"Look at all these people. You have time to introduce me to everyone don't you?" Vada asked in a tone of voice that said, 'if you don't introduce me to these people, I'll embarrass you in front of them'.

Xander looked around and motioned to each of the cars for everyone to 'come here'.

"Aunt Vada, you met Alex and Scott last time, this is Scott's twin brother Alan and Alan's significant other, Andrew. Behind them are their children. Next to them is..." Xander said before being interrupted.

"Introduce me to the children. They're people too, it's not polite to treat them as if they aren't." Aunt Vada said in a chastising tone.

Alan stepped behind the children who were standing in a stair-stepped row. He put his hand over Icheb's head and moved it as he said each child's name. "Icheb, Trey, William, Robert, Jimmy, Janine."

"Goodness, I'll never remember their names like that. I'll talk to you again in a moment, after I've met the others." Vada said with a tender smile directed at the children.

"This is Scott's sister Dawn and her partner, Tara." Xander said with a gesture toward the two women.

"Aren't you lovely. All the members of the Summers family are so radiant, and Tara, what a genuine beauty you are." Vada said with a smile.

"In the next car we have Professor Xavier and Mr. Howlett, our lawyer. They're in wheelchairs and it would be difficult and time consuming for them to get out of the car." Xander said quietly.

"I can understand that. It's only by the grace of God that I'm not in one myself. Are you ready to get to the courthouse?" Vada asked with a knowing smile.

"Yes ma'am. Mr. Howlett came along so he could be sure that we filled out the paperwork right." Xander said with concern showing through his voice.

"That's probably a good idea. Well let's be on our way... but would you mind if I ride in the van with the children? That convertible is low to the ground and difficult for me." Vada said simply.

"Um, I guess not... Is there enough room?" Xander asked Andrew and Alan.

"I can ride with you and then there'll be just enough room." Andrew said with a smile.

"Thank you... Andrew?" Aunt Vada asked in confirmation.

"Yes Ma'am. You're welcome." Andrew said shyly.

"Let's be on our way then." Vada said enthusiastically and began walking for the van.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everyone got into their vehicle and the group made the ride to the courthouse without incident.

Once there, they trooped into the courthouse and were confronted by the next challenge.

"Kids, I didn't think about it, but this is going to be a problem for us. Lets wait in the van." Alan said as he looked at the line of people going through the metal detector.

"Yes Dad." Icheb said with disappointment.

"Andy, I'm taking the kids to wait in the van. Let the others know what's going on." Alan said with a whisper.

"Okay love. Wish me luck." Andrew said, looking at the machine apprehensively.

"Good luck, just tell them that you have a metal plate in your head and you should be fine." Alan said with a smile.

"Go on. Love you." Andrew said quietly and moved forward with the line.

Alan and the children left the courthouse.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Why did we have to leave, Dad?" Jimmy asked as they headed for the van.

"Because your Borg components would have triggered the metal detector and we would have to try and explain why six children have metal components in their bodies. It's better not to have to answer such questions." Alan said honestly as he opened the van.

"This will give us more time to find a present for Uncle Remy and Uncle Xander." Icheb said helpfully.

"Icheb is right. And it looks like we'll need all the time we can get." Alan said with relief.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a half an hour of other cases Remy and Xander made their way to the front.

"Mr. Harris, Mr. LeBeau, I see from your paperwork that you want to be joined in civil union. I am not inclined to grant such petitions to out-of-towners because I am aware that you are trying to circumvent the legal system of your own state." The judge said sternly.

"When did you get to be such a bully Stevie?" A woman's voice asked into the ensuing silence.

"Who said that?" The judge asked with surprise.

"I did." Vada said and slowly made her way to standing.

"Aunt Vada?" The judge asked in wonder.

"I never thought when I was changing your diapers that you'd grow up to be so mean." Vada said with disappointment.

"I'm not..." The judge began to say.

"I still have the stain in my carpet from when you ate *all* the pizza rolls and threw up." Vada said sternly.

"What are you doing here with these strangers?" The judge asked with a note of accusation.

"They may be strangers to you but they have made me part of their family. They came to my house to share a meal with me... and when was the last time *you* came to visit? They invited me to witness their civil union because I'm part of the family. And when they do get hitched, they're going to adopt Maggie's baby." Vada said firmly.

"I'm sorry Aunt Vada, this Sunday, I promise." The judge said quickly.

"All right then." Vada said and ended with a contented smile.

"How did you meet Mr. LeBeau and Mr. Harris?" Judge Hawkes asked curiously.

"They came to tell me about something nice that Maggie had done for them and when they asked if there was anything they could do to help, I asked if they would be interested in adopting Maggie's baby. They wouldn't be trying to get the union so quickly except that they want Marguerite to have a home to go to when she's released from the hospital." Vada said with compassion.

"Marguerite?" The judge asked with a smile.

"Marguerite Vada LeBeau, if the adoption is approved." Vada said with strength.

"So you're having your union now so you can get the adoption started?" Judge Hawkes asked the men.

"Yes your honor." Remy said respectfully.

"You gentlemen wouldn't happen to have the adoption paperwork with you, would you?" The judge asked in a more gentle tone.

"I do your honor." A voice spoke from the back.

"Come forward." Judge Hawkes commanded.

"If you can get these nice folks to clear a path, I will." Mr. Howlett said in frustration.

A moment later Mr. Howlett guided his wheelchair to the front of the courtroom.

"And you are?" The judge asked curiously.

"Kenneth Howlett, I came with Xander and Remy to see that they filled out the civil union paperwork correctly. I am an attorney." Mr. Howlett said, a bit shyly.

"That was very conscientious of you Mr. Howlett, may I see the adoption paperwork?" The Judge asked pleasantly.

Mr. Howlett pulled a folder from his briefcase and handed it to Remy, who in turn handed it to the judge.

After a few minutes of reading the judge said, "You've done a very thorough job on this. Normally I would let such things take their natural course and time, but Maggie was a dear friend of mine. For her and Aunt Vada I'll see to this personally. I'm going to grant the civil union and get to work on the adoption. I see that your contact information is in the letterhead, I'll contact you as soon as I have something accomplished. By the power vested in me by the state of New Jersey, I pronounce you joined in civil union. You may kiss if you are so inclined." Judge Hawkes said kindly.

"Thank you your honor." Xander said quietly and gave Remy a brief but heartfelt kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How did it go?" Alan asked with excitement as Andrew and Aunt Vada exited the building.

"Better than we could have hoped, thanks to Aunt Vada." Andrew said happily.

"Stevie Hawkes used to come over to my house to play with Maggie and Toby when they were little more than babies. His mama is a good woman, I need to call her and see how she's doing." Vada said absently.

At Alan's look of question Andrew said, "The judge was ready to deny the civil union until Aunt Vada let him know that Xander and Remy were with her. Now, not only are Xander and Remy officially married, but the judge volunteered to see to the adoption personally."

"Would this be good Father?" Jimmy asked, holding up the catalog.

Andrew looked at the picture and said hesitantly, "It's a very nice food processor but I've never seen Remy or Xander cook, I don't know if they'd like something like that. You'd better put the catalog back in the van before they come out." Andrew said gently.

"Are the children trying to find a wedding gift?" Vada asked as she watched Jimmy get back in the van.

"Yes. I thought the catalog would be the easiest way for them to choose something... but it's not going too well." Andrew said in defeat.

"When you take me back home, come in for a few minutes and I'll show the children some things that I was given and are very special to me. Maybe that will give them some ideas for Remy and Xander." Vada offered.

"Thank you Aunt Vada, I think that is a great idea." Andrew said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander and Remy came out of the courthouse and everyone gathered around to offer their congratulations. Finally Xander asked, "Who all is going to Guillaume's with us?"

Dawn and Tara both said they would go and Scott had a look of indecision.

"Who isn't going that has a driver's license? I get the feeling that Scott would like to go." Andrew asked with a smile.

"I'll drive you. If it were traditional Hawaiian food, I'd be right there but traditional Louisiana cooking scares me." Alex said honestly.

"Alan love, would you like to go with Scott? " Andrew asked quietly.

"If you wouldn't mind, I really would like to go." Alan said with a guilty look.

"I wouldn't mind at all. You go and have a good time. We'll take Aunt Vada home and meet you back at the boathouse after your meal." Andrew said lovingly.

"Thanks love. I owe you one." Alan said and moved in for a kiss.

Andrew responded by pulling Alan close and making the kiss a long deep kiss filled with meaning.

Alan finally pulled back with a look of surprise.

"Paid in full." Andrew whispered with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex parked the van in front of Aunt Vada's house and everyone got out.

"Come children, I have some things I want to show you." Aunt Vada said kindly.

"How old are you?" Janine asked curiously.

"Well, how old do you think I am?" Vada asked in return as she unlocked the door.

"Thirty?" Janine responded carefully.

Vada walked into her home with a hearty laugh. "Thank you child, but I'm a bit older than that. I'm seventy years old." Vada said proudly.

Janine had a vacant look, she obviously couldn't imagine that many years all in a row.

"Here, this is one of the things that I wanted you to see." Vada said and gestured to a portrait above the fireplace.

"Do you think Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy would like a big picture of these two people?" Jimmy asked unsurely.

Vada laughed again and said, "This is a portrait of Mr. Jeffers and I, it was done shortly after we were married. I wasn't suggesting that you give Remy and Xander *this* picture, but you could pay to have a portrait done so they could look back on this time as fondly as I look back at my time with Mr. Jeffers."

"I'm not sure that I understand." Icheb said hesitantly.

"Icheb, would you go out to the van and get the backpack?" Andrew asked quietly.

Icheb nodded and immediately went out to get it.

"Icheb, that's a curious name, I don't think I've heard it before. Is that Yugoslavian?" Vada asked speculatively.

"Albanian, I think." Andrew said and waited anxiously for Icheb to return.

Icheb handed Andrew the backpack. After a moment of searching, Andrew pulled out the holo-imager and sat it on a nearby table.

"Do you remember this?" Andrew asked and turned the device on.

An image formed of all the children, standing in a row. Icheb stood nearly a foot tall on the tabletop. They all had blank, emotionless expressions.

"Yes, it was the day we met." Icheb said with a smile.

"And how does it make you feel to see this image from the past?" Andrew asked carefully.

"It brings me joy. I recall the events of that day and the feelings that I had, feelings I didn't have names for." Icheb said as he stared at the holo-image.

"That is what the portrait does for Aunt Vada. It is her image from the past that reminds her of past events and feelings." Andrew explained to all the children.

"Isn't that something, the things they come up with nowadays." Vada said in wonder.

"It's a prototype. It may be a while before they can be marketed." Andrew said quickly.

"Well, before you settle on the idea of a portrait, let me show you some other things that were given to me." Vada said and walked into her bedroom.

A moment later she walked out carrying an iridescent bowl that was twisted into a spiral design. It looked as if molten glass were exploding outward in a spiral, and then it was frozen in time.

"It is beautiful." Robert said in wonder.

"It reminds me of a wormhole." Jimmy said, fascinated by the changing colors.

"Are you saying my carnival glass bowl looks like a hole that a worm crawled out of... I don't know where you kids get your imagination..." Vada trailed off.

"What is the purpose of such an item?" William asked carefully.

"It's pretty. I put it in my room so I can see it in the morning light, first thing when I wake up." Vada said tenderly.

"Do you think Xander and Remy would like something like that?" Icheb asked curiously.

"Maybe. When it is a gift, that makes it more special. If you give them something pretty, it becomes even more beautiful because someone cared enough to give it to them." Vada explained.

"Like the art that you all gave to Alan and I. You know how much we prize it. The sculpture is beautiful by itself, but it is precious and beloved because it was given to us from you." Andrew said honestly.

"Perhaps we should create something like the sculpture for them." Robert suggested.

"If you would like. A gift that is created is far more personal than one that is purchased." Andrew said simply.

"Yes, Alan is right. Here, look at this." Vada said and held out a small irregular box.

"I do not understand the construction of this container, no two lengths of wood are the same and none of the corners are mitered to fit. It should collapse in on itself." Trey said curiously.

"It has, many times. I finally hot glued the thing together. This was made by my son Toby. He had no talent for carpentry, but he was determined to try and make me a gift." Vada said fondly.

"Then even though the construction is inadequate, you still consider this a treasure?" William asked incredulously.

"I've kept it over thirty-five years, so I guess I do. Because he loved me, he tried so hard to make me the perfect gift. A store bought gift wouldn't have had as much meaning because I know how much effort he put into making this for me." Vada said with eyes that looked into the distant past.

"Father, could we purchase the supplies to create a gift for Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy?" Icheb asked quietly.

"Of course, but we still don't know what we're making." Andrew said to the group.

"I have an idea." Trey said with a smile.

## **[Chapter 5: *Pride and Joy*]**

Alex, Andrew and the children went to a department store on the way home, then made a side trip to a craft store for more specialized parts at Trey's request.

Nothing Alex or Andrew did could get the children to reveal their plan for a gift.

"I give up. We'll find out when they're done... what do you think they're going to make?" Andrew asked Alex quietly.

"I have no idea, they bought wood, nails, paint, glue, fabric, a bunch of doll parts, six model ships, a bath towel, and three packs of construction paper. I have no idea what they're making." Alex said in confusion as he came to a stop at a stop light.

"They also got magnets, seven clockworks for making clocks, about ten feet of electrical wire, batteries, a mirror and thirty-three little lights." Andrew said in equal confusion.

"You don't think they'll tell us, do you?" Alex asked as he looked back at the huddle of children.

"No. I think Trey is the one who actually knows and the rest are just following his lead. He's probably filling them in now." Andrew said and glanced over his shoulder.

"Father, we have need of Dad's mutant ability." Trey said from the group.

"Your Dad is coming home with Xander and Remy, are you going to have enough time to get this done?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yes, if we work collectively, but without Dad's optic discharge of energy, we will need to stop at a hardware store for additional supplies." Trey said with a note of apology.

"What do you need your Dad to do? Maybe it's something I can help with?" Alex offered over his shoulder.

"We need for Dad to use his ability to help dry the paint and glue and also to burn some of the wood slightly to give it a distressed look." Trey said carefully.

"I think I can do that. My mutant ability is much like your father's except that mine comes from my hands." Alex said and continued to drive.

"Thank you Uncle Alex, your help would be greatly appreciated." Trey said and went back into the huddle.

"At least you'll get to see what they're working on." Andrew said in acceptance.

"What do you want to bet that I won't know anymore after I've finished helping them than when I started." Alex asked with wide eyes.

"No bet." Andrew said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander, Remy, Dawn, Tara, Scott and Alan made their way into the boathouse.

"How was your meal?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"It was great... and I talked to the Professor about our jobs and the kids while we were eating. Mr. Howlett is going to help us get all the children identities and we even got them birthdays." Alan said with joy as everyone filed into the living room and sat.

"I didn't think about birthdays... how are we going to remember them all?" Andrew asked seriously.

"Icheb's birthday will be February seventh, Trey's will be March seventh, William and Robert's will be April twenty-first..." Alan trailed off, seeing if Andrew would get it.

"Which is halfway between April seventh and May seventh, Jimmy's will be June seventh and Janine's will be July seventh." Andrew said easily.

"Right. And we decided on ages for them all. Icheb will turn sixteen on his next birthday, Trey will be fifteen, Robert and William will be fourteen, Jimmy will be ten and Janine will be seven." Alan said happily.

"Don't you think Janine's a little young for seven?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Maybe, but I think by July, she'll be just about right, she's around six now." Alan said with a shrug.

"Sounds good, what about our jobs?" Andrew asked with enthusiasm.

"Oh, the Professor was happy to hire us all, but he had a few suggestions... you see, I am a qualified teacher, like Scott, so he want's me to teach too." Alan said a bit shyly.

"What are you going to teach?" Andrew asked with interest.

"English." Alan said with a smile.

"You're underplaying your job, my brother. You'll be in charge of the language department. You'll teach English, literature, creative writing, and speech classes *plus* oversee the student teachers in your department." Scott said with pride for his brother.

"Student teachers?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, Kurt is going to teach German and Remy is going to teach French under my supervision since they aren't accredited teachers." Alan said happily.

"That sounds great, am I going to be your assistant Scott?" Andrew asked with excitement.

"No, I'm in charge of the Mathematics curriculum, if you're willing, you're going to be teaching in the computer science curriculum." Scott said, waiting for a reaction.

"Computer science?" Andrew asked with enthusiasm.

"You would be a student teacher under Dr. McCoy. You'd teach database administration, networking, web design and programming in the mornings. You, Remy, Kurt, Alex, Angel, and Dawn would be taking classes in the afternoons.

"What is Angel going to teach?" Andrew asked in wonder.

"History." Xander said with a chuckle.

"Perfect. He lived it, I bet he'll be a great history teacher." Andrew said with a smile.

"History, current events and a new class were tentatively calling 'Lore and Legends'." Scott said to the group.

"Lore and Legends?" Andrew asked curiously.

"About vampires, werewolves, demons, witchcraft and stuff like that." Xander said.

"The kids aren't going to believe it's serious." Andrew said in disbelief.

"Dawn and Tara volunteered to give a demonstration of witchcraft. And when Angel goes into game-face, they'll believe." Xander said with a chuckle.

"And it's important that they know about such things in case they encounter them out in the world." Scott said, injecting a serious note.

"So did he approve your daycare idea Dawn?" Andrew asked and cuddled into Alan's side.

"Yes, I'll be in charge of the daycare and home sciences classes, under the supervision of the Professor. Tara will be taking care of the daycare while I'm in class in the afternoon." Dawn said and held close to Tara's side.

"And you're going to be Hank's assistant?" Andrew asked Tara.

"Yes. I'll stay in the MedLab and work while Uncle Hank is teaching, and he'll stay in the MedLab while I'm taking care of the daycare." Tara said gently.

"What's Hank going to teach?" Andrew asked the group.

"Survival skills will be the official name of the class. It will include first aid, CPR, Lifeguard training, mountain climbing and repelling, emergency fire-fighting and blood borne pathogen training." Scott said seriously.

"I want to take that class, it sounds awesome." Alex said with enthusiasm.

"That would be fine. You are a student, and therefore eligible to take any classes that you want, assuming that you've had the prerequisite classes." Scott said with a smile.

"Um, if I'm a student, does that mean that I'm going to be a counselor?" Alex asked carefully.

"The Professor felt that you needed some training before you're ready for counseling, but suggested that you would be ideal for teaching humanities." Scott said with pride.

"Um, what's that?" Alex asked hesitantly.

"You would teach critical thinking techniques, psychology, and sociology. And while you're teaching those classes under the Professor's supervision, you'll be taking classes to get your teaching certificate." Scott said happily.

"It sounds like you've got it all worked out." Alex said in wonder.

"Yeah, and if you're still interested in being a counselor, you can pursue that after you're secure as a teacher." Scott said with a smile.

"Wow, it looks like there is going to be a major change in Xavier's curriculum this term." Andrew said to the group.

"Not really. Most of this stuff was offered before, it was just lumped into a few classes instead of being split into separate classes." Scott said in response, then continued, "But there will be some new offerings for the students."

"Yeah, Mr. Logan will be teaching a class that will be called Physical Education, but is actually combat training. He will teach the students to fight with and without their mutant abilities. His healing factor makes him the only man for the job." Dawn said with a chuckle.

"So Remy and Xander, how does it feel to finally be married?" Andrew asked, looking at the couple holding each other tenderly.

"It's great. Now we have each other, and all of you are here with us, this is the best." Xander said contentedly.

"Father?" Trey asked from the basement doorway.

"Yes Trey?" Andrew replied.

"Is now a good time?" Trey asked hesitantly.

"Yes, go ahead." Andrew said and waited with anticipation.

"What's up?" Xander asked as he noticed the children carefully carrying something into the room.

"We'll all find out together." Andrew said honestly.

"Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy, we wanted to give you a gift on your wedding day. We made this for you." Janine said and pulled back a sheet to unveil a tall stack of boxes.

"Um. What is it?" Xander asked carefully.

Trey looked at the creation and shook his head in exasperation. "Turn it around." He said to William and Robert who were standing on either side of it.

They turned the creation to reveal a series of open-ended boxes.

Icheb stood forward and said, "We have only just met. We thought that the best gift we could give from us to you is to let you know us. What is in each box tells how we see ourselves. I cannot say that this is who we are, but this is who we think we are."

"This one is mine." Icheb said and pointed to a box at the top of the structure.

Icheb pressed a button and a little pair of eyes could be seen, looking down. "Mine are the eyes that watch over my brothers and sister." A second light came on below the eyes to reveal tiny dolls made to look like all the other children. A moment later another light came on to reveal a tiny glowing heart. "Mine is the heart that cares for them." Icheb said slowly, then a pair of hands lit up and he continued, "Mine are the hands that do for them." Then a little mouth lit up and he said, "And I am their voice."

A silent moment passed then two pairs of eyes, two hearts, two pairs of hands and two mouths appeared above the first. "And as I am all these things to my siblings, so are my fathers to me." Icheb said then stood back as his box went dark.

Trey stepped forward and pointed to a box below and to the left of Icheb's. The small ship parts were stuck inside and painted gray to give the impression of a Borg cube. "This is mine. The Borg will always be a part of who I am, but I am more than that now." Trey said, then pressed a button. A small Borg doll began to move in the box. It glided across the floor and through a hidden door in the back, another doll came out, dressed in

normal clothing, obviously meant to be Trey. "Now I am a combination of what I was born to be, what the Borg made me and what my fathers have encouraged me to be." Trey said with a smile as his tiny doppelgänger stopped in front of the box and turned to face the group of adults who were all speechless.

William stepped forward and pointed to a box, a moment later Robert pointed to the neighboring box on the same level. "We were told that we were special." William said.

"Our dad is a twin and knew that it would be an important part of our identity." Robert said quietly.

"He encouraged us to be ourselves, but to always prize each other." William said with a small smile toward his brother.

Robert pressed a button and his box lit up. It was colorful and bright. Inside there were things moving around in all directions. "I have become the opposite of what it means to be Borg. I embrace the loud, the bright, and the chaos."

William pressed a button and a single dim light came on in his box that was dark and nearly empty. Slowly a picture rose from the bottom of the box. It was a spiral design that was almost an optical illusion because it was so intricately drawn. "I have become what it means to be Borg. I embrace the quiet, the dark and I seek perfection through order."

Both boys pushed on the sides of their boxes. The wall that separated the boxes folded down and they slid together to form one box. The bright colors were muted and the moving parts slowed their pace. The graphic design in the middle of the combined box drew the attention of all those watching as the light seemed to be focused only on it.

Jimmy stepped forward and said, "This is mine. I know my fathers expect me to have something about writing in here, because that is something that is important to me. But what is most important is my fathers."

He turned on the light to reveal two scenes. One was the shuttlecraft, and a wormhole could be seen through the window. The other was the sickbay with many dolls of people positioned around the room. "These memories will always be with me. The first time someone listened to me as a person, and believed what I had to say, and the day I found the person that I want to emulate in my life."

Janine walked forward and turned on the light in her box. "In my box I have my brothers, my daddies and my friend Naomi... but there's still enough room in there for all of you." Janine said with a smile.

Icheb walked forward and said, "This last box is for our cousin, Marguerite." And he turned on the light to reveal an empty box in the center of the stack.

"I wish for her to know the love of home and family." Icheb said and placed a small raven in the box.

"I wish for her to have companionship." Trey said and put a tiny dog in the box.

"I wish for her to know compassion." William said and put a small turtle in the box.

"I wish for her to have friendships." Robert said and placed a dove in the box.

"I wish for her to know comfort." Jimmy said and put a tiny teddy bear in the box.

"And I want her to have two wonderful daddies like I have." Janine said and placed two dolls, made to look like Xander and Remy into the box.

The children all stood back and waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wow." Xander finally said.

"You give Remy and Xander a wonderful gift." Remy said with watery eyes and walked to Icheb to pull him into a hug.

Xander followed his lead and went to Trey. They made their way through the children, giving each one a tight hug filled with love.

Finally Xander picked up Janine and held her. "You've got some wonderful kids, I can't believe this." Xander said as he looked in wonder at the large shadowbox.

"I'm having trouble believing it myself." Andrew said honestly.

"They did this all by themselves?" Alan asked with disbelief.

"Completely. All I did was take them to the store for supplies to make it. I had no idea of what they were making until they brought it out here." Andrew said in wonder.

"I can't think of a better gift. Thank you all for letting us know you. If no one minds, I'd like to keep this in here, in the living room. I wouldn't feel right having it in our room, it should be out where everyone can see it." Xander said to all in the room.

"Thanks Xander, I think that's a good idea." Andrew said with pride for his children.

"Well, now for the anti-climax, here's my gift." Alex said and handed Xander and Remy an envelope.

Xander opened it carefully and showed the contents to Remy.

"What is it?" Dawn asked impatiently.

"A gift certificate for a portrait sitting. This way we can have a wedding picture." Xander said with a gentle smile.

"Tanks Alex, dis be a perfect gift. Remy wan to remember dis day forever." Remy said with watery eyes.

Scott walked upstairs and came back a minute later with a large wrapped gift.

"I didn't think anyone was giving gifts, so I was going to save this for later." Scott said and handed the box to Xander.

Xander scooted the box across his and Remy's laps. He carefully opened it with Remy's help to reveal a beautiful, colorful quilt.

"Quilts always make me think of home and comfort. I wanted you two to have that feeling here." Scott said quietly.

"It's wonderful. And it's going to be great now that it's getting colder. I've never been outside California before." Xander said with a tender smile.

"Remy not used to de cold. Dis be a good ting for both of us." Remy said and stroked the quilt to feel the texture.

"Andrew, can you port me to our room for a second? I left our gift there."  
Dawn said shyly.

Andrew nodded and opened a portal. Dawn stepped through, then back a moment later.

"Thanks Andrew." Dawn said, then turned to Xander and Remy, "This is from Tara and I."

Remy took the gift from Dawn and opened it carefully.

"You got Remy and Xander jewelry?" Remy asked in confusion.

"Yeah, but that's not the good part. Put them on, then we'll cast the spell."  
Dawn said enthusiastically.

"Um, Dawn... Magic doesn't always work right on me. You may want to think twice about this." Xander said with worry.

"It's not that kind of magic, that's why you have the necklaces. If you want to end the spell, just take them off. The spell is on the jewelry." Dawn said frankly.

"Okay, but last time I used a spell like this, you almost had to marry a demon." Xander said in warning.

"Sweet wasn't so bad... for a demon. Anyway, put them on and I promise that if you don't like the spell, you can take them off." Dawn said and held out a paper for Tara to read with her.

Xander put Remy's necklace on him, then Remy returned the favor. Once they were ready, Dawn and Tara began to read:

>Eyes of amber, eyes of fire,  
>Now reveal your hearts desire,  
>Heart of pain, love of tears,  
>Passion of a hundred years,  
>With invocation of ancient art,  
>Now reveal your lover's heart.  
>So let it be,  
>So let it be,  
>So let it be.

Xander and Remy gasped as they felt each other's emotions. Xander felt Remy's love for him and knew without a doubt that his partner loved him completely, unconditionally, forever.

Remy felt Xander's love and knew that he had finally found his home, his peace and his rest. Xander didn't want anything from him but his love... and he had that already.

"Thanks Dawn and Tara, it's wonderful." Xander said with a dreamy smile.

"Remy tank you too. Dis be a great gift." Remy said with radiant joy.

"Dad, I do not understand." Icheb said in confusion.

"It's magic. You'll have to ask your father or Aunt Dawn about that stuff, I don't know anything about it." Alan said to Icheb.

"It was a dangerous thing to try, I'm glad it worked out." Andrew said to the two women.

"What do you mean dangerous?" Dawn asked seriously.

"If they didn't have true love, the spell would have caused them incredible pain." Andrew said honestly.

"You know this spell?" Dawn asked in confusion.

"Yeah, well, I know about it, I've just never actually used it. I'm glad you did though. They're obviously in love, and this spell will help them to always stay in love because they'll know each other's heart's desire." Andrew said with a fond look.

"We just wanted to give them something that would be meaningful. Knowing how your lover really feels sounded like the perfect gift." Dawn said frankly.

"As long as your lover really loves you, it is." Andrew said and snuggled against Alan.

"I'm sorry we didn't get you anything guys, no one told me about gifts." Alan said plaintively.

"We be livin in your house wit you and your brothers an your kids. You make us part of your family, an dat mean more to Remy dan words can say." Remy said honestly.

"Yeah. That goes for me too." Xander said and held Remy tight.

"Okay then. What do you all think about going to the mansion and leaving the newlyweds alone for a few hours?" Andrew asked the group.

"Father, may we visit Chris?" Robert asked quietly.

"That's very good thinking Robert. Why don't you, William and Jimmy visit with Chris while the rest of us talk to the people upstairs." Andrew said with a smile.

"I must gather some things for Chris." William said and hurriedly went downstairs, a moment later Jimmy and Robert followed.

"It's cool that they're thinking of Chris like that." Alex said with a smile.

"Yeah. they're good kids." Andrew said proudly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You came back." Chris said with a big smile.

"Yes. We would have come earlier, but we had to go to a wedding... that we could not attend." William said flatly.

"Who got married?" Chris asked in fascination.

"Our Uncle Remy and Uncle Xander." William said quietly.

"Two guys? That's weird." Chris said with a crinkled nose.

"Our fathers got married and it was not weird." Jimmy said in challenge.

"I didn't mean it bad, honest. I just never met two guys who got married before. That's all." Chris said hurriedly.

"Then you must meet our fathers." Robert said simply.

Chris nodded in agreement.

"What's that thing on your face?" Chris asked curiously.

"This device on my face is called an ocular implant, it allows me to make precise measurements by sight. It can also scan various non-visible frequencies." William said then pulled up his shirt to reveal a metal box embedded in his chest. "This is my personal data node, it stores the information that my ocular implant captures."

"Are you a robot?" Chris asked in confusion.

"No, I am Borg. A fusion of mechanical and organic components." William said matter-of-factly.

"Wow, does it hurt?" Chris asked slowly.

"There is sometimes discomfort, but regeneration relieves that. Usually no." William answered honestly.

"Are all of you Borg?" Chris asked the other two boys.

"Yes, we, our brothers and sister as well as our fathers." Robert said plainly.

"So you aren't mutants?" Chris asked in confirmation.

"No, our fathers are mutants, but we are not." Robert said with assurance.

"Then why are you here? I mean, isn't this a school for mutants?" Chris asked in confusion.

"My Father explained that to me." Jimmy said quietly. When all attention turned to him, he continued. "This school was originally made so mutants and non-mutants could learn to live together peacefully, but over time, it became a place for mutants only. Now it is becoming what it was supposed to be. A place for mutants to be safe and learn, but also for non-mutants to live peacefully with them."

"That sounds nice." Chris said with a smile.

"Your father is watching us." William observed.

"Yes, he's worried about me. He's afraid that you'll get me too excited and I'll open my wound or something." Chris said quietly.

"We would not encourage you to do something like that. You are our friend, we do not wish to see you hurt." Robert stated bluntly.

"Thanks guys, you are my friends too. Did you bring the graphic designs William?" Chris asked quickly.

"Yes, they are here. They are stored on this padd, just press this button and it will advance to the next." William said and handed the padd to Chris.

Chris looked at each design carefully and scrolled back and forth until he settled on one.

"I like this one best, it reminds me of what I see when I try to sleep." Chris said and handed the padd to William.

"It is a representation of my ocular implant transmissions while I am in regeneration." William said simply.

"What does that mean?" Chris asked in confusion.

"It's what he sees when he dreams." Jimmy said for William.

"You don't have real dreams, like about people or flying or falling?" Chris asked with interest.

"No, we generally have a static feed into our sensory inputs while we regenerate that negates random images from forming." Robert said casually.

"Okay, if you don't dream, then why do you sleep?" Chris asked in challenge.

"We do not sleep, we connect to a regeneration alcove and our nonessential functions cease while our bodies are regenerated." William said seriously.

"Do you think I could see that sometime? I don't think I'll understand unless I can see it." Chris said carefully.

"That would be acceptable." William said quietly.

"Here is a short story for you. Do you want the padd to read it aloud to you?" Jimmy asked and held up the padd for Chris.

"No, does it work like the other one? I just press those two buttons to move up and down?" Chris asked and looked at the padd.

"Yes, the controls are the same." Jimmy said with assurance.

"Then could you leave it so I can read it later? I'm feeling sleepy." Chris said and closed his eyes.

"We will get your father so he may say 'goodnight'. Jimmy said and stepped away from the bed.

The three boys walked out of the room and William said, "Chris is sleepy, perhaps you would like to say goodnight to him."

"Yes, thank you William." Angel said and walked past them into the recovery room.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Bobby, you have a phone call. It sounds urgent.// The Professor sent with worry.

Bobby picked up the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Bobby? I... need your help." The voice said in panic.

"Who is this?" Bobby asked, feeling a wave of fear crawl up his spine.

"It's your brother, Ronny... I... I think I just killed dad."

## **[Chapter 6: For Closure]**

"Ronny, tell me what happened." Bobby said as a cold clammy feeling washed over his body.

"He... He wanted to... But I couldn't... Not again... I said no... And he hit me... And... And... Made me... It hurts... It still hurts... And then... then, I started to fight and scream... and then he fell down... and now he isn't moving..." Ronny said and started to cry.

"I'll be there as soon as I can Ronny. Just stay there... when is mom coming home?" Bobby asked as his mind raced.

"She... she'll be late tonight, she works till eleven on Fridays." Ronny said breathlessly.

"Just hold it together bro, help is on the way." Bobby said and hung up the phone.

"Shit." Bobby whispered as he realized that everyone in the common room was watching him.

"Um, I, uh, think I'm going to need some help guys." Bobby said sheepishly.

"What's up?" Andrew asked with concern.

"It's my brother, he's in trouble and needs help." Bobby said quietly.

"The brother that called the cops on us and got me shot in the head?" Logan asked as he walked into the room.

"Yeah, that one." Bobby said in a whisper.

Marie looked at Bobby carefully and got a vague sense of what was going on.

"Logan, I need to talk to you for a minute." She said in a commanding tone.

"You ain't gonna talk me into helping that little mutant hating piece of trash." Logan said, but followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew looked around at the people in the room in confusion as Bobby, Marie and Logan left the room.

"When Bobby, John, Marie and Logan went to Bobby's house for help, his brother called the police and said that his family was being held captive by mutant terrorists. Logan was shot in the head and John lost control of his power. There's a lot of hard feelings there." Scott said to the group.

"Father, I do not understand. Couldn't they explain that there was a mistake to the police?" Icheb asked innocently.

"I'm afraid not. The way the laws are now, if a mutant is declared a terrorist, he loses all rights. Somehow they made it so the terrorism laws operate outside the system of due process. The mutant terrorist is considered a criminal automatically. There is no trial, no appeal, the only hope is escape, and they're pretty good about preventing that." Alan said darkly.

"What happens to them?" Trey asked quietly.

"The mutants are imprisoned and the authorities do their best to negate their mutant abilities. I would probably be blindfolded with my eyes taped shut. Right now there are several human rights organizations who are trying to get the courts involved in the process, but they're not having much luck." Alan said sadly.

"How can such injustice be allowed to continue?" Icheb asked the group.

"We are fighting it in our own way, by providing examples of what good things mutants can achieve for the benefit of all humanity, not just mutant-kind." Scott said sincerely.

"But sometimes it doesn't seem like enough." Alan said darkly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There's more to this than you know, and a lot more than I can tell. You need to trust me on this, we've both got to go, not for him... for us. Ronny isn't a problem, he's a symptom. I'm going and I could really use your support, but I'll do it alone if I have to." Marie said with force.

"As long as we ain't goin so we can help that little puke, I got no problem with it." Logan said plainly.

"Good, let's go." Marie said and walked out of the room.

[Kid's finally grown up. Good.] Logan thought with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Professor, Ronny needs my help... please." Bobby pleaded.

"Your brother called the authorities and said you, Marie, John and Logan were mutant terrorists with the intent of having you arrested. Do as you like, but I am not inclined to aid a known mutant hater who has actively put members of my household at risk." The Professor said calmly.

"Professor... I can't say the words, but look into my mind and you'll understand why he did what he did." Bobby said reluctantly.

The Professor opened himself to Bobby's mind and looked into the dark place that Bobby had always kept guarded. He moved into this most private place in Bobby's mind and looked on with horror as Bobby forced Ronny down onto the floor beside his bed. He felt cold shame wash over him as he witnessed the violation of that little eleven-year old by a fourteen year old Bobby. The Professor pulled out of Bobby's mind and saw the shame and regret etched on his face as tears silently fell.

"So he wasn't trying to get all of you arrested, just you." The Professor said quietly.

"Yes. And he had every right to want me to suffer. But now he needs me, and maybe I can make up for it, just a little bit. I have to try. Please help me." Bobby pleaded again.

"Very well. Against my better judgment I'm going to send a team to your house and assess the situation. I'll make no promises beyond that." The Professor said sternly.

"Thank you Professor, that's all I'm asking." Bobby said with a small but honest smile of gratitude.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Cyclops, assemble a team and travel to Bobby's family's home to assess the situation. Take whatever actions you deem appropriate.// The Professor sent abruptly.

"Okay, X-men mobilize. Storm, Tempest, Sprite, Portal, and Havock you're on the team. Portal, get with Bobby and find out where we're going. Gemini, you're our backup. If I call for help, you mobilize Colossus, Shadowcat, and Nightcrawler. And have Hank on standby, we may need his services." Cyclops said with authority.

"Logan and I are going too." Marie said firmly.

"I thought after last time you wouldn't want to help him." Cyclops said honestly.

"We have our own reasons. Are we on the team?" Marie pressed.

"Yeah, suit up." Cyclops said and left for the hanger bay.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Scott was walking from the hanger bay in his X-men uniform Angel walked out into the hall.

"What's going on?" Angel asked with concern.

"We're going on a mission." Scott said without slowing his pace.

"Need my help?" Angel asked.

Scott stopped and thought.

Finally he said, "Get Dr. McCoy to watch out for your son, and you can tell Chris that we're going to check on an injured man, this probably won't be dangerous. Meet us in the dining room in five minutes." Cyclops said and started walking again.

Angel nodded and ran back to the MedLab.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dr. McCoy? Could you look after Chris for me, I'm going on a mission with the team." Angel asked quickly.

"Of course. I just looked in on him, he is sleeping. If he wakes, I'll let him know that you'll be back soon." Hank said quietly.

"Thank you." Angel said and left the room quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Portal, you got the coordinates?" Cyclops asked as the last of the team members walked into the dining room.

"Yeah. We're going to enter into the living room." Portal said professionally.

"Storm, when we step through take Tempest and Sprite and secure the perimeter. Portal and Havock, guard our exit until we're secure and wait for instructions... Angel, here's a communicator, just press it while you talk and you'll be tuned in to our team." Cyclops said and handed him the metallic X symbol in a circle.

Bobby watched as the team prepared as seriously as they ever had.

Andrew formed the portal and the team stepped into the unknown.

## ***[Chapter 7: Deeply Touching, Touching Deeply]***

As they emerged into the living room Storm immediately went for the nearest door and motioned for Sprite and Tempest to follow. Portal and Havok stood on either side of the open vortex watching for any sign of trouble. Cyclops pointed at Angel then motioned to a doorway, he pointed at Wolverine and to another door. Then he pointed at Iceman and Rogue and motioned for them to follow him upstairs.

The three silently crept up the stairs. When Cyclops reached the top he looked at Iceman with question. Bobby pointed to his brother's room. With his hand on the trigger mechanism of his visor, Cyclops quickly opened the door.

What he saw made his heart lurch. Laying in the floor in a puddle of blood was an older man. He had blood coming from his nose and mouth. Cyclops counted six compound fractures before he decided that it didn't matter. He looked further on to see a pale and trembling boy laying on the bed crying. He was naked from the waist down and there was blood smeared on his buttocks and thighs.

"You need to get him out of here." Marie said quietly to Bobby.

Bobby nodded in stunned disbelief before he walked to his brother and said, "Ronny, I'm here to help you. Come on and we'll see what we can do to help."

As Bobby tried to put a comforting arm around his brother, Ronny flinched back in fear.

The action tore at Bobby's soul and he said, "Come on Ronny, let's get you cleaned up. I promise that I won't touch you... ever again, without your permission."

Scott realized what the words meant and the scene before him took on new meaning.

"Scott, help Bobby with Ronny. He doesn't need to be in here." Marie said and snapped him out of his shock.

"Yeah, um, get Andrew to call for Hank." Scott said absently as he walked to Bobby's side.

Marie gave one sharp nod and left the room.

"Ronny, we're going to take you into the next room. Help us out here. Bobby, grab a robe for him." Scott said with a gentle voice.

Bobby and Scott got Ronny to stand and put the robe on him, Marie returned to the room as the three were leaving.

Marie knelt down beside the broken man and noticed slight movement. He was breathing. She looked at the door quickly then pinched his nose closed with one gloved hand while she covered his mouth with the other.

William Drake struggled for breath for a moment before becoming still. Marie looked up to see Logan watching her.

Logan looked at the scene before him and took a smell of the air. He winced with disgust and finally said, "It's better than he deserved."

Marie looked at her gloved hands that were stained with blood.

She looked up at Logan with shock and question in her eyes.

"It needed done and you did it. That's all." Logan said and held out a hand to help Marie to stand.

Hank ran into the room a minute later and Marie said, "I think he's dead."

After carefully looking for a pulse Hank hung his head sadly. "His body is still warm, apparently his injuries were to grave for him to survive." he whispered with regret.

"Hank, we have another patient for you." Scott called from the doorway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hank walked into the room and saw a young man in severe emotional shock.

At the sight of Hank, Ronny began to mutter, "No... NO!" With increasing volume.

"Hank, maybe you can get Andrew to have a look at him first." Scott said with apology.

After a quick nod of comprehension, Hank left the room, a minute later Andrew appeared with his MedKit.

He scanned the boy and felt revulsion at his discoveries. Finally he said, "We need to get him to the MedLab, he needs a doctor."

"Is there anything you can do for him now?" Scott asked with hope.

"I can give him something to calm him down, but then Hank needs to see him." Andrew said decisively.

"He's afraid of Hank." Bobby said, standing a foot away from his brother and feeling helpless.

"My name is Andrew, what's yours?" He asked quietly.

"R... Ronny." He said in a trembling voice.

"Ronny, I'm like a paramedic. I can give you something to calm you down if you want, but only if you want. I'm not going to do anything unless you say it's okay." Andrew said honestly.

"How do I know you're not going to poison me?" Ronny asked with fear.

"Bobby, will you let me give you this shot first so Ronny can see that it doesn't do anything but calm you down?" Andrew asked carefully.

"If Ronny wants me to, I will." Bobby said, looking his brother in the eyes.

"Yeah, if he'll take a shot, so will I." Ronny said with a note of caution.

Andrew pressed the hypospray to Bobby's neck and a small hiss could be heard.

"That didn't hurt at all." Bobby said with wonder.

"Yeah, I wish they had these when I was growing up." Andrew said before turning his attention back to Ronny.

"Now if you want me to do this, I will. You still don't have to." Andrew said with assurance.

"How does it feel?" Ronny asked as he looked at Bobby.

"I just feel a little better, less edgy. I'm not sleepy or dopey or anything." Bobby said honestly.

"You're always dopey." Ronny said, then looked at Andrew and said, "Okay."

Andrew quickly and efficiently administered the sedative to Ronny. The effect was almost immediate.

"Now Ronny, I need to get you to a doctor. That big blue furry man is the doctor at the institute, but if you would rather go to the emergency room, we can do that. What's important is that you *need* to see a doctor." Andrew stressed.

"What... What's wrong with me?" Ronny asked with renewed fear.

"There is a large tear in your sigmoid colon. If it isn't repaired it could easily become infected and threaten your life. That's where most of the blood is coming from." Andrew said professionally.

"If I go to the emergency room, they're going to ask questions." Ronny said and glanced at Bobby.

"Yeah, and since you're a minor, they'll call the police." Andrew confirmed.

"Do I have to be knocked out for the surgery?" Ronny asked carefully.

"Honestly, I don't know. I just stabilize patients until the doctor can treat them. I don't know what's involved in that surgery, but I promise that we'll find out and let you decide before we do anything. *Nothing* is going to happen to you without your permission." Andrew said as a vow.

"So if I say no, what then?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

"Then we'll find another doctor, someone who won't ask questions, if that's what you want. Ronny, all I'm concerned with is that you go to see a doctor, I don't want you to get sick when it can be prevented." Andrew said sincerely.

"Let's talk to the blue guy and see if he can do the surgery while I'm awake." Ronny said and moved toward the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel stayed in the living room and awaited instructions. He could smell blood, violence and sex in the air. Bobby, Andrew and Scott came down the stairs surrounding a younger boy. As the boy moved closer Angel could smell the fresh blood coming from him and knew what had happened.

Thoughts of Chris flashed through his mind and he suddenly had the need to see him and know that he's okay.

"You're growling." Alex said quietly.

"Sorry, I was just thinking." Angel said quietly as he watched Andrew and Bobby lead the boy through the vortex.

"We'll need to do something to make this look natural, we don't want any questions." Scott said to the group.

"Robbery gone wrong?" Alex suggested.

"That wouldn't explain why Ronny is missing and the condition of his father. I think most of his bones have been broken." Scott said in thought.

"A big storm? Maybe collapse some of the house?" Rogue interjected.

"It has possibilities. But that still doesn't explain Ronny being missing." Scott said absently.

"How missing do you want him? Missing gonna come back in a few days or missing and presumed dead?" Logan asked seriously.

"Um... the second one, I think. That way he can still come back if he wants, he'll just have to make up some kind of story. And if he doesn't want to, he doesn't have to." Scott said unsurely.

"How about a big storm *and* a fire... maybe a lightning strike." Marie suggested.

"That's good." Scott said then tapped his comm device. "Storm, come in, we've got work to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Andrew, Ronny and Bobby walked into MedLab, Andrew said, "Hank, could you give us a few minutes to get Ronny comfortable?"

Hank nodded and left the room without a sound.

"So you're a mutant too?" Ronny asked Andrew as he climbed onto a bed.

"Yes. That vortex that we walked through to get here, that's my mutant ability." Andrew said calmly.

"But you look so normal." Ronny said with question.

"It's easier to think of mutants being so different from yourself. Most of us are just like anyone else, we just have a little something extra." Andrew said calmly.

"Um... Are there any, like, not-mutants around here?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

Andrew smiled and said, "Yes, there are quite a few. Xander, Dawn, Tara, Angel, and my kids."

"Could I have a not-mutant person in here with me? You're nice and everything, but I'd feel better having one of my own kind around." Ronny said nervously.

"Will you be okay if I leave you alone with Bobby for a few minutes?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No. Send Bobby, you're not leaving me alone with him." Ronny said with a definite tone.

"Okay, Bobby, will you go find a *not-mutant* to come in here?" Andrew asked, trying to hide a smile.

Bobby sadly nodded and left the room.

"You said kids, how many you got? I mean you look like you're sixteen." Ronny asked with honest curiosity.

"Six, and I'm twenty three. We adopted them about two months ago." Andrew said happily.

"Oh, that makes more sense. Wow, six kids?" Ronny said, impressed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and Icheb walked into the room a few minutes later as Andrew was running a scanning device over Ronny.

"What the hell is that?" Ronny asked as he stared at Icheb.

"What is what?" Andrew asked curiously.

"You said he's not a mutant, then why's he all deformed like that?" Ronny asked with a note of disgust.

"He's not deformed... He's just not human." Andrew said simply.

"So instead of a mutie, you bring an alien freak? Let me try again. Do you have any not-mutant *humans* here?" Ronny asked with a condescending attitude.

Andrew took a deep breath to calm himself and finally said, "Yes, Dawn, Tara and Xander are all fully human and are not mutants."

"Are you ready for me?" Hank asked from the doorway.

"What do you say Ronny? Can Hank come in and talk with you?" Andrew asked, trying to fight his anger and revulsion toward this boy.

"Yeah, I guess, if the alien freak can come in, why not the mutie cookie monster too?" Ronny said with a chuckle.

"I prefer 'blue wookie'." Hank said dryly.

"I would prefer that you not call my son a freak." Andrew said calmly to Ronny, then turned to Icheb and said, "Go find your dad and ask him to tell Uncle Scott that we need Tara or Dawn in MedLab to help Ronny."

"I don't want no girls looking at my bare butt if you're going to operate on me." Ronny said immediately.

"Okay, see if Angel can come here. He's about as human as we've got right now." Andrew said to Icheb with a look of sympathy.

"Yes Father... I'll tell Dad." Icheb said distractedly and left the room.

"Hank, he has a significant tear in his sigmoid colon." Andrew said, careful not to look at Ronny.

"Your kid called you father, and said he's going to his dad. Does that mean you're a fag too?" Ronny asked with a laugh.

Andrew quietly said, "Ronny, please don't use that word. It is offensive."

"Oh God! I was right! You're a mutie fag with six alien freak kids." Ronny said as he began to laugh.

"Will you let Dr. McCoy operate on you?" Andrew asked through gritted teeth.

"Can you do it without knocking me out? I don't want the mutie fag to be near my ass if I'm not awake to defend it." Ronny said as he fought back laughter.

"Yes, depending on the damage, I should be able to clean and suture the tear in a matter of minutes. And you won't have to be unconscious, it can be done with a local anesthetic." Hank said with a low, emotionless voice.

"Well get to it then, I don't want to be here any longer than I have to." Ronny said demandingly.

"Yes Hank, please hurry." Andrew added in a gruff whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel walked into the room at a hurried pace. "Scott said you needed me in here?" He asked with concern.

"Ronny wants a human, non-mutant to be here with him so he'll feel safe." Andrew said coldly.

"Me?" Angel asked incredulously.

"You're all we've got." Andrew said with a shrug then turned to Ronny who was laying face down on the bed, waiting for the surgery to begin.

"This is my friend Angel. He's not a mutant." Andrew said in a cold chopped tone.

"Is he a fag too?" Ronny asked without looking up.

"You'll have to ask him about that, we're not that kind of friends." Andrew said and turned to leave.

"Where you goin? The Cookie Monster is about to start, I didn't think you'd want to miss the show, it might make you hot." Ronny asked with cruelty.

"I need to talk to my son." Andrew said and continued out the door.

"So how about it? You a fag too?" Andrew heard Ronny ask as he left the room to find Icheb.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, I do not understand... the things that boy said... they hurt." Icheb said with watery eyes.

"I know son. I was hoping you'd get to have a little more time to get used to this world before you met someone like that." Andrew said sadly.

"Is there nothing to be done? You fixed Uncle Dave." Icheb asked with hope.

"First of all, Trey is the one who fixed Uncle Dave, I just helped. Second, it's not my place to try and dictate how another person should think or feel. I can't control Ronny's actions, only my own. Third, Dave was a good person inside. Trey just helped to bring that person out. Ronny seems to be cruel, evil and bigoted to the depths of his soul." Andrew said honestly.

"So he is a bad person." Icheb said in realization.

"Yes Icheb, he is." Andrew said quietly.

"In the months I have been with you and Dad, I have not known any bad people. I am unsure how to react." Icheb said with a note of question.

"The best advice I can offer is to ask you to understand that you are a good person. Don't let someone like Ronny drag you down to his level. He wants to force a reaction from you, to instigate a confrontation. That is how you validate him. Just do what is good and right and he won't have any control over your actions. That's not to say he won't still hurt you, but you won't be feeding his desire to cause pain if you don't sink to his level and fight him." Andrew said, feeling hurt at the lost and damaged expression on Icheb's face.

"So I am not a freak?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Actually you are." Andrew said, then quickly continued, "But the word 'freak' is just a derogatory term for an individual. He called you an alien freak, he called me a mutie fag. To someone from earth, who is on earth, you are an alien. You are a unique individual. Since you aren't like him, he sees you as a freak, but would you want to be like him?"

Icheb shook his head immediately.

"I am a mutant, and I am same gender oriented. So technically he is correct, but the term 'mutie' is a slur toward mutants and 'fag' is a slur toward homosexuals. So he effectively insulted us both, but said only the truth." Andrew explained carefully.

"I wanted to hurt him in response, does that make me a bad person?" Icheb asked quietly.

"No son, that makes you a feeling person. It is natural to want to cause pain to someone who hurts you intentionally. I wanted to hurt him too. But our hurting him wouldn't improve him, and it would diminish us. And by causing us to hurt him..." Andrew trailed off, hoping that Icheb understood enough to finish the thought.

"He succeeds in making us more like him, mean and hurtful." Icheb said with comprehension.

"That's right. I can't tell you exactly what you should do, or how you should react to someone like Ronny, you need to use your own judgment and behave in a manner that you can be proud of." Andrew said with assurance.

"I will try Father. But it is difficult to know what is appropriate to do." Icheb said honestly.

"For me too Icheb." Andrew said, then had a thought. "You know how your Dad or I will hug you when we know that you're hurting?"

Icheb nodded.

"It goes both ways. I really need a hug, do you mind?" Andrew asked with a small smile.

"I do not mind at all Father." Icheb said with a smile and pulled his father into a hug filled with love and respect.

## **[Chapter 8: Leapus Vengeance]**

After a quick talk with Scott, Andrew returned to the MedLab in time to see Bobby run from the surgery room in tears.

"Bobby, come here." Andrew said in a commanding tone and opened his arms.

Bobby didn't even think to protest, and ran into the waiting arms of Andrew.

"Shhh. Don't let him get to you, it only makes him want to hurt you more." Andrew said quietly as he rubbed Bobby's back.

"He... he keeps on and on. I tried to remember that he's hurting and has been through a lot today but... he knows just which buttons to push. I... don't want to give up on him but... I can't be around him like this." Bobby said and tried to pull himself back into emotional control.

"Yeah, he found a few buttons I didn't even know I had." Andrew said as he pulled out of the hug to look Bobby in the eyes. "I know what it's like to have to give up on someone in your family. The only advice I can give you is to find a new family where you'll be loved and accepted."

"Like yours?" Bobby asked in a hopeful whisper.

Andrew smiled and pulled Bobby close again. "You're already a part of my family Bobby. I've told all the kids about you and my son Robert is named after you." Andrew said with love in his voice.

"Really?" Bobby asked in wonder.

"Yeah, after we talk to Ronny for a minute we can go upstairs and you can meet him." Andrew said with a tender smile.

"Thanks Andrew, and thanks for trying to help Ronny... I don't know what we're going to do next. I was hoping he could stay here but..." Bobby shrugged.

"Not going to happen. I talked to Scott and the Professor. Ronny is to be invited to leave as soon as he is medically able." Andrew said seriously and pulled back to see Bobby's reaction.

Bobby nodded in acceptance and said, "Yeah, that's best."

Andrew put his arm around Bobby in support and guided him back into the MedLab's surgical theater.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is the surgery done?" Andrew asked with surprise as he and Bobby walked into the room.

"Yes, I had sufficient motivation to proceed quickly." Hank said as he put things away.

"What you doin with your arm around my brother?" Ronny asked from the bed.

"He just needed a hug." Andrew said offhandedly.

"He don't deserve nothin but a punch in the face." Ronny said with a sneer.

"I pray the day never comes that we get everything we deserve." Andrew said quietly.

Angel nodded in agreement and walked for the door.

"Where you going, you can't leave me with the mutie fag and his bitch." Ronny said to Angel's retreating form.

"Angelus likes him." Angel said to Andrew with a smile as he continued out of the room.

Andrew smiled at that, then let the emotion fall off his face when he looked toward Ronny again.

"Hank, is there any medical reason that Ronny has to stay? I mean, do you want to keep him for a week of bedrest?" Andrew asked Hank without a hint of humor.

"Oh God no!" Hank exclaimed, then noticed a mischievous twinkle in Andrew's eyes.

"That is to say, as long as Ronny gets sufficient rest, he is not limited in his actions. He is free to leave." Hank said professionally.

"Then all we need to know is where you want to go and we'll send you on your way." Andrew said to Ronny.

"I've had a few minutes to think about it and I decided to stay here. I've got no place else to go." Ronny said without concern.

"No. That is not an option. Don't you know a nice 'Friends of Humanity' stronghold where we can drop you off?" Andrew asked with hope.

"Well, if you decide to throw me out, I'll just tell the reporters and the cops that this is a mutant terrorist camp and they'll tear this place apart before you know what hit you." Ronny said with a cruel smile.

"And what good would that do?" Andrew asked, stalling for time as he thought.

"It would rid the world of mutie scum like you and my brother. The more of your kind we have safe in prison, the better off everyone else is." Ronny said with certainty.

"Isn't there someplace you'd like to go? I hear Hawaii is nice." Andrew said hopefully.

"Naw, I'd have more fun watching the feds tear this place down. Maybe they'd even let me watch them dissect your alien freak kids. Face it, I got you by the balls. There's nothing you can do to stop me." Ronny said with a happy smile.

"What about Bermuda? I can send you anyplace you'd like to go." Andrew asked, trying to decide what to do.

Ronny looked at Andrew with exasperation and said, "I said no. I wish you'd just leave me alone."

An image of Anya and Hallie flashed in Andrew's mind at the words and a cruel smile fell over Andrew's face as he said, "Done."

A flash of golden light erupted from Andrew's eyes and Ronny was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What did you do with him?" Bobby asked as he looked around.

"I granted his wish." Andrew said and turned to leave.

Bobby thought about Andrew's words as he followed him out of the MedLab.

"He wished you would leave him alone." Bobby said slowly, trying to figure out what had just happened.

"Yeah, come upstairs and I'll tell you while I explain to the Professor and Scott." Andrew said and got into the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Missed you love." Alan said and pulled Andrew into a kiss.

"Thanks, I really needed that." Andrew said with love and tenderness.

"Everyone just got back, you want to close the portal in the dining room?" Alan asked quietly.

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Andrew said and pulled his power from the portal. "So what's been going on up here?"

"Not much. The kids have been waiting here in the common room... no one's been in except Scott and Alex since you left." Alan said with a shrug.

"Oh, I figured the whole house would be in here to meet the kids." Andrew said honestly.

"I asked them to wait until the crisis had passed." The Professor said as he entered the room.

"I guess that's best Professor. Is Scott on the way?" Andrew asked as he looked around.

"Yes, he and the rest of the team are changing back into their regular clothes, they'll be here in a moment." The Professor said and motioned to the couches to invite Andrew and Alan to sit.

A minute later Orroro, Dawn, Scott, Alex and Logan walked into the room.

"Can you tell me now?" Bobby asked with worry.

"Sure. Ronny was talking about calling the media and the police and saying that this is a mutant terrorist camp. I didn't know what to do until he said that he wanted to be left alone..." Andrew said to the group.

"Where'd you put him?" Alan asked hesitantly.

"In your world." Andrew answered quietly.

"But the virus..." Alan began with horror.

"I left him phased out of existence enough so that he can't get the virus. He can't touch anything or hurt himself. He's like a ghost." Andrew said emotionlessly.

"He'll starve." Bobby said with worry.

"No. He's in a state of interdimensional flux. He won't need to eat, sleep or use the bathroom. He'll just exist." Andrew said to Bobby with assurance.

"For how long?" Logan asked, getting an uneasy feeling about this.

"Unless he meets up with an interdimensional traveler... for as long as we choose to leave him there... or forever, whichever comes first." Andrew said.

"It would've been better to kill him. It ain't right." Logan said to the group.

Andrew quirked his head in inquiry.

"I got a better idea than most people of what forever feels like. The thought of existing forever ain't a bed of roses, but put being alone forever on top of that... bring him back and I'll make it quick. No one deserves forever alone." Logan said with pain in his voice.

"Okay Logan, you're right. We won't do forever, but we need to keep him there for now until we figure out what else to do with him.

"Perhaps with some telepathic alteration, I can reengineer his memories enough to allow him to leave here with no knowledge of our existence." The Professor said to the group.

"That's risky. Telepathic blocks have been known to break after a while. Then he'd have that to hold over our heads too." Scott said seriously.

"What about our world?" Dawn asked the group.

"What about it?" Andrew asked, intrigued.

"We could toss him through a vortex into our world and let him fend for himself. He should love it, it'll be just what he always wanted, a world free of mutants." Dawn said to everyone.

Hank walked into the room at the statement and said, "As nice a thought as that is, it wouldn't work. Andrew came from your world, and he is a mutant... an omega class mutant. The omega class doesn't emerge until the beta and alpha classes are established. That means there are other mutants in your world too, you just haven't encountered them. And my tests just confirmed a suspicion... Ronny is himself a mutant."

"What?" Bobby, Marie and Dawn asked simultaneously.

"I suspected it when I saw the condition of his father. There is no way a fifteen-year-old boy could do the damage that was done barehanded... I tested a sample of his blood and detected the active X gene." Hank said to the group.

"So what do you think we should do with him?" Andrew asked Hank.

"Where did you put him?" Hank asked quietly.

"In Alan's dimension, phased out of existence enough so he can't catch the virus." Andrew answered with equal quietness.

"I say we leave him there and talk to him. Perhaps with time to think about it, he might change his ways." Hank said with hope.

"Or he might try and fool us into believing that he changed long enough for us to let our guard down." Marie said in speculation.

"That is a very real possibility, though I believe I could detect any attempt at subterfuge if I were to scan him." The Professor said in thought.

"Let's leave him where he is for now and talk to him tomorrow. Maybe after a night alone he'll be more receptive." Hank said in speculation.

"Yeah. I'm sorry if I made a mistake. It was the only thing I could think to do when he threatened the mansion." Andrew said shyly.

"Had you kept him here, our only option would have been confinement in the Omega Chamber. As it is, he is unharmed and is not a danger to himself or others. We'll leave him tonight and tackle the problem of Ronny Drake

fresh in the morning. I believe you gentlemen wanted to introduce your children to the members of the house." The Professor ended with a smile.

Andrew nodded shyly and looked to Alan.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few minutes later a group of students and X-men came into the room. They had obviously been waiting for the go-ahead from the Professor before entering.

"Clarissa, Theresa and Rachel, I was wanting you to meet my daughter Janine." Alan said with enthusiasm.

"Are these girls mutants?" Janine asked shyly as she hugged close to her dad.

"Yes, Clarissa is called Blink and Theresa is called Siren, Rachel doesn't have a mutant name yet." Alan said with a tender smile toward his daughter.

"Can Janine come up to my room to play?" Clarissa asked hopefully.

"It's okay if Janine wants to go. Be back here in two hours." Alan said quietly.

"Thank you dad." Janine said and followed the three girls hesitantly.

"This is my son Jimmy." Alan said and pulled Jimmy in front of him.

"That man has wings." Jimmy said in wonder.

"Warren, Jimmy noticed your wings, could he touch them?" Alan asked with a smile.

Warren shyly walked to Jimmy and Alan and extended a wing for Jimmy to touch.

"Can you fly?" Jimmy asked with wide eyes as he gently felt the silky smooth feathers.

"Yes, I like to fly... would it be okay if I take Jimmy flying?" Warren asked, dividing his attention between Jimmy and Alan.

Alan looked at Andrew who gave a small nod of approval.

"That would be fine Warren. Jimmy, be back in two hours." Alan said gently.

"I would like to come as well." Kurt said from the back of the group of people.

"Jimmy, this is my friend Kurt." Alan said, waiting to see Jimmy's reaction.

"That is my favorite shade of blue." Jimmy said pointing at Kurt's skin.

"You are not afraid of me?" Kurt asked in surprise.

"No, Dad said that you are his friend... should I be afraid?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"No Jimmy, you need never be afraid of me." Kurt said and walked with Warren and Jimmy out of the room.

"William, come here and meet Angel." Andrew said with a smile.

"I have seen him when visiting Chris." William said as he stepped forward.

"Angel is Spike's sire, he knows more about Spike than I do. Maybe you'd like to find out about your namesake?" Andrew asked happily.

"Really? Would you tell me about William the Bloody?" William asked with uncharacteristic excitement.

"You named one of your children after Spike?" Angel asked incredulously.

"Spike saved a lot of lives and before he died he was a good person. William likes the name and I'm proud to be able to honor Spike's memory this way." Andrew said honestly.

Angel nodded and said, "Yeah, he found his soul again before he died. I'll be happy to tell you all about my child. Let's go down to the MedLab and see if Chris is awake. He might like to hear about Spike too."

"If you're going to stay with Chris, send Tara up. I think she might enjoy being included in this gathering." Hank said to Angel and William.

"Two hours." Alan said quickly and received a nod from William as he left the room.

"Robert, how would you like to meet your namesake, Bobby?" Alan asked tenderly.

Robert nodded with excitement.

Bobby walked forward and looked at the young boy, dressed in bright colors and wearing a hopeful expression.

"It's good to meet you. I like your clothes." Bobby said in a friendly tone.

"Thank you. Father says my taste in clothing is like yours but..." Robert said and looked at Bobby wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

"I haven't been feeling like myself for a few days. If you want we can go up to my room and I'll show you my clothes. Maybe you'll get some ideas for your own wardrobe." Bobby suggested and glanced at Andrew.

Andrew nodded and said, "Two hours."

Trey stepped forward, knowing he would be next.

"Everyone, this is my son Trey." Andrew said briefly and moved to take a seat.

"You are not going to send me away like the others?" Trey asked in quiet confusion.

"No Trey, I thought you would enjoy being included with the adults." Andrew said with a smile.

"Thank you Father." Trey said with an answering smile and took a seat.

"And this is our oldest son, Icheb." Alan said to the group and put his hand on Icheb's shoulder.

Then Alan took a seat on the couch beside Andrew, the other side from Trey. Icheb moved to the couch and sat beside Alan.

"Wow, big family." Marie said without taking her gaze from Icheb.

"Yes. I can't even imagine my life without all of them." Andrew said happily.

"Who is making dinner tonight?" The Professor asked the group.

"Kurt and I were scheduled to but Kurt left..." Marie trailed off.

"Perhaps I could help you?" Icheb offered genuinely.

"Are you a good cook?" Marie asked with interest.

"No. I have never prepared food." Icheb said shyly.

"Perfect, I don't like someone who thinks they know it all in the kitchen with me." Marie said with a smile.

Icheb looked at his Dad with question and received a nod in response.

\* \* \* \* \*

Janine, Clarissa, Theresa and Rachel walked to a room and Clarissa said, "This is Artie's room. If he's feeling okay he might want to join us."

Clarissa knocked on the door quietly and heard a quiet 'come in'.

The group of girls walked into the room and Artie looked curiously at Janine.

"This is Janine, she is Portal and Gemini's daughter." Clarissa said eagerly.

"But they didn't have any kids last week, how'd that happen?" Artie asked in wonder.

"My fathers adopted me." Janine said simply.

"Do you want to play with us?" Clarissa asked Artie hopefully.

"Sure, what are we going to be doing?" Artie asked as he got up from his bed.

"Listen to music, maybe play a game." Clarissa said in a bored tone.

"Do you know how to play Kadis'ka?" Janine asked hopefully.

"No, I haven't heard of that." Rachel said, intrigued.

"If you want to learn, I will get my game and teach you." Janine said hopefully.

"Sure, that sounds like fun." Rachel said with a smile.

Janine walked toward the door when Theresa tapped Rachel on the shoulder and motioned to herself, then Janine.

"Theresa wants to go with you. We'll all meet in Clarissa's room since she has the best stereo." Rachel said before Janine could leave.

"That would be acceptable." Janine said and left with Theresa following behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy walked outside into the chilly autumn air with Warren and Kurt.

"I didn't think about the cold, we need to get your coat Jimmy." Warren said with concern.

"I do not have a coat. We have been living in an environmentally controlled ship for the past three months." Jimmy said with apology.

"Maybe one of the kids has one you can borrow, Kurt would you mind?" Warren asked quietly.

"I vill return in a moment." Kurt said and bamfed away.

Warren expected Jimmy to be surprised by Kurt's exit, but noticed that Jimmy didn't even flinch.

A minute or two later Jimmy quickly turned his head just before Kurt appeared beside them.

"You can see his teleport?" Warren asked curiously.

"Yes, this device on my face allows me to see interdimensional variations." Jimmy said and accepted a coat from Kurt.

"Ethan said you can keep this coat, he has outgrown it." Kurt said as he helped Jimmy put it on.

"Thank you... I am unsure what I should call you. My fathers told Robert that you are both their friends and I am to call their friends Aunt and Uncle, but we were not introduced that way." Jimmy said in confusion.

"I think in this case it's whatever you want to do. You may call us Kurt and Warren or Uncle Kurt and Uncle Warren, whatever feels right to you." Warren said warmly.

"I think I will call you Uncle Kurt and Uncle Warren. As I understand the custom, it is a term of respect." Jimmy said and looked around.

Warren and Kurt looked at each other with surprise at the blunt honesty of this boy before Warren asked, "Are you ready to fly?"

Jimmy nodded with a happy smile and moved into Warren's opened arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel and William walked into the MedLab to find Tara talking with Chris.

"Dad! Tara was just telling me that you got to go on a mission. Will you tell me all about it?" Chris asked with excitement.

"In a little while. Tara, Hank said that since I'm staying with Chris, you're free to join the meeting upstairs if you want." Angel said as he took his place at Chris' side.

Tara muttered a shy 'thank you' then left the room.

"William, I didn't think you'd be visiting again tonight." Chris said happily.

"My Father told me that your father knew the man I was named after. Your father suggested that you might also enjoy hearing about William the Bloody." William said and looked at Angel expectantly.

"Are you interested in hearing about Spike?" Angel asked Chris carefully.

"Yeah, he's the vampire you were telling me about right?" Chris asked William who nodded.

Angel sat back in his chair and thought for a moment before saying, "William was a kind and gentle man with a great heart. He was a poet, a really bad one. He took his name from a comment that someone had said when they were insulting his poetry, they called him 'William the Bloody Awful Poet'. When he was turned into a vampire, he shortened the name to 'William the Bloody'..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and Robert walked into Bobby's bedroom. Bobby went to the closet and pulled out a few things to show Robert.

"Uncle Bobby, I have a question to ask and I am unsure if I should. I only know that I do not feel comfortable asking my fathers." Robert asked shyly.

"First of all, I'm only a few years older than you so please call me Bobby. And you can ask me whatever you want, I'll do my best to answer." Bobby said and motioned for Robert to take a seat at the table by the door.

"It is a matter of sexual orientation... I do not understand my own." Robert said hesitantly.

Bobby sat stunned for a moment before saying. "I don't know how much help I can be with that. I have been in denial about my own orientation until this week. But if you want to tell me what you're feeling, I'll do what I can."

"Thank you... Bobby. William, my twin brother, has expressed interest in females. He finds them fascinating and wants to look at them all the time. I do not share his interest." Robert said with worry.

"What about men? Do you find yourself wanting to look at men the way he looks at women?" Bobby asked and tried to assume a more comfortable position in the chair.

"No. I have not noticed that desire." Robert said in thought.

"Then I think your problem doesn't have to do with your orientation as much as your maturity. You just aren't ready for that yet, and that's okay. William is growing up and discovering his desires. You'll probably be discovering your own before very long. You just have to let it take its natural course. These things come in their own time." Bobby said with assurance.

"But what if it doesn't?" Robert asked with concern etched on his face.

"We'll worry about that if it becomes a problem. Right now you are the person that you're supposed to be, it won't help you to stress out about what might or might not happen later. Just be yourself and you'll be fine. I wish I had learned that lesson a few years ago." Bobby finished with a weak smile.

"I feel confusion and... like something is hurting inside... but I don't understand what the feeling means." Robert said brokenly.

"That's called puberty. It happens to everyone. I don't know how it's going to effect you, but I can tell you what I went through... I would worry about things that seemed so important at the time, but now I look back and understand that I was worrying about trivial things that I couldn't control. I would feel that I was too skinny, too gangly and goofy even though I look back and know now that I was perfectly normal. I felt like people were looking at me all the time and watching everything that I did. It wasn't true, other people were living their own lives and didn't notice most of what I thought they were staring at. I felt alone... well that one was true enough, but you don't have to worry about that. You have a big wonderful family who love you and will do whatever they can to help you. And you can include me in on that too." Bobby finished with an encouraging smile.

"Thank you Bobby. But I do not know how to feel better, what will make the hurt stop." Robert said with tired pain in his eyes.

"Okay, come here." Bobby said and stood up.

Robert walked to face him.

Bobby pulled Robert close and said, "Tell me about your pain. Something is hurting you deep inside. You don't have to make sense, just say whatever words you can to tell me about what is wrong. I'll never tell anyone else whatever it is that you tell me, just let out your pain."

"I remember being Borg." Robert began.

Bobby had no idea what that meant but stroked Robert's back and said in a whisper, "Tell me about it, tell me what hurt you."

"I do not remember the time before I was Borg, but I remember what it felt like to be changed. They injected my neck and I began to lose myself. I remember them drilling holes into my head and putting devices inside me. I wanted to scream but I couldn't use my voice." Robert said as a tear fell down his face.

"Go on." Bobby said as he kept up the soothing hug.

"They hurt me... I could feel them putting things into my body and I couldn't stop them. I wanted to scream and cry but I couldn't move." Robert said as tears began to flow.

Bobby looked down and noticed the tears and said as gently as he could manage, "You couldn't cry then, but you can cry now. Go ahead, let it loose and I'll hold you and keep you safe."

"After they finished putting things in my body... they... they started... taking away my mind..." Robert said between sobs.

"Go on." Bobby whispered.

"I could feel myself... being broken into pieces... and they were killing him... the person I was... they broke him into little bits... I am what is left of him." Robert said and finally broke down into full sobbing.

Bobby held Robert close and said, "Go on. Let the pain out. You couldn't cry then, but you can cry now. You couldn't scream then, but you can scream now. Let all this old hurt out so you can heal. You don't need to keep it inside anymore."

Bobby and Robert held close to each other as Robert cried out his pain. Bobby felt tears falling down his own face as he began a gentle rocking and placed a kiss of comfort on Robert's head.

## ***[Chapter 9: Tastes and Nuances]***

Icheb and Marie walked into the kitchen.

"We're going to have lasagna tonight. Turn the oven on to four hundred degrees and I'll get the lasagna out of the freezer." Marie said and walked to the far side of the room.

Icheb looked at the stove and turned the knob until it pointed to 400. He turned back to Marie.

"Do you know how to make salad?" Marie asked as she pulled two family size lasagnas from their boxes.

"No, I have never prepared any type of food before... I do not eat." Icheb said shyly.

"How do you keep from starving?" Marie asked as she put the two foil pans in the oven.

"At night I am connected to a device called a regeneration alcove that recharges my systems. It provides the nutrients that my body needs." Icheb said hesitantly.

Marie noticed the expression on Icheb's face; the feeling of being abnormal, an outsider. She put a gloved hand on his arm and said quietly, "Don't worry about it. Everyone here is different, that's why we're here."

Icheb reached up and put his hand on her exposed arm.

"Don't!" Marie said and pulled back as if she had been burned.

"I'm sorry." Icheb said immediately with horror.

Marie looked at Icheb's expression of terror and forced herself to calm. "I just don't want you to be hurt. If anyone touches my skin, I absorb their energy. I didn't mean to scream at you." She said timidly.

"I wish to understand, could I touch your arm again, just enough to know what you're talking about?" Icheb asked with hope.

"Yeah, but if you pass out, I'm going to wait for you to wake up before making the salad, you're not getting out of helping me that easily." Marie said and waited for Icheb to touch her.

He hesitantly placed a hand on her bare arm and waited for a reaction.

And nothing happened.

"I do not feel any draining sensation." Icheb said quietly.

"You can touch me?" Marie asked in wonder.

"It would seem so." Icheb said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny looked around the room and saw that it was different. The floor was littered with packages and medical instruments. The light was dimmer and the door was standing open.

"Where are you mutie fag?" Ronny called out and noticed a strange echo quality in his voice.

Slowing he got off the bed and walked out of the room, looking in windows as he went. The silence was bothering him; there weren't any sounds around him. Even his footsteps didn't make a sound.

He looked into a window and saw a pile of dead bodies in the center of a room. They were so decomposed that he couldn't make out their features and identify them. He continued on in silence until he reached the elevator that he had come down on. He looked around and could not find a button to press to call the elevator.

"Shit." he muttered as he began looking for the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So tell us about your time away. From the new additions to your family, I have a feeling that it is a tale quite beyond the ordinary." The Professor said to Andrew and Alan.

"Let's see... Alan was hurt, I found a vortex that was hanging open in space, on the other side I could just barely make out a ship that had an advanced medical lab so I took a chance and jumped us through." Andrew said.

"The jump caused Andrew to have a massive stroke that destroyed over seventy percent of his brain and I was near death from the explosion. Our new hosts on the ship healed us." Alan said with a fond smile.

"After some fine tuning, we made friends and decided to go ahead and get married." Andrew said and hugged Alan close.

"It was near that time that my siblings and I were found on a ship that was about to fall into a collapsing star." Trey said to the group.

"We volunteered to watch the children the first day they were on the ship and found that we really liked them." Andrew said happily.

"And on the day of our wedding, we realized that we loved them and wanted to adopt them all." Alan said with joy.

"We asked the ship's first officer what we would have to do to adopt the children and the Captain took over and held a hearing." Andrew said and glanced at Trey.

"After interviewing everyone involved, she decided to let us be adopted and we officially became a family." Trey said with a smile.

"For the next two months, I studied to be a field medic while Alan worked as an administrative assistant to the first officer." Andrew said fondly.

"Icheb and Jimmy worked as Anchorman and reporter on the ships news program, William and Robert worked in the mess hall helping out and Janine attended classes." Alan said then looked to Trey to tell his part.

"I worked in engineering. It was my responsibility to oversee and maintain the bioneural gelpacks for the ship." Trey said with pride.

"Then Dawn found a way to bring us home." Andrew said happily.

"I will assume that you have just given me a greatly condensed version of your time away." The Professor said with a fond smile then asked Trey. "You worked with bioneural circuitry? Are you familiar with the filtration of nutrients and interface protocols?"

"Yes, they are essential to the job I was doing." Trey said, impressed that the Professor knew about such things.

"Perhaps you could look at Cerebro and help me with the bioneural gel. It was contaminated some months ago and I haven't been able to purify it adequately. It has been necessary to purge the system at least once a week since." The Professor said with worry.

"I would be glad to help." Trey said with delight at the prospect of being able to contribute to his new home.

"Father, could you port me to my room for a minute. I want to teach Rachel, Theresa, Clarissa and Artie to play Kadis'ka." Janine asked hopefully.

"Go through that wall over there." Andrew said and pointed to an empty space on the wall between two bookshelves.

Janine ran through the wall and returned less than a minute later.

Theresa turned and led the way out of the room.

"I hope they get along okay. Janine can be vicious when she plays Kadis'ka." Andrew said with worry.

"Only when she plays with someone at her own level. Remember when she helped me learn to play? She was very patient until I was able to play on her level..." Alan said but was interrupted.

"...then she swooped in for the kill." Andrew said with a frank expression.

"I hope they'll get along." Alan said with the beginnings of worry in his voice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy was laughing and clinging tightly to Warren as they glided through the air. Whenever they would come to rest on the roof or in a nearby tree, Kurt would teleport to join them.

"Can we rest for a minute? That was fun. What else do you do for fun?" Jimmy asked as he worked to make his breathing normal.

"What do you mean?" Warren asked in confusion.

"I mean, what do you do to have fun? Flying is great, but I wouldn't want to do it all the time." Jimmy said and looked at Warren with question.

"I like to read and watch old movies." Warren said as he pulled Jimmy close for a hug.

"What's that for Uncle Warren?" Jimmy asked as he enjoyed the warm hug on the cold night.

"That's because you treated me like a person instead of a pair of wings. So many people see the wings and believe that they are all that I'm about. You just naturally assumed that there was more to me, that I enjoy other things. That's why." Warren said as he continued the hug.

"Can you fly me to the boathouse? I have something to show you." Jimmy asked hopefully.

"Can Kurt come too?" Warren asked kindly.

"Of course." Jimmy said and snuggled close as Warren rose into the air.

Kurt smiled and teleported directly to the boathouse roof so he could watch Warren and Jimmy approach.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel became silent and allowed the boys to think about his story and formulate their questions.

"If Spike was a demon, how could he love Buffy?" William finally asked.

"Because even when he lost his soul, he never lost his capacity for love. The heart of the poet continued to live on in him. He loved Drucilla and Buffy... even me in his own way. But his demon led him to express his love in some interesting ways." Angel said with a pained smile.

"You miss him, don't you father?" Chris asked quietly.

"Yes. Even though my demon isn't in control anymore, I feel his absence. But what I feel for Spike isn't the same as what I feel for you Chris. You are my son, Spike was my childe. I don't know if I can explain it, but it's like Spike was the offspring of my demon and you are the offspring of my soul." Angel tried to explain.

"If I understood correctly, Angel is your name since you have control of your demon, Angelus. What was your human name?" William asked shyly.

"Liam. Liam O'Rourke. I don't expect you to understand, but I'm not him anymore, not since the demon was added." Angel said with a sad smile.

"Before I was called William my designation was Four of Seven. I took the name William to show that I am no longer what the Borg made, but what I made of myself." William said honestly.

"You do understand. What was your name before you were Four?" Angel asked while looking into William's eyes.

"I do not know. Icheb is the only one of us who has any memory from before the Borg. The rest of us were... deconstructed and remade into what the Borg wanted us to be." William said with a regretful tone.

"Can I have a new name?" Chris asked from the bed.

"Why do you want a new name?" Angel asked with worry.

"Because Chris died when my family was killed... And Michael couldn't cope at the GenX school. I want to be a new person like you dad, and like William. I want the old me to go away and for the new me to begin here at the Xavier Institute." Chris said honestly.

"Take some time to think about it. If it's what you really want, I'll do what I can to make it happen. Do you know what name you'd like?" Angel asked carefully.

"I'd like the last name O'Rourke so I would really be the son of your human self. I'd like the name Penn as my middle name so I could be named after a child of Angelus, and be like a part of his family. And I'd like for you to pick my first name, since you are my father." Chris said with certainty.

"When Connor was about to be born, I was thinking about what name I would like to give my son. There was a man I knew who sacrificed himself to save a large number of humans and demons. If you would like it, I'd like for you to have the name Doyle."

"Doyle Penn O'Rourke." He said with a happy smile as he said the name.

"Should I now call you Doyle?" William asked unsurely.

"Please. Chris died a long time ago, I've just been waiting for my name." Doyle said serenely.

"Then I'll talk to the Professor and see if he can help to change your name. I don't know how much trouble it will be, but we'll get it done." Angel promised.

"And I will tell my family that you have decided to change your name, they will all understand, all of us have had at least three different names so far. My dad has had more with his mutant names." William said frankly.

"I guess I need a mutant name too... how do I get one of those?" Doyle asked with confusion.

"Allow me to help you with that." William said and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and Robert finally released their hug and sat back in the chairs.

"Thank you. I do not know you... but I feel as though I have known you for a long time." Robert said with embarrassment and confusion.

"I know what you mean. I can't relate with all that you've been through, but I've known enough pain in my life that I can understand what you're feeling." Bobby said with assurance.

"Can you speak of your pain? I will promise as you did, never to tell another." Robert asked shyly.

Bobby thought about it and finally said, "Okay, but tell me if you want me to stop. It's bad."

"Okay, come here." Robert said as he stood and held open his arms.

"It was my father, he hurt me. I loved him and he hurt me." Bobby said as he held Robert close.

"Go on." Robert said and began stroking Bobby's back.

"He used to be sorry afterward and give me all kinds of attention and love... but later he just hurt me without caring. I wanted to love him so bad and I wanted him to love me. But he didn't." Bobby said as he broke down into tears.

"Then you need a new dad like mine. They love me and would never hurt me. I was hit with an electrical discharge, Father breathed for me and forced my heart to start working again. If you asked, I know that you could be part of my family too." Robert said in a comforting tone.

"Your Father already told me that I was part of his family. That I am his friend and that you were named after me. And it helps, just sometimes, the old hurts come back and I can't get them out of my mind." Bobby said as he pulled out of the hug.

"When that happens, come to me and tell me. We will do this for each other and make each other better." Robert said with certainty.

"You've got a deal. When either of us feels a black mood coming on, we'll get together and tell each other our feelings. That way neither of us ever have to be alone." Bobby said with a pained smile.

"We are part of a family who love us. We are never alone." Robert said absolutely.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can I kiss you?" Marie asked hopefully.

"What?" Icheb asked in shock.

"I haven't been able to kiss anyone without causing them pain in years, could I please kiss you?" Marie asked hopefully.

Icheb remembered all the times he had seen his fathers express their love and moved in to give Marie a full deep kiss. After a moment's hesitation, she gave into the feeling and allowed Icheb's exploring tongue into her mouth.

She felt alive and wonderful and... normal... for the first time in years. She moved her hands around Icheb's back and pulled him into a crushing hug. Years of unspent desire and passion went into her kiss.

"Do you need any help?" Peter asked as he walked into the kitchen.

Marie and Icheb pulled away from each other quickly and both blushed.

"Um, yeah Peter, I think we could use some help with the salad." Marie said in a flustered, absent tone.

Icheb stood silently and watched Marie go back to work on making dinner.

After a few minutes of standing in shock, Icheb was startled to hear Marie's voice next to his ear. "I'll talk to you later."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny was sitting on a bed, doing nothing. He couldn't open any doors, he couldn't touch anything. He realized that he was a ghost.

[Mutie fag killed me... I guess I didn't have him by the balls after all.]  
Ronny thought with disgust.

He settled back on the bed and began to think about the events of the day that had led him here.

His father had raped him... again.

He had called his brother for help... and Bobby came to help immediately.

He was hurt, and his brother had made sure that he was taken care of.

He was afraid and his brother took a shot to prove that he wouldn't be hurt.

His brother had promised to never touch him again without permission. And the rest of the day, he never broke that promise.

He had trusted his brother before and promised himself that he'd never make that mistake again, but everything Bobby had done made Ronny think that maybe he'd give Bobby one more chance... if he wasn't really dead.

Ronny heard a sound and turned to see a shifting shadow in the hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

William entered the common room and conversation stopped as everyone looked at him.

"Uncle Scott, could I have your help for a minute?" William asked hopefully.

"Sure William, what do you need?" Scott asked as he got up from his chair.

William led the way out of the room and once they were away from the common room he said, "Angel's son would like to have a mutant name. As I understand the process, as team leader, you are the one who bestows mutant names." William said as he approached the elevator.

"Yes, The Professor and I give out the names." Scott said as he thought.

"Will you give Doyle a name?" William asked hopefully.

"Doyle? I thought his name was Chris... or Michael." Scott said in confusion as the elevator went down.

"He has decided that he wants to start his new life with his new father in this new school by having a new name." William said as he stepped off the elevator.

"I don't know anything about his mutant ability. That usually has something to do with what name a person is given." Scott said honestly.

"Will you talk to him Uncle Scott? He is my friend and I want him to have what I do. My life has only improved since I received my name. It identified me to others as part of a family. If he gets his new name, he will be part of Angel's family and if he get's his mutant name, he will be part of the mutant family of the institute." William explained.

"You're very convincing William. I'll talk to Chris... Doyle and see what I can do." Scott said with a gentle smile as he walked into the room where Angel and Doyle were waiting.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert looked around the room, feeling uncomfortable with the silence. Suddenly he asked, "Can I see that green shirt? I like that color."

"Sure. Why don't you try it on? It's going to be big on you but you'll get the idea of how the color looks on you in case you think about buying one in your size." Bobby suggested.

Robert pulled off his shirt and pulled on the mint green button up shirt. Bobby saw something unusual and asked, "What is that?"

"That is my personal data node. It collects the information from my appliances, processes the information and stores the resulting data." Robert said as he finished buttoning the shirt.

"There is a full length mirror on the back of the closet door. Take a look and see what you think." Bobby said quietly as he remembered Robert's earlier words about having machines put into his body.

"I like the color, but not on me. I think this would look better on my brother Jimmy. It would draw attention to the color of his eyes." Robert said and began to remove the shirt.

Bobby fished in the closet for a moment before coming out with a pale yellow shirt and a black vest.

"Try these on and see what you think. They never looked right on me, but maybe they'll look good on you." Bobby said in a considering tone.

Robert turned around to set the vest on the bed and Bobby noticed a piece of hardware at the base of Robert's skull and another at the base of his spine.

"What other equipment do you have? If you don't mind talking about it." Bobby asked hesitantly.

"I do not mind. The Borg modifications are part of who I am. I could either accept them as part of me or hate them. Some of my modifications are useful, so I accept them. The one at the base of my skull is my occipital implant, it is an interface node for my regeneration alcove. It takes the information from my data node and incorporates it into my internal memory... my brain. It would be impractical for all the sensory inputs from the day to be constantly feeding into my brain, so they are processed by my alcove, purged from my data node and relevant data is retained." Robert said and looked in the mirror.

"I don't understand about relevant data." Bobby said curiously.

"The window sill is point seven two meters wide. Every time I look in the direction of the window, my ocular implant will automatically scan the window sill and every time it will find that it is point seven two meters wide. At the end of the day, my alcove will take those redundant readings and record the fact once that the sill of your window is point seven two meters wide, thus eliminating the need for massive storage of useless redundant facts." Jimmy said then got an expectant look on his face and held his arms out to display the outfit.

"Uh, I guess the only thing that looks good on is the hanger. Here, try the pastel blue." Bobby said and handed Robert another shirt.

"The implant at the base of my spine is a spinal clamp. It is the external part of a large device that surrounds my spine like a cage. It's purpose is to give me increased durability and the ability to perform tasks that would normally damage a vertebrate's spinal column... I can twist and lift simultaneously without adverse consequences." Robert said as he tried to fasten the cuff buttons of the shirt.

"Here, let me help you with that." Bobby said and buttoned the cuffs.

Bobby took a moment to look at Robert and finally said, "It looks good, but not with those pants. Do you know your pants size?"

"In which unit of measurement?" Robert asked immediately.

"I'll take that as a no... Can you tell by looking if these will fit you?" Bobby said and pulled a pair of white pants from the back of his closet.

"They exceed my length requirements, but they are the proper width." Robert said.

"That's fine, we can do alterations on length without a problem." Bobby said and handed the pants to Robert.

Robert slipped out of his pants and pulled on the white pants. Bobby noticed the metal on Robert's right leg that went down into his sock.

After fastening the pants, Robert noticed that Bobby was staring at his leg.

Robert held out one of his hands and showed Bobby the thin metal strips that encased most of his left hand. It was like he was wearing a paper thin metal glove with places cut out to expose skin.

After making a fist, Robert pointed his hand away from Bobby and to metal tubes sprang out two feet from his hand.

"These are my tubules, they can be used to interface with electronic systems or to inject nano-probes into biological organisms." Robert said before retracting the tubules back into the back of his hand.

"Injecting... like people?" Bobby asked carefully.

"Yes. That is how I was assimilated. A Borg captured me and it injected nano-probes into me. The miniature devices began to override my natural defenses and assume control of my body." Robert said and walked to the mirror again... with the pant legs flopping off the ends of his feet.

"What do you think? I like the look, but it seems a little too bright for the autumn. It seems to have a summer feel." Bobby said in a considering tone.

"May I look in your closet?" Robert asked hesitantly.

"Of course Robert, that's why you're here. Help yourself." Bobby said with an honest smile.

"May I try this on?" Robert asked and pulled out a pair of rust colored pants and a gold shirt.

Bobby squinted as he looked at the loud shirt and said, "You can try, but that shirt is really bright."

"I know, that is why I want to try it. Why go to the trouble of finding attractive clothing if you do not wish to draw attention?" Robert asked as he put the shirt on.

"Yes, but if the clothing is too bright, it annoys people." Bobby said as Robert tried on the rust colored pants.

"Would you hand me the black vest?" Robert asked as he fastened the pants.

Bobby got the black vest again and handed it to Robert. He pulled the vest on and asked, "Would you tighten the back?"

Bobby adjusted the small clip on the back of the vest until it took up the slack in the waist.

Robert walked back to the mirror and looked as he turned right, then left.

"It looks great. And I'm surprised that my pants fit you so well, we just need to take up the length a little." Bobby said in an impressed voice.

"Yes, when we purchase clothing, I will try to find this combination, I find it pleasing."

"Robert, those pants are too small for me and the shirt is too bright. The vest has never looked good on me, I'm more of a sweater vest kind of a guy. You keep them and we'll get the pants altered to fit you." Bobby said, as he looked Robert over again.

"Thank you Bobby, but I do not have anything to give in return." Robert said with concern.

"Robert, when your family give you something do you feel the need to repay them?" Bobby asked carefully.

"No, the family is a collective. We provide for each other to support us all." Robert said reasonably.

"I'm part of your family and this is my contribution." Bobby said honestly.

"Even if my fathers hadn't made you part of our family, you would be part of my family. Thank you Bobby." Robert said and hugged Bobby tightly.

Bobby held Robert close and thought about Ronny, alone in another world.

\* \* \* \* \*

Icheb watched as Marie and Peter worked on salad and garlic bread.

"Icheb, would you take this fruit and wash it? When it's all clean, put it in this bowl then take it out to the dining room." Marie said as she put the fruit and bowl on the countertop.

"Yes... of course." Icheb said and began to work. His mind was filled with the sensations that the kiss had stirred in him.

"I'm going to set out the plates and stuff in the dining room. Everything is cooking, so we're done for a while." Marie said happily and left the room.

"Peter? Could I ask you a question?" Icheb asked shyly.

"Of course, ask what you like." Peter said as he continued working on the salad.

"I do not know if it is appropriate to ask..." Icheb said with worry.

"Icheb, I came to this country three years ago. I understand that it is difficult to know what is proper. Please ask and I will not be offended." Peter said and turned his full attention to Icheb.

"I just kissed Marie and I felt... something. Do you know of anyone... male... that I could kiss to compare the feeling? I believe the comparison would allow me to be certain about my orientation." Icheb said shyly.

"I believe I know of someone who may be able to help. I am nearly finished here, help me clean up and we can go see him." Peter said as he put the last of the chopped vegetables into the large salad.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello?" Ronny called down the hallway.

"Who's there?" called back in a gruff voice.

"Where are you?" Ronny called in panic.

Logan walked down the hallway and was confronted by the transparent form of Ronny Drake.

"You a ghost?" Logan asked as he sniffed the air.

"Yeah, I guess so." Ronny said weakly.

"Figures, the whole world dies and I get haunted by the little mutant hating puke that got me shot in the head." Logan growled.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Ronny said vaguely.

"Whatever. How come you're haunting the mansion?" Wolverine asked with slight interest.

"I don't know. I guess when I told mutie fag that I wanted to see his freak kids get dissected he must have got pissed off and killed me." Ronny said with a shrug.

"Some people are just touchy that way." Logan said and walked past Ronny into the MedLab's treatment room.

"Can I hang out with you? I'm kind of alone down here." Ronny asked with a pleading tone.

"Yeah, sure. But you start talkin any mutant hating trash to me and I'll leave you alone." Logan warned as he found the bottle he was looking for.

"Yeah, I can do that." Ronny said quietly and followed Logan to the elevator which opened as he approached.

## **[Chapter 10: November Knights]**

"So Alan, you never did tell me what the aliens were like on Voyager." Alex asked with interest.

"Alex, alien is kind of an offensive term around the kids, non-human is better." Andrew said quietly.

"Uh, sure. No offense Trey." Alex said with true apology.

"It's okay Uncle Alex." Trey said with a smile.

"And to answer your question. B'Elana was a Klingon. They are a warrior race, amazingly strong and violent. Their society is built on codes of honor and dedication. They have a violent nature that they don't try to restrain. B'Elana was half Klingon and worked very hard to suppress her violent nature. She was a truly good person and was adopted into our family as an Aunt." Alan said with a fond smile.

"Tuvok and Vorik were Vulcans, their society was built on what is logical and they try to purge all emotions from their lives. They never really did fit in with the others on Voyager as far as I could tell, but you could depend on their help if you ever needed it." Andrew said and hugged close to Alan.

"Geron was Bajoran, and their race was based on spirituality and devotion to their gods, the prophets. I do not know of others of the race, but Geron was a kind and gentle man who I was proud to call Uncle." Trey said with a smile.

"I notice that you three take turns talking, and almost finish each others thoughts. Why is that?" Orroro asked curiously.

"Because we see each other as equals. Alan and I know what each other are going to say most of the time and allow each other equal time. When we know that Trey has something to add, we give him the opportunity to say his part. If all the children were here, it wouldn't be so noticeable because we would do most of the talking and they would just interject their points of view." Andrew said, enjoying being snuggled against Alan.

"What is it about the term alien that is offensive?" Tara asked the group.

"Trey?" Alan asked.

"The term alien refers to someone who is different from the norm. While it may be accurate since we are on Earth, it is like saying not-one-of-us rather than saying not-human." Trey said informatively.

"That makes sense." Tara said and took Dawn's hand to hold.

"How do you like Earth so far Trey?" Hank asked curiously.

"I have no memory of living on a planet before. It was disconcerting to feel the sense of... not moving. As well as the absence of the hum of engines. Now that I have become accustomed to those sensations, I am enjoying the freedom of being outside a ship. Grass, trees, open sky, unrestrained water, rain... I had never considered these things before. There is much to learn and experience here." Trey said with a gentle smile.

"How about the people." Hank asked with concern.

"We have mostly met the people that Father and Dad consider family until now. Everyone has been very pleasant and helpful... especially Uncle Alex." Trey said and smiled at Alex.

"Me? What did I do?" Alex asked in confusion as he thought over the past few days.

"You drove the van when Uncle Scott wanted to attend the dinner. You helped us with your mutant ability when we needed you. And you have been a friend to my fathers." Trey said simply.

"Trey's right, you're a good brother." Alan said with a proud smile.

Alex blushed and stayed silent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy, Warren and Kurt quietly crept into the back door of the boathouse.

"We do not want to interrupt Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy while they are enjoying their sexuality." Jimmy whispered and walked to the basement door.

A loud moan of ecstasy came from the upstairs and all three blushed as they hurried down the stairs.

"Here, this is what I wanted to get. Uncle Kurt, can you poof us outside so we don't have to hear Uncle Remy and Uncle Xander again?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"Ja, comin ze." Kurt said and opened his arms.

Warren went to one side as Jimmy went to the other and a moment later they were on the boat dock.

Jimmy looked toward the horizon and saw the reflection of the sunset on the water.

"Look... it is beautiful." Jimmy said in wonder.

Warren pulled Jimmy close to him, concerned that he might get cold and looked with appreciation at the sunset.

"Such beauty happens every day unt ve rarely take ze time to notice." Kurt said and stood close beside Warren and Jimmy.

Silence fell over the three as they stood and watched until the sun had completed it's descent over the horizon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott walked into the room and said, "William tells me that you would like to have a mutant name."

"Yes, please." Doyle said with hope.

"If you can tell me about your mutant ability, I may be able to help you. That usually has something to do with what name you get." Scott said quietly.

"Okay... when it happened... it was like a ball of power moved out from my heart and grew in all directions. I couldn't see it but I could... see it in my mind. Everything it touched began to crumble and break apart. It was like everything around me just got tired and old, then became weak." Doyle said from distant memory.

Angel took Doyle's hand and held it tightly, knowing that he was reliving the death of his parents.

"Tell him about what happens when your power contacts people." Angel said quietly.

"They fell apart. It's like the skin and muscles didn't want to hold onto the bones anymore. They just fell into a pile of parts." Doyle said and began to cry.

"It's okay son. I'm here with you and you're safe." Angel said and moved to hug Doyle closely.

After Doyle had quieted, Angel asked, "Is that everything you need?"

"Yeah, I'll think about it, give me some time. William, would you come with me?" Scott asked and turned to leave.

"Yes Uncle Scott." William said quietly and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Robert was trying on a bright blue, iridescent shirt there was a knock on the door.

"Just a second." Bobby said and ran to answer it.

"Peter. Come in... and... Icheb?" Bobby asked, straining his memory.

"Correct. May we speak with you for a moment?" Icheb asked timidly.

"Come in, Robert and I were just going through some clothes." Bobby said and walked back into the room.

"I have something to ask you, and I am unsure..." Icheb began to say with a blush.

"He wants to kiss you." Peter said simply.

"What?" Bobby said, stunned.

"He is not sure of his orientation. He kissed Marie and wants to compare the feeling of kissing you so he can be sure before he makes any decisions." Peter said without embarrassment.

"Um, I, uh, guess so. I mean, I've never really kissed a guy before but I wouldn't mind giving it a try." Bobby said hesitantly.

"I was led to believe that you are same gender oriented." Icheb said curiously.

"Yeah, but I haven't really done anything about it. I've had sex, but it didn't have anything to do with kissing. It was just sex." Bobby said with shame.

"I understand, I am sorry to hear that your previous experiences were unfulfilling." Icheb said honestly.

"Um, thanks. You wanna just do it so you can find out?" Bobby asked with a new blush.

"Yes, please." Icheb said and took a step toward Bobby.

"Okay." Bobby whispered and waited for Icheb to kiss him.

Icheb moved in and kissed Bobby full on the mouth. As Bobby felt the tongue glide across his lips, he opened hesitantly.

Icheb let his tongue roam as his hands began to explore Bobby's back.

Bobby hesitantly put his hands on Icheb's back and pulled him close.

Icheb felt a swell of desire rise up within him and ground his pelvis against Bobby in an almost animalistic thrust.

Bobby felt the erect cock through the layers of clothing as it rubbed against his own rising member.

Icheb let his hands drift lower and come to rest on Bobby's ass. He firmly grasped, and pulled Bobby closer, grinding Bobby against him as much as he was grinding against Bobby.

Finally Icheb pulled out of the kiss and said, "Thank you."

Bobby let his hands fall away from Icheb and stood stunned.

"Have you decided yet?" Robert asked curiously.

"I believe I will process the information while I regenerate before making any decision." Icheb said and walked for the door, before leaving he said, "Thank you again Bobby."

Logan led the ghost Ronny first to the kitchen, then into the common room that seemed to have a... lived in quality. There was debris strewn across the room and empty food containers surrounding the couch.

"I wasn't expecting company." Logan said as he took a seat on the couch.

"Are you the only one here?" Ronny asked as he looked around the room.

"Yeah, I been alone for four months. Everyone else is dead." Logan said and took two pills, then washed them down with a beer.

"Everyone in the mansion died? How did that happen?" Ronny asked as he thought about the people that he had met earlier in the day.

"Everyone in the world died. Some mutant hating trash decided that the world would be a better place without us and made a virus to kill us all. It backfired and killed everyone." Logan said before taking another drink of his beer.

"So you're alone in this world?" Ronny asked with a note of fear.

"Yeah, as far as I know. I ain't seen or heard anyone else since November." Logan said, looking curiously at the ghost standing before him.

"How can you live like that? I mean, I've always been around people, I can't imagine being completely alone." Ronny said in thought.

"You don't have to imagine it now kid. You are alone. Unless you meet up with another ghost, you and me are it. And I don't think we're going to be best buds or anything since you got me shot when you were alive." Logan said honestly.

"So you don't mind being alone?" Ronny asked in confusion.

"Well, I guess since you're dead I can tell you. I mind it. I've always been a loner, but when I wanted to be around people, they were there. Now, I dunno, it's like there's no point to being. I think it's like, when you help someone, you have a purpose. It makes their life better and yours. Without anyone else around to help or fight, I can't make a difference. There's no point." Logan said darkly and finished his beer.

Ronny sat silently for a long minute then said quietly, "I never helped anyone."

"You're a user kid. You use people to get what you want and damn anyone else's feelings." Logan said without malice.

"You don't know me." Ronny said in offense.

"No. But I've known enough people like you to recognize the breed. You're a parasite, you latch on to someone until they can't give you anymore then you move on." Logan said and walked from the room.

Ronny sat silently thinking about the words.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on the door.

"I'll get it." Dawn said and sprinted from the common room.

She opened the door to reveal a familiar face.

"Wesley?" She asked in wonder.

"Yes... Have we met?" Wesley asked curiously.

"Um, no, I guess not. Come in, it's cold outside." Dawn said and led Wesley into the common room with everyone else.

"Wesley!" Andrew exclaimed with a smile.

"How is it that I am known here?" Wesley asked uneasily as he was directed to a chair.

"Long story Wes, maybe later." Dawn said and walked to Orroro.

After a moment of whispering and a nod from Orroro, Dawn and Tara left the room.

"So what brings you here Mr. Wyndom-Price?" Professor Xavier asked with a smile.

"I, uh, Mr. Giles had requested some rather rare items and I was asked to verify the need for their use." Wesley stammered, thrown completely off balance by everyone knowing him.

"Yes, of course. We will be having dinner soon, would you like to join us?" The Professor offered kindly.

"Yes, thank you. That is very kind." Wesley said in confusion.

Ethan walked into the common room and timidly asked, "May I borrow the Star Wars movies? I was reading and wanted to look at them again."

"Go ahead Ethan, just bring them back when you're finished. Those movies are quite popular." The Professor said in his teacher's tone.

"Thank you Professor." Ethan said and made his way across the room. He noticed Wesley sitting by the VCR and said, "Hello Wesley, are you staying for dinner?"

"Yes, I am." Wesley said with renewed confusion.

Ethan got the videotapes he wanted and left the room quietly.

"I think we should wait for Dawn to explain, she's the most knowledgeable about the spell that was used." The Professor said to Wesley.

Wesley looked around the room and noticed Trey sitting by two men on the couch.

He was unaware that he was staring until Andrew said, "Go ahead and ask whatever questions you have Wesley. You're among friends here."

Wesley shook himself out of his daze and asked, "What is he? Is he a half demon?"

Alan and Andrew laughed as Trey got a sour look.

"I am not a demon. I am a non-human from another world." Trey said with a trace of offense in his voice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know." Wesley said timidly.

"That's fine Wes, Trey needs to get used to explaining who and what he is. Let me help." Andrew said and put on a serious expression. "Wesley, this is

my son Trey O'Seofon Summers, Trey, this is Wesley Wyndom-Price from the watcher's council."

"You know about the council? How much did Mr. Giles tell you?" Wesley asked with worry.

Dawn walked back into the room carrying a cup of tea.

"Here you go Wesley. Some oolong tea should make you feel better." Dawn said and handed the cup to Wesley.

"Yes, thank you." Wesley said in astonishment.

"And Giles didn't tell us anything. I come from a neighboring dimension and my sister is the queen slayer, so I already know all about that stuff." Dawn said as she took her seat followed immediately by Tara.

"Neighboring dimension? Queen slayer?" Wesley asked in confusion.

"Andrew? Can you give an amazing demonstration for Wesley?" Dawn asked without looking away from the watcher.

"Sure Dawnie... Slayer central?" Andrew asked casually.

Dawn nodded and continued to watch.

Andrew gestured toward the entertainment center and a misty vortex formed from floor to ceiling, then resolved the image of a large room.

"Caridad, is Buffy around?" Dawn asked through the vortex.

"No, they're all on their way here by bus. They should be in... Texas or Oklahoma right now. Do you need me to call her on the cell?" Caridad asked with worry.

"No, just a social call. Just let her know that I checked in and I'll see her soon. How are things going on the Cleveland Hellmouth?" Dawn asked and glanced at Wesley.

"Not bad, but we found something that freaked us out pretty bad last night." Caridad said with worry.

"What's that?" Dawn asked as she devoted her full attention to Caridad.

"A bringer."

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is my writing. You like to read, so I thought maybe you'd enjoy it." Jimmy said as he offered the padd.

"Thank you Jimmy. Let's go back to the mansion and we can read it together." Warren said and glanced at Kurt.

"I have difficulty reading English. The rules of pronunciation and grammar confuse me." Kurt said honestly.

"What is your native language?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"German." Kurt said as the three walked.

Jimmy pressed a few buttons on the padd and finally said, "That language is included in those I downloaded from Voyager's database. If you wish to read the story in German, I can translate it for you."

"Zat would be good. Zere is little available for me to read in my own language, and it is difficult for me to follow ze story when I must translate ze words as I go." Kurt said quietly.

"You don't have the same problem with hearing English do you?" Jimmy asked curiously as the mansion came into view.

"No. Much less so."

"Uncle Warren, would you read outloud to us?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"How much time before you have to be back?" Warren asked Jimmy.

"Eleven point four minutes." Jimmy said automatically.

"Then I think it will have to wait until later. By the time we get back to the mansion, you'll need to be back with your parents." Warren said in a gentle tone.

"Perhaps later. It is still many hours before I must regenerate and Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy don't sound like they're done yet." Jimmy said with a smile.

"How do you know so much about sex?" Warren asked with concern.

"My fathers don't realize that all of us have enhanced hearing. We can hear them when they enjoy sexuality. Icheb said that they would be embarrassed if they knew and would become uncomfortable sharing intimacy while we were in the house if we told them. So when they go in their room, we generally go to a part of the house far from them and act as if we don't hear them." Jimmy said with an impish grin.

"Then you must hear other things that you're not supposed to, when your fathers think they are speaking privately." Warren said with worry.

"Yes, but our Fathers have never said anything except to express their love for each other and for us. It reassures us to know that even when they believe we can't hear them, they continue to say good things about us." Jimmy said as they reached the mansion's back door.

\* \* \* \* \*

William and Scott walked down the hallway of the lower level of the mansion, and Scott turned opposite the way William expected him to.

"Where are we going Uncle Scott?" He asked curiously.

"To the hanger bay. I want to talk with you for a minute and we can be alone there." Scott said and led the way.

William followed silently and once they were inside Scott led him into a side room that was filled with lockers.

"Have a seat. I need to ask you something and I'm not sure..." Scott began as he took a seat on the bench opposite William.

"Please just ask Uncle Scott." William said quietly.

"I've just seen that you are someone who takes the most direct path to get things done. You are blunt and honest. I need to know how you feel about me living at the boathouse." Scott said with concern in his voice.

"I do not understand the question." William said honestly.

Scott got up from the bench and said, "I just don't know if I belong there. All you kids and your fathers are so close. I don't know how to be like that. Alex and I have never been in a family where people talked... or touched.

We each lived our own lives and pretty much avoided contact with everyone else. If we behaved ourselves, we were rewarded by being left alone rather than have to endure a lecture, or even worse, a family meal where we sat silently and tried to get through as quickly as possible so we could get away from each other." Scott said from memory.

"Is that the type of family you wish to be a part of now?" William asked hesitantly.

"No. Not at all. But I don't fit in with your family. I'm not like you. I don't know how to be like you." Scott said as he paced the room.

"Are you asking if our family would be better without you as a part of it?" William asked in confusion.

"Yeah, that's what I'm asking." Scott said and took his seat again to look William in the eyes.

"Uncle Scott. Our dad loves you and is proud of you. Since the day we arrived on Voyager, he has spoken of how much he cherished his brother. You and Dad are like role models for Robert and I since we are all twins. Our family would be harmed if you decided to leave. It would hurt our dad, our Uncle Alex who loves you a great deal, and it would hurt Robert and I. We do not want you as part of our family for what you do, we want you because we love you." William finished sincerely.

Scott thought about the words and sat silently for a long minute, digesting what was said and trying to formulate his next question.

"Why do you want to leave us?" William asked bluntly.

"I don't. Not really. I just feel... separate from the rest of you and I don't know how to change that." Scott said quietly.

William thought about the words then asked, "What do you like to do Uncle Scott?"

"How do you mean?" Scott asked with confusion.

"What activity do you engage in for pleasure?" William asked succinctly.

"I... usually don't have time for anything but work. I'm either planning my next class, seeing to maintenance of the jet or the mansion or dealing with

team issues... I haven't even watched a movie since the day your Father arrived in our world." Scott said in realization.

"Do you want to be a part of our family?" William asked with strength.

"Yeah, I really do." Scott said quietly.

"Then I will tell you how, do this list of things and you will be a part of our family... completely." William said with certainty.

"What things?" Scott asked anxiously.

"You must let Janine teach you to play Kadis'ka, read all of Jimmy's writings, take Robert to buy clothing, create one graphic design with me, ask for Trey to help you build something, give Icheb a task among your duties in the mansion that involves leadership and supervise him, and you must assist each of my fathers in preparing food for the family for at least a week. If you do all these things, you will be one of our family completely." William said certainly.

"How will those things make me a part of your family?" Scott asked in confusion.

"Because those are the activities we enjoy. We share in each other's interests and enjoy each others company. I believe that if you chose to share in our interests, you would feel like one of us, and when you develop your own interests, you could share them with us." William said instructively.

"Thanks William. I'm going to give it a try... when would you have some free time to work on a graphic design?" Scott asked with a smile as he stood and offered a hand to help William to stand.

"I have no plans for tomorrow, whenever is convenient for you." William said as he accepted the hand and stood before his Uncle Scott.

Scott stepped forward hesitantly, and with a look of question, he asked, "May I give you a hug William?"

William nodded and Scott pulled him close for a tender hug.

"For your future reference, you are welcomed to hug me when you like. You are my favorite Uncle of all those I have, real and honorary." William said from the hug.

"Why?" Scott asked as he pulled back to look William in the eyes.

"Dad told Robert and I how you accepted him immediately as a brother when you met. And how you worked to make sure that he never felt like, 'the other one'. You were a friend to Father when he most needed a friend. And they both speak of the time the three of you were in a bed, recovering from injuries, as one of the happiest times of their history together. Anyone who could bring so much joy to both my fathers is a special person who deserves to be honored." William said honestly.

"I did all that?" Scott asked in wonder.

William nodded.

"Let's go upstairs and visit with the family." Scott said as he put an arm around William's shoulder and guided him toward the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you Bobby?" Robert asked with concern.

"Um, good, wow, your brother... he's some kisser." Bobby spluttered.

"He uses the techniques that our fathers use. I believe he was emulating them." Robert said in a considering and clinical tone.

"Now I know why they always seem so happy." Bobby said as a silly smile fell over his face.

"Are you attracted to my brother?" Robert asked with genuine curiosity.

Bobby froze at the question and really thought about it.

Robert saw Bobby's frozen stare and concluded that Bobby was either processing a great deal of information... or stuck in a loop.

Eventually Bobby snapped out of his trance and looked at Robert's expectant face.

"Oh, uh... No. I'm not really attracted to your brother. I mean, I am physically. The kiss was great, and if I ever had any doubt about my orientation, that pretty much settled it. But I don't know your brother. I

don't know if he's someone I'd like to spend time with..." Bobby trailed off in confusion.

"I understand. His action toward you stimulated a sexual response, but you have no emotional connection to him. It is good that you recognize this, I believe that such situations sometimes lead to misunderstandings that have far-reaching consequences." Robert said in a considering tone.

"Thanks buddy. That cleared it right up for me." Bobby said with a smile and opened his arms.

Without hesitation Robert went into Bobby's arms and enjoyed yet another hug.

## **[Chapter 11: Unwilling Alliance]**

Ronny was thinking about Logan's words and looked up when Logan entered the room with a plate of food.

"I'm really sorry I got you shot. Will you tell me your name?" Ronny asked shyly.

"Logan." He said before taking a large bite of food.

"Thanks Logan, you can call me Ronny if you want... That stuff you said... about me being a parasite... you're right... but if that's what I am, how do I become something else?" Ronny asked plaintively.

"Dunno kid. You most likely can't change... being dead and all." Logan said in a slow considering voice.

"I was afraid of that. But if I wasn't dead, how would I be able to change?" Ronny asked in a low voice.

"Let me ask you somethin kid. Who do you respect? Who do you like? Who is your role model?" Logan asked, then when he saw Ronny deep in thought, he took another bite of his food.

"No one." Ronny finally answered timidly.

"Thought so. Some people can change themselves with willpower but... I think you need an example to follow. Someone you can trust and respect, maybe your dad." Logan said with a shrug.

"He raped me this morning and I killed him... I'm thinking no." Ronny said darkly.

"You're dead, you can let it go now. But you're right, bad role model." Logan said and sat his empty plate aside.

"The only person I can think of is my brother, Bobby." Ronny said weakly.

"Yeah, the gang were all tore up when he ran off with John to join up with another team. I think it took guts for him to make a change." Logan said in a considering tone.

"But I just saw him a few hours ago, right before... I died." Ronny finished weakly.

"Whatever, I don't know what happens when you die, maybe you were put on hold for a few months before you woke up here. But I saw Bobby and John with my own eyes about two months ago. They died holdin on to each other." Logan said without a trace of emotion.

"Bobby's dead? I didn't even think about that..." Ronny said as he realized that he couldn't cry.

Logan looked at the distraught expression on Ronny's face with curiosity.

"Being dead sucks! I can't even cry for my brother!" Ronny said in anger.

"Yeah, let me know if you find the upside to it." Wolverine said with a chuckle.

Ronny nodded, then thought to ask, "What about you? If you had a second chance, what would you do?"

Logan got a big genuine smile on his face and said, "Orroro."

"I don't understand, what's that?" Ronny asked with confusion.

"She's not a what, she's a who, and she's the most beautiful woman I've ever known... I never even made a single move on her. If I was to get a second chance, that's all I'd want, is to stop being such a chicken shit and let Rorro know how I feel." Logan said with a fond smile that turned sour at the sheer sentimentality of it all.

"Don't worry Logan, I'm dead, who am I going to tell?" Ronny said with a smile.

"If you wasn't dead before, I'd have to kill you fer seein that." Logan said with a growl.

"I think I just found the upside." Ronny said with a grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bringers are the harbingers of the first evil. This is most dire." Wesley said with concern.

"Caridad, we'll check in tomorrow at noon. Let us know then if you need any help." Andrew said and waited for her nod before closing the portal.

"Don't worry Wesley, that's a different dimension and the first evil was dealt a major setback." Dawn said in a comforting tone.

"Yeah, we were able to close the Sunnydale hellmouth forever." Andrew said proudly.

"Sunnydale?" Wesley asked in confusion.

"That was the most active hellmouth in our dimension at the time. But when one is closed another one seems to become active." Dawn said with a shrug.

"Yeah, but at least we're finally getting low on hellmouths. With the Sunnydale and Tunguska hellmouths permanently closed, and the Stonehenge hellmouth bound, that just leaves the Cleveland, Cuzco, Marfa, and Sydney hellmouths." Andrew said absently.

"You closed a hellmouth? You personally?" Wesley asked with wide eyes.

"Well, not me personally. but I was on the team that closed it." Andrew said shyly.

"Yes but, to be witness to such a monumental event... It is for that type of experience that I joined the watcher's council."

"Yeah... would you excuse me for a minute?" Andrew said and left the room quickly.

"Was it something I said?" Wesley asked with concern.

"We lost some close friends closing the hellmouth. I think your enthusiasm hit a sore spot. Don't worry Wesley, Andrew won't be angry with you, he just needs a minute." Dawn said in explanation.

"Mr. Wyndom-Price, it is already dark out, may I offer you a room for the night? You may have the guest room that Mr. Giles and Miss Ololafhey occupied when they visited." Charles offered kindly.

"Yes, I would be delighted to accept, and I must say that I am impressed by your hospitality. I never expected to encounter such delightful people..." Wesley trailed off when he realized what his next words would have been.

Professor Xavier gave a full honest laugh before saying, "Don't worry Mr. Wyndom-Price. I am well aware of what a reputation the Americas have around the world, and must admit that it is for the most part deserved. But, be that as it may, I choose to be hospitable to those who come in friendship... You do come in friendship, don't you?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do I do now?" Rachel asked in frustration.

"I may not answer, that would give you unfair advantage over Artie." Janine said pleasantly.

Theresa pointed to one of the red pieces before Rachel then to a position on the board.

Rachel was unsure, but put the piece in place.

Janine smiled a knowing smile and waited for Artie and Clarissa to see the mistake.

"Kadis'ka!" Clarissa screamed and put a blue piece into a position that won her the game.

Artie and Clarissa yelled with joy as Rachel and Theresa cleared the board.

"That was a very exciting game. I believe you are ready for the next level." Janine said with a smile and opened a pouch.

"What's that?" Artie asked with a big smile.

Janine poured the contents out on the floor and there were three more colors of playing pieces.

"All five of us are going to play? At once?" Artie asked in wonder.

"Yes, my fathers call this level of the game 'cut-throat'." Janine said happily as she took her favorite color, yellow.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy, Warren and Kurt walked into the mansion to find Andrew sitting in a chair in the hallway.

"Father? You seem to be feeling bad, may I help?" Jimmy asked with genuine concern.

"Yeah, come here." Andrew said with a pained smile.

Jimmy walked close and received a tight hug from his father.

"I love you Jimmy." Andrew said in a gruff whisper.

"Father, what is wrong?" Jimmy said with worry.

"It's nothing Squirt. You know how I sometimes get mood swings, I just had a dark one, that's all." Andrew said and forced a smile onto his face.

"Come with me." Jimmy said in a demanding tone.

"I really don't feel like..." Andrew began but was interrupted.

"Father, if you do not come with me to the kitchen immediately, I'll get Dad and Trey. If your blood sugar has decreased to the point to effect your mood, then it is time for you to eat." Jimmy said with determination.

"Hey, who's the father here?" Andrew asked as he stood.

"When you act like a child and refuse to care for yourself, I am." Jimmy said and pulled Andrew by the hand to the kitchen.

Warren and Kurt watched the entire scene without uttering a word, but both immediately followed Andrew and Jimmy, wanting to know what would happen next.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Jimmy was leading Andrew to the kitchen, he saw Icheb about to open the kitchen door.

"Icheb, Father's blood sugar has fallen to an unacceptable level." Jimmy said as he pulled his father into the kitchen and led him to a chair.

"Marie, where would I find peanut butter?" Icheb asked as he went to the nearest cupboard and started looking.

"I'll get it, what else do you need?" She asked with worry as she went to the pantry.

"A glass of milk." Icheb said as he pulled bread from a bag.

"I'll get the milk." Warren said and went to the refrigerator.

"I do not understand." Kurt said from just inside the doorway.

"Father is hypoglycemic. When he does not eat regularly or exerts himself right before mealtime, his blood sugar drops to an unacceptable level." Jimmy explained as he held his Father in a hug.

"Here is a peanut butter sandwich Father. Eat this and you'll feel better." Icheb said with assurance.

"Thanks." Andrew mumbled and took the sandwich with a shaky hand.

"Is it serious? I mean, is he going to be okay?" Warren asked as he handed Icheb the glass of milk.

"Yes, as I understand it, this is something he was born with and will always have. He will be fine in a few minutes." Icheb said and went back to Marie.

"Thank you Marie, I'm sorry I left earlier. I hope it did not inconvenience you." Icheb said honestly.

"No, there was nothing to do anyway, but I came back in here and you and Peter were gone. Where'd you go in such a hurry?" Marie asked as she glanced at Andrew, eating his sandwich.

"I went to kiss Bobby." Icheb said simply.

"What?" Marie asked in shock, then said, "I mean... what? Wait, wait. Let me explain something to you. At this moment I want to cause you great pain then hate you forever... but I'm going to give you one chance to explain, so you'd better make it good."

Icheb stared in fear for a second before saying, "When we kissed, I felt something. I was unsure of my sexual orientation, so I went to Bobby to find out if his kiss effected me the same way or if it was just you. It would be unfair to you if I led you to believe I was heterosexual then found that I wasn't."

"Been there, done that, got the tee shirt. Okay, you just got out of the physical pain because after what I went through with Bobby, I need for you

to be damn sure of your orientation. What did you find out?" Marie asked with her hands balled on her hips.

"I want to process the information during my regeneration to be sure..." Icheb began but was interrupted.

"Look at me. Do I look like I'm going to wait for you to sleep on it? I'm not asking you to tell me you love me or any junk like that, I just want to know if you're straight or gay. The rest can wait." Marie said seriously.

"I do not know. Both kisses were pleasurable. I am sorry that I cannot answer your question." Icheb said in a sullen tone.

After a long moment of consideration Marie finally said, "Okay. I guess I can understand that. I'm just still a little sensitive about the gay thing right now. Bobby was my boyfriend and he turned out to be gay, and then I kiss you and you immediately find a guy to kiss you. I guess I feel like I'm single-handedly turning all the guys I know gay." Marie said frankly.

"I promise that as soon as I know, I will tell you. I did not know of your past with Bobby or I would have found another. I only wanted to be sure so that I would not mislead you." Icheb said with worry.

"Okay. I won't hate you forever. Let's just leave things like they are for now. The next move is yours." Marie said more gently.

"I understand. It is good to know that you do not hate me." Icheb said honestly.

"Dinner's about ready, help me get all the stuff into the dining room." Marie said and began to work.

"Could I borrow Icheb for a minute before you do that?" Andrew asked from the table.

"Um, sure. I'll just carry in the salad while you talk." Marie said and blushed when she realized that they had just had their talk in front of Icheb's father.

"Yes Father, did you need something?" Icheb asked with concern.

"I just wanted to give you a little advice about your situation. I couldn't help but overhear." Andrew said quietly.

Icheb nodded and waited patiently.

"Your Dad and I aren't the right people to talk to about what you're going through. Neither of us have been attracted to women and it wouldn't be fair to you if we tried to advise you. I think you need to talk to your Uncle Scott, and your Uncles Xander and Remy. I think all of them have had relationships with women and will be able to give you good advice." Andrew said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you Father, I will do that. I am confused and could use some advice." Icheb said honestly.

"I know. This is one of those difficult questions that everyone has to answer eventually. Just be honest and everything should be fine." Andrew said and stood to pull Icheb into a hug.

Warren, Kurt and Jimmy had watched and listened through the entire scene without speaking, so as not to draw attention.

Finally Warren said, "Icheb, if you ever need to talk to someone who is straight to understand that point of view, I will be glad to speak with you."

"Thank you. I will remember your offer." Icheb said sincerely.

"Yes, thank you Warren, and thank you for taking Jimmy flying." Andrew said gently.

"Guys? Do you think you could help me now? We have a lot of hungry people in the dining room waiting for this food." Marie said from the doorway.

"Yeah, let's all help." Andrew said and moved to get a pan of lasagna.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I must prepare to leave. My fathers expect me in five minutes." Robert said regretfully.

"Okay. Why don't you put the gold and rust outfit on? I can roll up the cuffs and it'll be good enough to show it off tonight." Bobby suggested.

Robert nodded and began to change.

"Did my brother's kiss upset you? You seem to be quiet now." Robert asked with concern.

"No, I mean, maybe a little, it felt weird kissing someone who I didn't know. It felt wrong." Bobby said in thought.

"That is understandable. As I understand it, a kiss is a sign of affection. If you share a kiss with someone for whom you feel no affection, the sensation should be wrong." Robert said as he buttoned the vest.

"You sure have a clear way of looking at things. I enjoy hanging around with you, you make a lot of sense." Bobby said with a smile.

"I enjoy your company as well. Perhaps we should endeavor to schedule some of our free time so we may enjoy some activities together." Robert said casually.

Bobby thought about the statement for a minute, then said, "How would you like to run with Pete and I tomorrow?"

"Run? From what?" Robert asked in confusion.

"We run to improve our speed, agility and physical condition. If you want to, come to the mansion at seven thirty in the morning. I'll find you something to wear and we'll run the track. Give it a try and if you don't like it, you don't have to do it again." Bobby said as he rolled up Robert's pants legs.

"I will do that. Does this look adequate?" Robert asked as he turned to display the outfit.

"It looks great. I think everyone will like it." Bobby said honestly.

"Then we should go." Robert said and walked for the door.

"Before you go... thanks. You're a good friend Robert. Thanks for accepting me." Bobby said, a bit shyly.

"Then I should thank you as well. You have accepted me as I am and treated me as a friend. I am new here and you are the first friend I have made... besides Chris and he is \*our\* friend, but you are \*my\* friend." Robert said with a grin.

"Okay, let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny moved to a chair and sat down to watch an old movie with Logan. It was a black and white western and was really bad but Ronny didn't care. He could sit through the most boring movie ever if it meant not being alone.

Without warning, Logan asked, "Who was it that killed you anyway?"

"Andrew." Ronny said quietly.

"Wait. Andrew, the guy who can make doors to different places?" Logan asked as he sat up on the couch.

"Yeah, he made a door that went to my home this afternoon." Ronny said as he was confused by Logan's enthusiasm.

"Emma told me 'bout him. He ain't in this universe, he's in the universe where Scott and Remy went... I don't think he killed you kid, I think he put you here to get you out of the way. And if he can send you here, he could take me to your world." Logan said with a smile.

"But what if he left me here to die?" Ronny asked darkly.

"He's one of the white hats kid, he wouldn't do that... Well he might think about it if you told him you wanted to see his kids dissected, but he won't leave you here. The good guys got a code of honor and he'll come back for you." Logan said with assurance.

"Really?" Ronny asked with disbelief, then thought to ask, "If he's one of the good guys, does that make me a bad guy?"

"Yeah." Logan said with a gruff chuckle.

"You said you'd leave me alone if I started talking mutant hating trash... but I've got some questions. Would you mind if I ask you?" Ronny asked plaintively.

"Go ahead kid. I can't promise you'll like my answers, but go ahead and ask." Logan said and relaxed back on the couch.

"Are mutants trying to get rid of the rest of us? I mean, do they want to take over the world?" Ronny asked seriously.

"You gotta stop believing everything some Friend of Humanity hands you. We're people just like you. There's good and bad. Some want to get rid of non-mutants, the folks who lived in this place wanted to live beside 'em as friends." Logan said without emotion.

Ronny thought about that for a minute, then asked, "So the mutants aren't prowling the streets so they can catch helpless normal people off guard?"

"No, you're thinking of the boogie man. They're just people. You walk the streets alone at night and someone will probably grab you sooner or later. But chances are, it won't be a mutant. We're just trying to get by the best we can like everyone else." Logan said honestly.

"Then what about that thing when everyone got a headache at once? Wasn't that a mutant trying to kill us all?" Ronny asked suspiciously.

"Some bad guys tried to kill a lot of people and the good guys stopped 'em. It don't matter if they were mutants or not." Logan said and looked at Ronny to find comprehension.

"Okay, I guess. So how can I stop being one of the bad guys?" Ronny finally asked.

"I dunno if you can. But the best way is to find the people you hurt and tell 'em your sorry. That don't make it all better, but it might take some of the pressure off till you can prove that you're serious." Logan said simply.

"Yeah, I can do that... But how can I prove it?" Ronny asked with worry.

"I got an idea about that. Try this. Shut up and listen. Watch what's going on around you. Only make promises that you intend to keep, then keep 'em. Before long you'll see enough to know how you feel about everything and sooner or later you'll have a chance to do something to prove that your not a bad guy." Logan said with certainty.

"Yeah, okay. Shut up, listen, watch... I think I can do that." Ronny said as he nodded.

"And it'd be a good idea if you stopped calling people 'mutie' and 'fag'. Stuff like that don't make it easier on you." Logan said frankly.

"But I still don't like fags." Ronny said simply.

"You don't have to. But you don't have to be disrespectful to 'em either. You don't want to have sex with a guy... then don't. You don't want to be friends with someone who does, then leave 'em alone. But let everyone else get their jollies however they want. It ain't your business." Logan said and got up.

"Okay, that makes sense. I think I can keep a lid on it." Ronny said speculatively.

"It makes everyone's life easier if you do. Including yours." Logan said and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dinner's ready." Marie said from the door of the common room.

"Thank you Marie. We'll be right in." the Professor said.

"Come on Wesley, I'll show you the way." Dawn said and walked toward the door.

Wesley followed obediently.

As the group entered the dining room, all the children were milling around, filling their plates and finding places to sit.

"Wesley, would you like to sit at the head table with me?" Charles asked graciously.

"Yes, thank you." Wesley answered in an overwhelmed tone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, William and I could perform our duties as we did on Voyager if you would like." Robert offered in a whisper.

"If you want to, I know everyone would appreciate the gesture." Andrew said with admiration for his son.

"Bobby, I am going to refill drinks and bring additional portions for those who want it. I will join you again at the conclusion of the meal." Robert said carefully.

"That's nice of you Robert. I'll be waiting here when you're done." Bobby said with a smile.

William and Scott walked into the room. Robert immediately went to William and whispered to him. A moment later William was helping Robert prepare to start filling drinks and bussing tables.

"Scott, come sit with us." Andrew said and motioned to the family table.

"Um, thanks." Scott said and took a seat.

"Would you like for me to bring you a plate of food Uncle Scott?" William asked quietly.

"Yes, thank you William." Scott said with surprise.

"They used to help out in the mess hall back on Voyager. I think this will help them to feel... included in mealtime." Alan said when he saw Scott's expression.

"Oh yeah, they don't eat. Maybe they could stay in the common room and watch a movie while we're having dinner." Scott suggested.

"We thought about that, but it would only make them feel more different than they already do. If people can just accept that they don't eat, then the children can stay and join in conversations at mealtime with everyone else." Andrew said calmly.

"I guess I can see that. Where are the other kids?" Scott asked as he looked around.

"Jimmy is sitting with Warren, Kurt, Ethan and Orroro. Janine is sitting with Artie, Clarissa, Rachel and Theresa. Icheb is helping Marie with the food and Trey is right here." Alan said and finished by putting his arm around Trey.

"Here you go Uncle Scott. Robert will bring you a beverage in a moment." William said as he placed a plate of food before Scott.

"Thank you William, that was very kind." Scott said with a smile.

William got close to Scott's ear and whispered, "You're one of us."

Scott got a smile at the statement and watched with fondness as William walked away.

"It looks like you're finally connecting with the kids. I'm glad, you've seemed a little stand-offish lately." Alan said as he began to eat.

"I had a talk with William and he cleared up a few things for me. Just let me know if I'm getting stand-offish again, I don't always know when I'm doing it." Scott said shyly.

Alex walked into the dining room and took a seat beside Scott.

"You got a deal. Alex, aren't you going to eat?" Alan asked with worry.

"I'll get something in a minute. I want to wait for the line to go down." Alex said quietly.

"What's wrong Alex?" Scott asked with concern.

"Not now. Ask me later." Alex said quietly to Scott.

## **[Chapter 12: Illusory Behavior]**

"Would you like some more to drink?" Robert asked Wesley as he made his way around the Professor's table.

"Yes, thank you... are you one of the non-humans like Trey?" Wesley asked as he looked at Robert's ocular implant.

"Yes, Trey is my older brother. What were you drinking? I am not familiar with this beverage." Robert asked seriously.

"Oolong tea. That young woman brought it for me." Wesley said, pointing at Dawn.

"I will ask Aunt Dawn how to prepare another. Would you like a second portion of any of the food?" Robert asked as he took the empty cup.

"A small portion of salad, if you wouldn't mind." Wesley said timidly.

"I do not mind, that is why I offer. We have not met, my name is Robert Summers, what is yours?" Robert asked politely.

"Wesley Wyndom-Price, it is a pleasure to meet you Robert." Wesley said with an honest smile.

"For me as well, I will return shortly." Robert said and picked up Wesley's empty salad plate.

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Janine and the others were chattering when Artie asked, "Aren't you going to eat anything Janine?"

"I do not eat." Janine said simply.

"Ever?" Rachel asked with fascination.

"Ever. I am Borg and Borg do not eat." Janine said in a serious tone.

"Oh. Okay." Rachel said and went back to her meal.

"Don't you get hungry?" Artie asked with concern.

"No. My body doesn't work like yours. Mine recharges at night." Janine said simply.

"Oh, my cell phone does that too." Artie said and went back to his food.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Would anyone care for another portion of food?" William asked Warren and Kurt's table as he walked around filling tea and water glasses.

"No thank you. But I am curious to know why you are doing this." Orroro asked with confusion.

"This is the job that we had where we lived before. It provides us a sense of continuity to be able to do the same here." William said as he finished filling the last glass.

"Why did you have jobs?" Orroro asked, feeling a twinge of concern.

"Our fathers felt that we would benefit from contact with the most people possible. So they arranged for us to work in the mess hall to aid Mr. Neelix as well as provide us an opportunity to interact with people outside our family." William said as he stood by the table, waiting for more questions.

"If you did not wish to do this job, what would happen?" Orroro asked quietly.

"We would tell our fathers. Then we would not do it anymore." William said simply.

"Thank you... William?" Orroro asked, not sure of his name.

"Yes. And you're welcome." William said as Robert approached.

"Would you take a small salad to the gentleman beside Aunt Tara? I am going to prepare him some more tea." Robert asked quickly.

"Of course, which dressing?" William asked quietly.

"The white dressing that smells of fish." Robert said and turned to leave.

"Robert?" Orroro called.

"Yes, may I help you?" Robert asked as he stopped by Orroro's chair.

"Did you say you were going to prepare Wesley some more tea?" She asked carefully.

"Yes, would you like some too?" Robert asked kindly.

"I would. Thank you for offering." Orroro said with a smile.

"I will return shortly." Robert said and went to the kitchen.

As Robert and William walked off in opposite directions Orroro said to the table, "I was concerned that they were being asked to toil while others relaxed."

"This is their way of contributing to our community. It brings them pleasure to help, it allows them to talk with many people in a favorable atmosphere and gives them purpose." Jimmy said in reply.

"When you look at it that way, it seems a good thing. Do you also have a job?" Orroro asked Jimmy.

"Not as yet. But my fathers assure me that I will soon find a way to contribute. On Voyager I was a writer and reporter for the ship's news program. Icheb would read my articles to the rest of the crew." Jimmy said with pride.

"What did you report?" Warren asked with interest.

"Each week I would interview a different person and feature a story about them on the news program. I would tell about their home, their life and about their interests. It seemed to bring people closer together by letting them know each other in a non-threatening way." Jimmy said pleasantly.

"That sounds entertaining. So you write biographies?" Orroro asked.

"Yes, but I also write about my experiences and feelings. My fathers have allowed me many opportunities to do things that most people do not get to do... Uncle Warren, could I see the data pad for a moment?" Jimmy asked.

Warren handed the padd to Jimmy. After pressing a few buttons, Jimmy handed the padd to Orroro.

"The story is written in Kiswahili?" Orroro asked in puzzlement.

"Did I choose the wrong language? I was trying to accommodate you by translating to your native language." Jimmy said timidly.

"No child. This is perfect, I have not read in my own language for far too long." Orroro said and began to read.

"So you're a writer and reporter? Is that what you want to do when you grow up?" Warren asked.

"I am unsure. My fathers have exposed me to many professions in the course of my writing. It was their intention to give me as many varied experiences as possible so I might choose what I would like to do. At this point, writing continues to be my primary focus." Jimmy said happily.

"If I understand this correctly, your ship was disabled while traversing a passage that collapsed. You were alone in the medical area and had to close an incision on your fathers leg." Orroro said in amazement.

"Yes, but that was before he was my Dad." Jimmy said with a fond smile.

"You must have been terrified." Orroro said as she looked up from the writing.

"I was. But my Father came as quickly as he could and saved many lives... including Robert's." Jimmy said proudly.

Orroro continued to read and would occasionally look up at either Jimmy or Andrew.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bobby, did I do wrong by bringing lcheb to you today?" Peter asked timidly.

"No Pete, it was just a little awkward. But it's no problem." Bobby said honestly.

"Do you like lcheb?" Peter asked carefully.

"I don't know. I haven't spent any time talking with him. He's a good kisser, but that's all I really know about him... were you hoping that I would?" Bobby asked suspiciously.

Peter nodded without saying a word.

"Thanks for the thought Pete, but I need to get to know a person before I can get involved with him. It's just like if I brought a girl that I thought you'd like to kiss you... how would you feel?" Bobby asked.

After a long silence Peter said honestly, "I would be more angry than you seem to be."

"To tell the truth, I was never angry. I know that you wouldn't try to embarrass me or hurt me. I was confused, but Robert helped with that. He's good at getting to the heart of a problem." Bobby said simply.

"I am glad, he seems to be a nice child." Peter said in a considering tone.

"I never thought of him as a child the whole time we were talking. He's a good person and he's easy to talk with." Bobby said and relaxed back in his chair.

"Perhaps I should get to know him." Peter said thoughtfully.

"I hope you mean that, I invited him to run with us tomorrow morning." Bobby said with a smile.

"Good, we will talk then." Peter said and went back to eating.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here is your salad, I did not know how much dressing you would like so I brought it on the side." William said as he placed the salad and the dressing in front of Wesley.

"Thank you Robert." Wesley said with gratitude.

"I am William. Robert is my twin brother." William said without offense.

"William Summers?" Wesley asked.

"Yes, and you are?" William prompted.

"Wesley Wyndom-Price." Wesley said and extended a hand to shake.

Wesley was surprised at William's firm handshake.

"A pleasure to meet you. My brother will return with your tea momentarily. Would you like anything else?" William asked politely.

"No, thank you William." Wesley answered, impressed by William's manors.

"I will return in a moment to refresh your drinks." William said to the others at the table, then returned to the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Andrew, why are your children filling drinks and bussing tables?// the Professor thought to Andrew.

//Because they like to help. Robert asked if they could do this and I told him it would be okay. You don't mind do you?// Andrew thought in reply.

//Not at all, it just seemed unusual behavior. As long as they are doing this because they want to, they are welcomed to continue.// the Professor thought with a smile.

//Thank you Professor. It makes them feel good to be able to help. Being children in a new place, there is little that they know how to do.// Andrew sent and returned the smile.

The link fell silent as Alan asked, "Are you using telepathy?"

"Yes, and you aren't going to withhold cookies from me this time." Andrew answered with a teasing smile.

"Why don't we have cookies and milk tonight? We haven't done that since you've been back." Scott asked with enthusiasm.

"That sounds like a great idea. Will you join us Alex?" Andrew asked, noticing Alex's dark mood.

"Yeah, sure." Alex said as he tried to put on a happy face.

"Alex, will you come with me for a minute?" Andrew asked and stood.

"Uh, sure." Alex said with worry and stood to follow.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here is your tea Mr. Wyndom-Price. You may wish to wait a moment, it is very hot." Robert said with concern.

"Yes, thank you Robert. And you may call me Wesley if you wish." Wesley said with a smile.

"Very well. Can I get you anything else Wesley?" Robert asked.

"No, thank you." Wesley said and Robert looked over the table.

"Please allow me to clear your plates." Robert said and took an empty plate from Dawn's hand.

"Thank you Robert, I could have done that." Dawn said and sat back down.

"I am up, there is no need for you to interrupt your conversation." Robert said as he cleared empty plates from in front of the others.

The Professor looked to the other tables to find William also clearing dishes.

"Robert, I would like for you and William to come here for a moment." The Professor said in a polite tone.

"Yes Professor." Robert said and went to William.

A moment later the two boys were standing expectantly before the Professor.

"Everyone, may I have your attention for a moment." The Professor called to the room.

Everyone quieted and turned their attention to the Professor.

"Robert and William have volunteered to help us during mealtime, and I wanted to take a moment to recognize them for their efforts, please join me in a round of applause." The Professor said and began clapping.

There was a brief but hearty round of applause from everyone in the dining room.

"Thank you both for helping us. Your courtesy and hard work has made the meal much more enjoyable for everyone." The Professor said to William and Robert.

"It is only our way of contributing to our community. Thank you for the recognition." Robert said in a strong voice.

"You're very welcome. I won't keep you any longer." The Professor said with a smile.

Robert and William went back to work clearing dishes and filling drinks.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Alex, what's wrong?" Andrew asked when they were in the hallway.

"It's nothing. Really." Alex said distractedly.

"Come on Alex. I know something is bothering you. Is it something you don't feel comfortable talking with *me* about?" Andrew asked with concern.

"I guess you'll find out anyway. It's about the living arrangements... As much as I like living with all you guys, Scott needs his own space. He's been getting quieter and more distant the last few days and I think it's because I'm sharing his room." Alex said sadly.

"I've noticed it too. And I don't think you two sharing a room is part of his problem, but you're right, we do need to do something about that. Will you do something for me Alex?" Andrew asked while looking Alex in the eyes.

"What?" Alex asked with worry.

"Just hang on for a day or two more. Let me see what I can do to fix this before you do anything drastic like moving out. Will you do that?" Andrew asked in a pleading voice.

"Yeah, I can do that... Do you really want me to stay?" Alex asked shyly.

Andrew pulled Alex into a hug and said, "You're part of my family. Of course I want you to stay. The kids love you, Scott and Alan love you and I love you like the younger brother I always wanted. Please help me make this work. I know that if we can get the wrinkles worked out, it's going to be great for all of us."

"I hope so, I'm just worried that Scott is feeling cramped with me around." Alex said, enjoying the hug.

"I'll talk to Scott. We're close enough that he'll open up to me and let me know what's up." Andrew said as he released Alex from the hug.

"Thanks Andrew, you're a good brother-in-law." Alex said with a smile.

"I'll only ever think of you as a brother Alex. Now let's get back in there, something's happening." Andrew said at the sound of the clapping.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Andrew and Alex walked back into the dining room, Bobby jumped up from his table and quickly said, "Andrew, do you have a minute?"

"Um, sure." Andrew said and walked back into the hall.

Once they were both in the hall, Bobby said, "I'm worried about Ronny. Is there any way you can send me where he is so I can tell him what's going on?"

"I guess so... I guess it would be scary if you didn't know what was happening." Andrew said sheepishly.

"Good, I just need to know that he's okay." Bobby said quietly.

"I'm glad you're a part of my family Bobby. You make me proud." Andrew said and patted Bobby on the shoulder.

"Thanks Andrew, you have no idea how long it's been since anyone's been proud of me." Bobby said shyly.

"You'd better get used to it, because I plan to be proud of you a lot." Andrew said with a smile.

"Can we do it now?" Bobby asked with concern in his voice.

"Yeah, let me find him... he's in the common room. I'll phase you here and you can go in and talk to him. Come in the dining room when you're done and I'll port you back. Okay?" Andrew asked and waited for confirmation.

"Yeah, and thanks again." Bobby said quietly.

"Anytime Bobby." Andrew said and let his power loose.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father. Where is Bobby?" Robert asked as Andrew walked back into the dining room.

Andrew looked around the dining room and decided that this would be better said privately.

"Follow me." Andrew said and went back into the hallway.

"What is it Father?" Robert asked with concern.

"Why do you need to talk to Bobby?" Andrew asked quietly.

"I told him I would speak with him at the conclusion of my duties. Most people are finished and William said that he will continue alone. But when I went to the table, Peter said that he went to talk with you." Robert said with concern.

"I phased Bobby into a parallel dimension so he could speak with his brother." Andrew said hesitantly.

"Why would you not bring his brother here?" Robert asked simply.

"Bobby's brother is not welcomed here. He is a bad person and is being kept in the alternate dimension until we can decide what to do with him." Andrew said as he looked into Robert's eyes.

"A bad person? Why would Bobby choose a bad person to be his brother?" Robert asked with puzzlement.

Andrew chuckled and said, "Ronny is Bobby's brother like William is your brother. They were born into the same family, not chosen."

"Then Bobby is concerned for his brother, and that is why he wishes to visit him?" Robert asked slowly.

"Yes. That's right." Andrew said with relief.

"May I go as well?" Robert asked with strength.

"Why?"

"Because if Bobby's brother is a bad person, he may cause Bobby harm. Bobby is my friend and I wish to help him if I can." Robert said honestly.

"I don't think it's such a good idea. Ronny is mean and hateful. He made lcheb and Bobby cry earlier today. I don't want you to be around someone like that." Andrew said seriously.

"And I do not want Bobby to be around someone like that. Please Father, allow me to do this to help Bobby. If he does not wish my help, I will return immediately." Robert said with a pleading tone.

"Alright. But return to the dining room as soon as you're ready to come back... and tell Bobby to be back within half an hour, I don't want to be sitting in the dining room all night." Andrew said in a fatherly tone.

"Thank you Father." Robert said and pulled his father in for a hug.

"It's okay. But if he hurts your feelings, just come to the dining room and I'll phase you back here." Andrew said as he enjoyed the hug.

"I will Father. I am ready." Robert said as he stood back.

"They're in the common room. I love you son." Andrew said and phased Robert out of existence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby stood and waited for a long minute as he decided if he really wanted to face Ronny again. He had been so cruel earlier... but he was alone here and at least needed to know what was going on.

Bobby braced himself and began to walk toward the common room when he heard something behind him.

"Robert?"

"I came to help if you would allow me." Robert said shyly.

"Help?"

"My father said you were going to visit with your brother, and that your brother is a bad person. You are my friend, and I didn't want you to face him alone." Robert said with concern.

"Thanks Robert. I can really use a friend right now. Let's go.

### **[Chapter 13: Big Fish]**

"What's wrong love?" Alan asked as Andrew returned to the table.

"I just phased Bobby and Robert into your dimension so they could talk to Ronny." Andrew said with worry.

"You don't seem happy about it." Alan said with his own concern.

"I'm not. Ronny is an evil, nasty, hateful, mutant hating, homophobic, xenophobic piece of shit and I don't want Bobby or Robert anywhere near him." Andrew said as worry furrowed his brow.

"Um, but how do you really feel?" Alan asked with a teasing smile.

"He really pissed me off, love. That kid pushed all my buttons and I phased him into your dimension so I wouldn't hit him." Andrew said quietly.

"Andy, the kid's messed up. He was raped today and he killed his dad today... I think he has a right to be upset. He just took it out on you." Scott said quietly.

"I guess. Gods above and below, I never felt like punching a kid before... I hate feeling like this." Andrew said in frustration.

"Andrew?" Alex said in a quiet voice.

Andrew looked up with question.

"Are you feeling so bad because what you did was wrong?" Alex asked in a voice that was barely more than a whisper.

"No... I don't know what else I could have done. He can't stay here. And he's not going anywhere near the boathouse..." Andrew rambled.

"Andrew." Alex said, still barely louder than a whisper.

Andrew stopped his ramble and looked Alex in the eyes again.

"In your heart. Were you wrong?" Alex asked quietly.

Andrew sat quietly for a long minute, finally a tear fell down his cheek and he nodded.

Alan pulled Andrew close for a hug.

"Then you've got to make it right." Alex said with certainty.

"How?" Andrew asked.

"Not for me to say. I just know that when I feel like I've done something wrong, nothing feels good again till I've put it right." Alex said with concern.

Andrew fell silent again and thought. Finally he said, "You're right Alex. I was wrong... in my heart. I put him in a dead world to hurt him, because he hurt me and my kids."

"So what are you going to do to make it right?" Scott asked seriously.

"Can you guys help me with that? I mean, he's really awful, I need a place to put him where he won't call the cops or hurt someone else." Andrew said to the group.

"With all of us helping, we should be able to come up with something." Scott said with assurance.

"Uncle Scott, may I speak with you privately for a moment?" Icheb asked with apprehension.

"Uh, sure. I'll be right back guys." Scott said to the others at the table as Icheb led him into the kitchen.

"I am unsure of my sexual orientation and my father suggested that I speak with you." Icheb began nervously.

"Why me?" Scott asked with genuine puzzlement.

"Because you have been attracted to both males and females." Icheb said honestly.

"Oh. Well I can tell you how I feel. It doesn't mean you should feel the same way..." Scott began.

"Please." Icheb whispered.

"I'm attracted to a person, not a gender. I generally find females more attractive but sometimes I find a man who attracts me." Scott said in thought.

"Then I don't have to choose?" Icheb asked in wonder, never having considered that possibility.

"No Icheb, spend time with the people you like and if romance should develop, let it happen and enjoy." Scott said with a smile at the expression of relief that came over Icheb's face.

"Thank you Uncle Scott, my fathers could not advise me in this situation." Icheb said and pulled Scott into a hug.

"You're welcome Icheb. I'm glad I was here to help you." Scott said with a peaceful smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander and Remy walked into the dining room and were surprised by the silence that fell over the room.

"You guys have a big blue furry doctor and it doesn't phase you but honeymooners taking a break to eat freaks you out? You have a really messed up sense of weirdness." Xander said to the silent hall.

Laughter ran through the room as William walked up to the two men.

Please take a seat and I will bring you some dinner. The main course has already been returned to the kitchen.

"Thanks William." Xander said happily and went to sit with Andrew and Alan.

"Hey guys. Did we miss anything?" Xander asked as he pulled Remy close to his side.

"Let's see... A rape, a murder, a threat against the mansion..." Andrew said absently.

"Don't forget about the lightning and the fire to cover up the murder." Scott said in his own considering tone.

"And you exiled a homophobic brat to a dead dimension." Alan said offhandedly.

"Where do you guys come up with this stuff?" Xander asked with a laugh, then looked around the table.

"No, no, don't tell me all that went on while we were..." Xander began to say when Remy put a hand over his mouth.

"Dere be a child at de table, you best not finish dat sentence." Remy whispered, then kissed Xander on the ear.

Xander responded to the kiss by turning and pulling Remy close for a full, deep passionate kiss.

"Is that what we look like?" Andrew asked as he watched the two... basically making out.

"Pretty much. Don't worry, you'll get used to it." Scott said without concern.

"Yeah, we did." Alex said in the same tone of voice.

Dawn walked to the table and said, "If you two go past second base, I'm gonna throw a bucket of cold water on you. There are still kids in here."

Xander and Remy broke their kiss. "Okay, okay... but are we going to have to behave ourselves ALL the time?" Xander asked in a whining tone.

"No, when the kids are regenerating and we're in our own home, we can relax however we want. But the dining room of the school is not the place to be examining Remy's tonsils." Andrew said in his fatherly tone.

"Got it. I never knew you were such a prude Andrew." Xander said with mock hurt.

"Only when it comes to my kids." Andrew said with a smile and turned to peck Alan on the cheek.

"Perhaps I should leave so Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy can feel free to express their sexuality." Trey said with worry.

"Don't worry about it Trey. We're just playing. Sometimes we're overly dramatic and exaggerate our feelings to make a point. I know Xander and Remy wouldn't do anything inappropriate in front of the kids, but it's funny

to see them so expressive when they hardly touched before the wedding." Andrew explained carefully.

"I understand. By exaggerating the response, attention is drawn to their actions to emphasize the contrast between yesterday and today." Trey said carefully.

"Yeah." Andrew said with a smile as Alan hugged Trey close.

"Den maybe it be time for you to fill us in. Who been raped?" Remy asked seriously.

"His name is Ronny, I don't think you know him." Andrew said quietly.

"He be Bobby's brother. I not know de boy, but I heard de name. Who be dead?" Remy asked without emotion.

"Ronny and Bobby's dad." Alan said flatly.

"De poppa, rape de boy, de boy kill de poppa... de boy threaten de mansion?" Remy asked carefully.

"Yeah, he said he'd call the police and the reporters and tell them we're a terrorist camp if we don't let him stay here." Andrew said tiredly.

"So you put de boy... you have to tell Remy dat part." Remy said in defeat.

"I phased him into your dimension, just not enough so he can get the virus." Andrew said with a note of pain.

"I see why your such a good man to have on the team Remy. That wasn't very many clues and you figured almost all of it out." Scott said with an impressed voice.

"Remy figure tings out sometimes." Remy said with a shrug.

"I got me a smart husband." Xander said with pride as he snuggled close to Remy again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ronny?" Bobby asked carefully as he entered the common room.

"Bobby? Are you dead too?" Ronny asked, then noticed someone following Bobby.

"We're not dead. Andrew sent us here. We're just phased out of existence." Bobby said calmly.

"Okay. So why are you here?" Ronny asked defensively.

"I just wanted to let you know what's going on and find out if you need anything." Bobby said carefully.

"Who's your friend?" Ronny asked with caution.

"This is Robert, he's one of Andrew's kids." Bobby said with a smile.

"Did Andrew send him to check up on me?" Ronny asked with accusation.

"My father did not send me, I asked to come." Robert said simply.

"Why? What's there to see here?" Ronny asked, looking around.

"I have never met a bad person before. So I wanted to meet you." Robert said without emotion.

Ronny wanted to be offended but saw that there was no malice in Robert's statement.

Finally Ronny said, "Take a good look. This is me, the bad person."

"I do not understand. You seem a bit hostile, but not mean or hateful." Robert said with slight confusion.

"I'm not up to being mean and hateful at the moment, the best I can do right now is annoying... is that okay?" Ronny asked with a smile.

"Please do not feel that you must be annoying for my benefit. I was just curious, my primary purpose for being here is to see that Bobby isn't hurt by you." Robert stated honestly.

Ronny was taken aback by the frank statement and thought back to the things he had discussed with Logan. Finally he said, "That was nice of you. I've been hurting Bobby all day, I'll give it a rest for now."

Robert nodded and looked at Bobby expectantly.

"How are you?" Bobby asked carefully.

"A little bored, but I'm okay." Ronny said with a shrug.

"As soon as we can find a place for you, we'll bring you back. You won't have to stay here." Bobby said quickly.

"It's not so bad. It's given me time to think about stuff. I'm sorry I said all that stuff to you today... I didn't mean most of it." Ronny said with a sour look.

"Okay, what part *did* you mean?" Bobby asked.

"When that Andrew guy had his arm around you, that kinda bothered me. It was like you were gay or something and that was just creepy." Ronny said and sat down in a chair.

"Um, Ronny, I am gay." Bobby said timidly.

Ronny sat in shock for a minute and processed that information.

Finally Ronny seemed to come to an internal decision and said, "Okay. I don't like that, but it ain't for me to like. Will you do something for me?"

"What?" Bobby asked cautiously.

"Don't do gay stuff or talk about gay stuff around me. I think I'll be okay if I don't have to see it." Ronny said unevenly.

Bobby thought about it for a second before saying, "I can't do that. I can't pretend to be something I'm not, or edit out the parts of my life that offend you. But I'll promise to not throw it in your face every few minutes or start every other sentence with 'Since I'm gay...'. I'm still me like I was before, I'm just this too."

Robert thought about it and finally said, "We can try it out for a while. But you gotta understand if I need to be away from it."

"Yeah, that's not a problem. I just don't want to feel like I can't be myself around you. So what are you going to do when you get back?" Bobby asked carefully.

"I dunno. The cops are probably going to be looking for me, so I'd better find somewhere to lay low." Ronny said with worry.

"The guys kinda fixed that. They made it look like the house got hit by lightning and caught fire. It was the only way they could make it look like dad died accidentally." Bobby said as he watched for his brother's reaction.

"You guys did that for me? God, after all the shit I gave everyone, you covered my ass like that. I don't know what to say..." Ronny said in wonder.

"Whatever you say, say it to the team. Scott was the one who decided what to do and Orroro, Tara and Dawn were the ones to make it happen. Ronny, you started off bad, but it's not too late to turn it around... I did." Bobby said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"Everyone loves you, what did you have to turn around?" Ronny asked with a sour look.

"I used people. I hurt them to get what I wanted. I put on the Mr. Perfect mask and pretended to be nice, then used it to get people to give me whatever I wanted from them. After a while, I forgot I was acting. I'm sorry I hurt you Ronny, I can never make up for what I did, but I'll keep on trying." Bobby said regretfully.

"We're both pretty messed up. You became Mr. Perfect, the user, and I became a bad person and a parasite. Do you really think we can change?" Ronny asked with a whisper of hope.

"Yeah, I've been working on it. Everyone's been really cool. Just this week I've been adopted into a new family who really care for me. Robert's family." Bobby said with a happy smile.

"Damn. So you got adopted into the family that I insulted first thing when I got here." Ronny said with a laugh at the irony.

"If you're sorry, they'll forgive you. They're good people." Bobby said with assurance.

"But I'm not. Robert was right. I'm a bad person. I'm a bully and a liar. And I don't know any other way to be." Ronny said with pain.

"How do you want to be, kid?" Logan asked as he walked back into the room.

Bobby and Robert stared as Ronny said, "I don't even know how else I can be... this is all I've ever been."

"Logan?" Bobby asked with confusion.

"Yeah, how you doin, ice cube?" Logan asked as he took a drink from his beer.

"I thought everyone here was dead." Bobby said in wonder.

"Everyone else is... So I guess this means Ronny ain't dead. Bet you're glad to hear that." Logan said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I guess." Ronny mumbled.

"Ronny, you're coming back with me as soon as we know where we're going to put you. When you threatened the mansion, you made it a lot harder on yourself. But you won't be alone. I'll come and visit with you as often as I can until we figure out what we're going to do..." Bobby said with conviction, then turned to Logan and said, "I'll let the others know you're here. We'll find a way to get you to our dimension without bringing the virus."

"Good luck with that kid, I still got it. I'm taking pain-killers to keep me from goin nuts." Logan said seriously.

"The X-men won't leave you here alone. They'll find a way." Bobby said as a vow.

"And you won't be alone Logan. I'm here and I don't think I'll be leaving anytime soon." Ronny said quietly.

"We must leave. Father is in the dining room waiting to bring us back." Robert said quietly.

"No one introduced me to the new kid." Logan said gruffly.

"Logan, this is Robert Summers, Andrew and Alan's son." Bobby said proudly.

"Alan, as in the Scott from this dimension?" Logan asked to be sure.

"Yes, Dad has spoken of this place many times. It hurt him to know that he could never return." Robert said quietly.

"So One-Eye got a kid, good for him." Logan said with a note of happiness.

"Actually, there are six of us and he is expecting twins in six and a half months." Robert said with joy.

"Cyclops is pregnant?" Logan asked as he choked on his beer.

"He is now known as Gemini, and yes, he is two and a half months pregnant." Robert said with a big smile.

"So one-eye married that Andrew guy?" Logan asked as he relaxed back into the sofa.

"Yes, my father and my dad are very much in love. And he no longer has to wear the special glasses, so he is not 'one-eyed' anymore." Robert reported happily.

"Turn your back for a few months and everything changes..." Logan said in wonder, then said, "Ask your dad to stop by and visit, and that goes for Remy too... is he still around?"

"He is enjoying his honeymoon. I will ask him to visit when it is appropriate to do so." Robert said with assurance.

"Did he find 'im a hot blonde? He always liked slinky little blondes." Logan said from a place of fond memory.

"No, Xander is a brunette. And he is far from slinky or little." Robert said seriously.

"The Cajun married a guy? Okay, now you *got* to get him to visit. I need to know what happened to turn him around." Logan said and finished his beer.

"I will tell him. We must go now, it is past time for us to return." Robert said with an imploring tone directed at Bobby.

"Ronny, I'll be back. I'll visit every day until we figure it out, okay?" Bobby asked and waited for a response.

"Yeah, thanks bro. I'll be right here waitin for ya." Ronny said with a tired smile.

Bobby nodded and followed Robert back to the dining room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, Dad, May I go with Uncle Warren and Uncle Kurt?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Sure, where will you be if we need to get in touch with you?" Andrew asked Warren.

"Here's my card, you can call the cell number if you need anything." Warren said quietly.

"Okay, thanks Warren. Jimmy, we'll meet in the common room at nine o'clock." Andrew said with a smile.

"Thank you Father." Jimmy said with a smile and left with Kurt and Warren.

"Did you see the look?" Alan asked.

"Yeah, if they were a couple, I'd say they were about to decide to have a kid." Andrew said with a laugh.

"Let's see what happens." Alan said in a considering tone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hank, may I speak with you privately for a moment?" Orroro asked distractedly.

"Of course, what can I do for you Orroro?" Hank asked as he followed Orroro into the hallway.

"Hank, I have been waiting for months for you to make some type of advance toward me. You finally admitted that you found me attractive while you were in your self imposed exile, but have not made any attempt to speak with me since. I have to know if you are interested in me at all." Orroro asked in an almost angry tone.

"Yes, of course. I'm just not very good at making my feelings known." Hank said shyly.

"Could any of those feelings of yours lead to the possibility of the two of us spending some time together and getting to know each other?" Orroro asked a little more tenderly.

"Yes, many of them could." Hank said quietly.

"You are shy, I accept that. I am not. But I will not carry the relationship all by myself. When we go on our first date, you must participate... It won't be any fun without you." She finished with a smile.

"You have a deal. Would you like to go for a walk with me tonight?" Hank asked hopefully.

"Yes Hank. I would like that very much. After a walk in the chill of the evening we could come back here and have some hot cocoa." Orroro said in a dreamy tone.

"That sounds wonderful. Perhaps we could start a fire." Hank said as he joined her in her dream state.

"Yes. That would be perfect."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is it time for us to talk yet?" Scott asked Alex quietly.

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

"Come on." Scott said and led Alex out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew noticed something at the edge of his vision and let loose a tendril of power to see the unseen.

With a small flash of power he phased Robert and Bobby back into existence.

Wesley jumped in surprise as two boys appeared in the middle of the dining room. He looked around to notice that no one else seemed to be bothered by the happening.

"How was your visit?" Andrew asked with a note of fear.

"Ronny calmed down. He's much better now." Bobby said with quiet worry.

"So he didn't hurt either of you?" Andrew asked to be sure.

"No Father, he was remorseful. I believe he regrets his behavior earlier." Robert said quietly.

Andrew thought about that for a minute, then said, "When we've decided what we're going to do with him, I'll bring him back and see for myself. Whatever happens, I promise that I won't leave him there alone."

"He's not alone. Logan's there." Robert said simply.

"WHAT?" Andrew asked in a yelp that drew the attention of everyone still in the dining room.

"Logan is with Ronny. He says that everyone else is dead and he still has the virus. He asked for Dad and Remy to visit when they have time." Robert said, wilting under the attention.

"Andy, can you do it now? I need to find out what's going on."

"Sure, I'm coming too." Andrew said as he stood with Alan.

"Remy comin too." Remy said as he also stood.

"You're not leaving me behind." Xander said and stood by his man.

"Anyone else?" Andrew asked as he looked around the room.

"Yeah." Logan said with a growl.

"Professor, we've got to do this, we'll be back soon." Andrew said and waited for Professor Xavier's nod of approval.

A golden light erupted from Andrew's eyes and the five men were gone.

"I must say, you people lead very interesting lives here." Wesley said as everyone else went back to their conversations.

"Where are Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy?" William asked as he carried two plates out of the kitchen.

"They had to visit a neighboring dimension for a few minutes, keep their plates warm in the kitchen and you can bring them out when they return." The Professor said kindly.

William nodded and took the food back into the kitchen.

"Neighboring dimension?" Wesley asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, Dawn, perhaps now is the best time to tell Mr. Wyndom-Price why we needed the spell components." The Professor suggested.

Dawn nodded and thought for a second before saying, "Most of the people here are mutants. A group of scientists and government officials conspired to create a virus to kill any active mutant it encountered..."

\* \* \* \* \*

"So I need to know what you intend to do now." Marie asked as she walked down the hallway with Icheb.

"I plan to spend my free time getting to know you." Icheb said honestly.

"Why?" Marie asked curiously.

"I talked with my Uncle Scott and realized that I was focusing on the wrong aspect of getting to know you. I do not know if we will become friends or not, yet I was worrying about my sexual orientation. Uncle Scott made me realize that if we are meant to have that type of relationship, then we will." Icheb said with a smile.

"So you want to get to know me so you can find out if your straight?" Marie asked in confusion.

"No. I believe my orientation is currently undecided and will make itself known when it is appropriate. I want to get to know you to find out who you are. I wish to know of your life, what you do for enjoyment, and who your friends are." Icheb said with a peaceful smile.

"You were so nervous earlier, why are you so calm now?" Marie asked curiously.

"Before I was unsure. Now I know that what I am doing is right. Marie, please spend time with me so I may know you. When we know more about each other, we may become friends, or we may not. I am new here and it would be good to make a friend." Icheb said gently.

"Friends, as in we don't kiss or hug or anything?" Marie asked suspiciously.

"Correct... for now. Later we may develop feelings for each other and decide to take that step. But for now, please let me know you... or do you only wish for me to be your friend because I can touch you?" Icheb asked carefully.

"I don't know Icheb. After you told me you kissed Bobby, I thought about that. It's hard for me to know why I feel what I feel." Marie said seriously.

"I do not know if I can touch you because I am Borg or because I am Bruhnalli. If it is due to my Borg components, you could also touch my brothers and sister. That would give you a variety to choose from rather than automatically choosing me." Icheb said with a note of hurt.

Marie thought about that and finally said, "I'm not going to try. If I were to touch one of them it would be like admitting that I'm only interested in knowing you because you can touch me. And that's a shallow, selfish way to be. Let's try this thing your way... How do we start?"

Icheb smiled and said, "I believe that we begin to schedule our free time so that we may share activities when possible."

## **[Chapter 14: Shallow Inspiration]**

"...And the feeling was like having my electrolytes replenished after days of inadequate regeneration." Warren finished in wonder.

"I am told that it may also be likened to taking a drink of cool water after a long dry day at work." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Zat vas some adventure. Unt you vere ze one zat thought to make an egg around ze ship. Your Father must be proud." Kurt said in wonder.

"Yes, my father was quite proud of me, but not only for that. He was also proud of my interest in going, and my telling of the experience." Jimmy said happily.

"So your father encourages your writing?" Warren asked.

"Yes, but only as long as I enjoy it. He has said on more than one occasion that if I feel that the writing has become a burden, that I should put it aside for a time. He says that childhood should be for doing what I enjoy, and that obligations will come later and limit my choices." Jimmy said frankly.

"That they do. But I don't think you'll have to worry about that. I'm sure with your talent that you'll be a famous writer someday." Warren said with a smile.

"Perhaps, but Dad suggested that I might also be a bricklayer who indulges his love of writing by doing so in his off-duty hours. He posed the question to me of who's life is more fulfilled, the full-time writer or the bricklayer. I am still pondering that question." Jimmy said and looked to both adults.

"I think a convincing argument can be made for either one. The writer has the freedom to write all the time, but if it is his only job, then it might become a chore, whereas the bricklayer lacks the time to write all that he wants to but is doing what he enjoys in his spare time and indulging his passion." Warren said in speculation.

Jimmy smiled and hugged Warren.

"What is that for?" Warren asked as he enjoyed the hug.

"For seeing me as a person instead of a child. My fathers understand me and treat me as a person, but most others treat me as a child incapable of

having meaningful thoughts or relevant feelings." Jimmy said as he finished his hug.

Warren thought about the words and finally said, "I have to admit that when I first met you, I did think of you as a child. But now that I've spent some time talking with you, I understand that you are an intelligent, insightful person who deserves appropriate consideration."

"Ja, Warren unt I haf been judged by our appearance. It would be unfortunate if we could not look beyond ze surface to know ze person inside." Kurt said honestly.

Jimmy moved to hug Kurt and said, "Thank you Uncle Kurt. I was worried that no one would understand me here. Father has chosen his friends well."

Kurt enjoyed the hug and saw Warren's look of tenderness directed at them.

"Perhaps ve could read another story?" Kurt asked as Jimmy released the hug.

"Sure."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex and Scott walked in silence to the hanger bay.

"So what's up Alex?" Scott asked as he took a seat on the bench.

"I'm worried about you bro. You don't seem to be happy." Alex said as he watched Scott for a reaction.

"Yeah, I'm adjusting to things. I've been feeling like I'm not fitting in with the intergalactic branch of the family." Scott said quietly.

"I thought you liked the kids." Alex said, not understanding the statement.

"I do. They're great. I'm just having trouble seeing my part in their lives. You know how we were raised. I don't know how to form a relationship with them. It's different with Andrew and Alan, they're adults and I can relate to them, but I'm only used to relating to kids as their teacher." Scott said with difficulty.

"Oh, I didn't think of that. I can see your problem." Alex said in thought.

"How about you, this can't be easy for you either." Scott said honestly.

"I don't think it's the same for me. Icheb is only about two years younger than me. I can relate to the kids as peers more easily than you can. But, yeah, it's not easy." Alex said with worry.

"I talked with William today and he asked me a question that threw me for a loop." Scott said and looked up at Alex.

"What's that?" Alex asked as he looked curiously into Scott's glasses.

"When I told him a little of what our family was like, he asked me if that was the kind of family I wanted to have. Alex, what if we're doomed to raise our kids the way we were raised?" Scott said seriously.

"Not going to happen. If I believed that was going to happen, I'd never have kids." Alex said darkly.

Scott nodded his head.

"So what are we going to do?" Alex asked carefully.

"We?" Scott asked in surprise.

"Yeah, we're in this together. I'll help you, and you'll help me." Alex said with a smile.

"I've got a list of chores to do. William thinks I need to share in the interests of the children to become more included in their lives." Scott said tentatively.

"And what do you think?" Alex asked without emotion.

"I don't know. I'm willing to try. I just want to do right by the kids, I'm afraid I'll screw it all up and end up being the sour old uncle who the kids can't stand to see on the holidays." Scott said with dread.

"Yeah, I don't want to be the uncle all the kids don't take seriously because he's almost their own age." Alex said with his own darkness.

Scott stood suddenly and said, "Then let's not be."

"How are you going to stop it from happening?" Alex asked, still in his funk.

"Hard work, dedication, help from my brother..." Scott trailed off with a smile.

"It looks like you got a plan." Alex said with a look of question.

"Not exactly. But I'm going to try to think of this as a dry run for when I have kids of my own. I'm going to do everything I can to be the best uncle those kids could ever want. And when the time comes that I decide to settle down, I'll know if I want a family or not." Scott said with conviction.

"I'm with you bro. We'll face this challenge together." Alex said strongly.

"Good, I'm going to be counting on you to help me. You've got more of a sense of fun than I ever did. I'll need you to tell me when I'm being oblivious to what's going on around me and focusing on the practical matters." Scott said seriously.

"And you gotta tell me when I'm being more of a kid than the kids." Alex said with a smile.

"Deal."

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander, Remy, Logan, Alan and Andrew walked into the common room to find Ronny and Logan watching a black and white movie.

"You guys mind some company?" Xander asked with a smile.

"Scott? Remy? I didn't think you'd come so soon." Logan said with uncharacteristic happiness.

"We came as soon as we knew you were here." Alan said with a smile.

"So who are these guys?" Logan asked with a bit of a growl, trying to hide the fact that he had just had a joyful moment.

"This is my husband Andrew." Alan said proudly.

"An dis be my husband Xander." Remy said with equal pride.

"I'm not too surprised with Scott, I figured he was gonna marry Gene. But I figured that the Cajun would find a slinky little blonde to settle down with." Logan said with a quirked eyebrow.

"De slinky blondes be fun to play wit, but Remy found sumthin a whole lot better for keeps." Remy said and tried to put an arm around Xander, only to have it pass through.

"I should have warned you about that, we're in a state of flux. We don't have substance here." Andrew said sheepishly.

Logan moved from the back of the group and looked curiously at his counterpart on the couch.

"Xander? You're the not-mutant?" Ronny asked carefully.

"Yeah, no X gene in me." Xander said simply.

"Can I talk to you for a minute? I mean, alone?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

"Um, sure. I think Remy wants to visit with Logan anyway." Xander said and followed Ronny out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What an extraordinary tale. I don't mean to sound as if I don't believe you, but could I meet Angel and Chris? Their part in the story should be easiest to confirm." Wesley asked carefully, not wanting to offend.

"Sure, I'll take you down there now." Dawn said with a bounce.

"I'll go too." Tara said and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and Robert walked to a table and sat with Peter.

"Are you well Bobby?" Peter asked with worry.

"Yeah Pete. I'm just worried about Ronny. I know he's going to be okay, but I feel... responsible for him, like I need to watch out for him." Bobby said quietly.

"Try not to worry. I will help if I can." Robert said in a comforting tone.

"You are Robert?" Peter asked.

"Yes, and you are Pete?" Robert asked in return.

"Yes. And we will both help Bobby care for his brother." Peter said with strength.

"Thanks guys. With your help, I'm sure this will all work out fine." Bobby said with a smile.

"We will do our best." Robert said and placed a hand on Bobby's shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's that?" Logan asked, pointing to Alan's stomach.

Everyone looked down to see two small lights glowing from within Alan's transparent body.

"The babies." Andrew finally said with a smile.

"These are my sons, Chakotay and Thomas." Alan said to Logan with a smile.

"Okay Scott, you gotta tell me how you managed that trick." Logan asked and drank some beer.

"It's a long story, and I'll tell you, but first we have to figure out what we're going to do to get you out of here." Alan said as he passed an insubstantial hand over his stomach.

"I got the virus, it's still tearing me up inside. I'm taking pain killers to take the edge off, but it ain't gettin any better." Logan said seriously.

"We need to let Hank know what's going on. If anyone can help, it's him." Andrew said to the group.

"You wanna go find him now? We can wait here and talk to Logan." Alan asked quietly.

"Yeah, I'll be right back." Andrew said and faded from sight.

"Okay guys, you gotta tell me what all has happened the past four months to change you so much." Logan said and grabbed another beer from his six pack beside the couch.

"Four months? It's been three months for me." Alan said curiously.

"And it been a week for Remy." Remy said in a considering tone.

"Yeah, It's the beginning of March, the virus hit in November." Logan said from the couch.

"Logan, is there something else we can call one of you? It's going to get confusing with two Logans." Alan asked the pair.

"Since you changed from Scott to Alan, I guess I'll be the one to change... What about Matt?" Logan asked everyone.

"Why Matt?" Logan asked from the group.

"Why not? It's my name. Jonathan Matthew Logan." Logan asked from the couch.

"I don't know my name. Just Logan." Logan said from the group.

"Matt works for me. So Matt, you ready to hear the story of how I got pregnant?" Alan asked with a smile.

"Sure Scott, but you can leave out the juicy parts, I'm not feeling up to that now." Matt said with apology.

"Deal. Let's see... I went on a mission to destroy a data warehouse..."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Xander, I need to talk to someone who's not a mutant to understand some things. Do you mind?" Ronny asked with worry.

"Just ask me whatever you want to know." Xander said quietly, clearly seeing the distress in the young man.

"Logan says that mutants are just people like everyone else, some good, some bad, but I've always been told that mutants are evil. I don't know what to believe." Ronny said in a shaky voice.

"Believe in what you see with your own eyes. Believe in the results you see around you. People lie, they'll try to trick you or mislead you. Watch the people around you and their actions will prove what kind of people they are." Xander said quietly.

"I figured you'd tell me to trust people." Ronny said with surprise.

"Hells no. That's a sure way to get screwed over. Find people who are worthy of your trust, then trust them. As time goes on, you'll find more people that you can trust. Don't be misled by labels like good and evil. People are rarely one or the other and even if they are, people grow and change. My ex-girlfriend Anya was a demon for twelve hundred years, but ended up sacrificing herself to save Andrew's life. Spike was a vampire who enjoyed torturing his victims with railroad spikes, but he eventually fell in love, regained his soul and sacrificed himself to save a lot of lives." Xander said with a note of pain.

"Sounds like you have a complicated life." Ronny said in wonder.

"You have no idea. But what it all boils down to is, you find one person that you can trust and let that person be your anchor. From there you can find others and decide if you trust them or not." Xander said simply.

"Okay, I get that. I got another question though. You said your ex-girlfriend, but you're married to a guy. How'd that happen?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

"It's pretty simple. I loved Anya. I love Remy. The rest doesn't matter." Xander said with a shrug.

"But are you gay or straight?" Ronny asked with confusion.

"Those are just labels. If you have to call me something, you can call me bi, but it doesn't really matter. Whatever label you pin on me, I'm going to love who I love." Xander said and noticed Ronny was deep in thought.

"Okay. I guess that makes sense. This is tough. No wonder I'm a bad person. It feels like everything I thought was the truth turned out to be lies." Ronny said as he continued to think.

"Yeah, I know that feeling. I didn't always feel like this. I used to think 'good guys' and 'bad guys' like anyone else. But now I understand that people are people and those labels just make it easier for us to judge people without getting to know them. There's a guy, Angel, who I treated like crap for years because he hurt me once. I know now that he's a decent

guy, but I'm still not able to trust him because he hurt me one time." Xander said from distant memory.

"Yeah, I met him. How'd he hurt you? I mean, did you two date and he cheated, or did he beat you up?" Ronny asked with curiosity.

"See these scars on my neck, they're from him. We never dated. We've never really been friends." Xander said darkly.

"It's not too late. You're here, he's here. You feel bad about it. Maybe it's time." Ronny suggested.

"Yeah, maybe it is." Xander said with a smile.

"What's funny?" Ronny asked defensively.

"You just thought about my problem instead of your own. That's not good for your rep as a 'bad person'. Bad people are only supposed to care about themselves." Xander said with a chuckle.

"Then maybe I'll have to switch sides." Ronny said with a smile.

"I don't know everything, but I've lived a lot in a few years. If you need any help, just ask and I'll do what I can." Xander said honestly.

"Thanks Xander. I guess I've got some more thinking to do." Ronny said and looked off into the distance.

"I'm going to get back to the others now. Just ask if you need anything." Xander said kindly as he walked away.

Ronny nodded and continued in his deep thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wesley, Dawn and Tara walked into the MedLab to find Angel holding Chris in silence.

"How's he doing?" Tara asked with concern.

"He just got upset when Scott asked him some questions... Wesley?" Angel asked in confusion.

"Yes, you know me too?" Wesley asked cautiously.

"You could say that. The Wesley from my dimension is a rogue demon hunter who came to work for me." Angel said, then looked back at Chris's sleeping face.

"I was led to believe that my counterpart was a watcher." Wesley said and looked to Dawn.

"He was, until the council withheld the antidote for a poison that was killing me. I guess he realized that they were operating with their own agenda and didn't care who got hurt as long as their objectives were met. That was when Wesley left the council and Buffy decided that she didn't need a watcher anymore." Angel said quietly as he stroked Chris' hair with a feather-light touch.

"I don't understand why they would refuse to help you." Wesley said with concern.

"Because I'm a vampire." Angel said quietly.

"Ms. Summers mentioned that fact, and that you have a soul. Would you mind if I saw?" Wesley asked shyly.

Angel looked at Wesley's timid expression and allowed his game face to flash on for just an instant. Then he turned his concerned gaze back to Chris.

"Good Lord. Then everything else she said was true. This young man took a stake in the heart to protect you?" Wesley said in a tone that was obviously his own thinking outloud.

"Yeah. Chris knew from the moment he saw me that I was going to be his father." Angel said with a quiet smile.

"Really?" Dawn asked.

"When all the children were brought to the hotel, he walked up to me and asked if I was his father." Angel said with a chuckle.

"Talk about an icebreaker." Dawn said with a tender smile.

"Thank you for your time Angel, I'll leave you to your son." Wesley said and turned to leave.

"Do you need anything Angel? Blood or a break?" Tara asked with concern.

"No Tara. I'm fine. But thanks for taking care of me." Angel said warmly before turning back to Chris.

"I'm glad to help." Tara said and went to Dawn who was waiting at the door with Wesley.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Uncle Warren, are you going to have a family of your own someday?" Jimmy asked and looked Warren in the eyes.

"Yes, I suppose I will, someday." Warren said with a smile.

"When? I mean, I do not understand why you wait." Jimmy asked simply.

"I wait because I don't have a wife. I need to be married before I have children." Warren said in return.

"I understand that. But why do you not have a wife? You are of sufficient age, you are physically attractive, you are enjoyable company, I do not understand why you do not have a wife." Jimmy said curiously.

"Because I am attractive and wealthy, people seek me out. They make insincere overtures of friendship for their own purposes. Some want to be seen with a powerful man, some want to feel better about themselves by being seen with someone attractive, some are just weak and want to follow in the shadow of someone who is strong in hopes of getting my cast-offs. For that reason, I have trouble finding people that I can trust enough to form relationships that might lead to marriage." Warren said contemplatively.

"That is unfortunate, but I understand... And being in this place, where people attempt to see beyond the surface, you find acceptance because you know that we are dealing with you the person rather than you the image." Jimmy said speculatively.

"Yes Jimmy. That is why I choose to come here from time to time. I come to help when they need me, and it... nourishes my soul to be around people who aren't trying to get something from me all the time." Warren said with a peaceful smile.

"I hope that you will find someone who can be your wife soon. You would be an excellent father." Jimmy said, then turned to look at Kurt.

"I suppose you want to know why I am not married as well." Kurt asked with acceptance.

"Isn't it the same reason as Uncle Warren?" Jimmy asked curiously.

Kurt laughed and said, "I am not beautiful, powerful, or wealthy."

"I think you are quite attractive. Although I think you would look better in different clothing." Jimmy said honestly.

"You think I am attractive?" Kurt asked in disbelief.

"Yes. It is unfortunate more people do not look like you. Then you would understand how attractive your features and coloring are." Jimmy said honestly.

"No one has ever called me attractive before. I thank you for the compliment." Kurt said with a purple blush.

"Do you have a catalog here? I would like to look at some different clothing for you. I believe that we could find a combination that will compliment your coloring and features." Jimmy said in a considering tone.

"I haf one in mien room. One moment." Kurt said with excitement and disappeared in a bamf.

"You really made him happy. He feels ashamed of his appearance." Warren said tenderly to Jimmy.

"I said only the truth. I have Borg memories of many species, some attractive, some grotesque. I suppose that gives me a different perspective on who is attractive." Jimmy said absently.

"I suppose it does. I'm glad you're visiting with us. You've made what would have been a boring evening into an interesting and fun night." Warren said and patted Jimmy on the shoulder.

Jimmy thought about the words and said, "I think of you as a friend too Uncle Warren."

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew appeared in the common room and hurried to the dining room to find the professor.

"Where is Hank? We need for him to look at the Logan from Alan and Remy's universe." Andrew said in a rush.

"He is walking outside. I will call him for you." The Professor said with concern.

After a moment of silent concentration the Professor said, "He is on his way. Orroro is coming too."

"Good. Logan can use as many friends as he can get right now. You should see him, he's really drawn and sick. He said that four months have passed since the virus was let loose... and he's been sick and alone all that time. I hope there is something Hank can do to help." Andrew said with worry.

"Have faith Andrew. Hank is a talented physician and Logan is a strong man." The Professor said confidently.

"Yeah." Andrew said and waited impatiently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt appeared in a bamf with a catalog in his hands.

"Vat should we look for first?" Kurt asked with excitement.

"I think an orange shirt would look good on you. It would compliment your skin coloring and bring out the color of your eyes." Jimmy said in a considering tone.

"Zat would be a bright color for me." Kurt said slowly.

"Yeah, but we can tone it down with a vest... maybe something charcoal gray or black." Jimmy said as he leafed through the catalog.

"Vat about zis one?" Kurt asked as he pointed to an orange shirt.

"No, that print would be too busy, I think we need something solid. Uncle Warren, do you think Kurt would look better with silver or gold buttons on his vest?" Jimmy asked over his shoulder.

"Silver, definitely silver... and maybe some turquoise jewelry. Something small and tasteful." Warren said in a speculative voice.

"Here. Look at this and imagine this outfit with an orange shirt." Jimmy said with excitement as he pointed to a picture.

"Just a second." Warren said and went to his briefcase. He came back with several pens.

"Here are some highlighters of different colors. Here's an orange one for the shirt, and here's a blue one for the skin. Go ahead and color the picture so we can get a better idea of what Kurt will look like in the outfit." Warren said with excitement.

After a minute of coloring Jimmy said, "There, what does everyone think?"

"Ze colors look good. But I do not know of zis style." Kurt said hesitantly.

"It is Southwestern style clothing. I think they'll look great on you. What time is it?" Warren asked happily.

"It is seven fifteen." Jimmy said without looking at a clock.

"Plenty of time. Kurt, will you take Jimmy into the house and ask his Dad if I can take him to the store?" Warren asked quickly.

"Ja, comen ze." Kurt said, feeling swept up into Warren's enthusiasm.

Jimmy grabbed onto Kurt and they bamfed to the dining room.

Warren looked at the colored picture in the catalog and a tender smile fell over his face.

## *[Chapter 15: Mountains of Time]*

Wesley, Dawn and Tara walked into the dining room to find Andrew fidgeting and watching the door.

"Andrew, do you think you could send us to Slayer Central for a few minutes? I'd like to show Wesley some of the watcher's journals from the Sunnydale days." Dawn asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, but I don't know how soon I can bring you back. I'm dealing with a situation in Alan and Remy's dimension too." Andrew said absently.

"That's fine. We've got about five years of journals for Wesley to look through. We can wait as long as we need to." Dawn said with assurance.

"Okay, here you go." Andrew said and a vortex formed beside them.

"Thanks Andrew. Just let us know if there's anything we can do to help with your problem." Dawn said quietly before she walked through.

"Yeah, I will. Thanks Dawn." Andrew said genuinely, then closed the portal behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Andrew was closing the vortex, Kurt and Jimmy appeared in front of him.

"Father, may Uncle Warren take me to the store to buy clothing for Uncle Kurt?" Jimmy asked with excitement.

"Sure, that's fine. Kurt, if we're not here when you get back, would you bring Jimmy to the boathouse?" Andrew asked with a smile at Jimmy's excitement.

"Ja, of course. Ve vill try not to keep him out too late." Kurt said with his own smile.

"It's Friday, so I suppose it won't be a problem if he's out a little late. Have fun." Andrew said as he noticed Hank and Orroro hurry into the room.

"We will Father. Thank you." Jimmy said and held close to Kurt.

There was a bamf, and they were gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The Logan from Alan and Remy's dimension needs help. He has the virus but is fighting it." Andrew said quickly.

"I'll need to know some details. I'm ready when you are." Hank said and glanced toward Orroro.

Andrew let loose his power and they saw the room dissolve around them. Within a minute, they were standing in the same room, but it was dark and abandoned.

"Everyone's in the common room." Andrew said and led the group.

As they were about to go in Andrew noticed movement from the corner of his eye and turned in time to see Ronny walk into the main hall.

"Go on, I'll be back in a few minutes." He said and turned to find Ronny.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a long moment of silence Robert said, "Trey, can you fill us in on what's happening?"

Trey made his way from the otherwise empty table and joined Peter, Bobby and Robert at their table.

"Father and Dad are helping a man who is stranded in a neighboring dimension. He is ill and has been alone for four months. Aunt Dawn and Aunt Tara have taken Mr. Wyndom-Price to Father's dimension to review recent history. Icheb and Marie are becoming friends. Jimmy, Uncle Kurt and Uncle Warren are going shopping. Janine is playing Kadis'ka with four other children. Uncle Hank and Orroro are attempting to begin a relationship. Uncle Angel and Chris are in MedLab resting, Uncle Angel is concerned for Chris' emotional well-being. Uncle Scott is concerned that he does not know how to behave as a part of our family due to the inadequacies of his own family. Uncle Alex is concerned that his cohabitation of the room with Uncle Scott is causing Uncle Scott undue stress and making him unhappy." Trey said in an emotionless tone.

"What do you think we should focus on to help?" Robert asked in a considering voice.

"I believe all the situations are being dealt with, but I would like to focus on Uncle Scott and Uncle Alex. Their behavior suggests that they might wish to withdraw from the family because they feel out of place with us." Trey said with concern.

"That is unacceptable. That would hurt Dad and Father. We must find a way to let them know that they are part of our family." Robert said seriously.

"How do you know all this stuff?" Bobby asked in wonder.

"We have enhanced hearing. Trey is very good at sitting quietly and listening to what is happening around him." Robert said in a fond tone.

"Do you have any suggestions to help us with Uncle Scott and Uncle Alex?" Trey asked Bobby and Peter.

"Do you remember the party that Tara and Dawn had for Andrew and Alan?" Peter asked Bobby.

"Yes, it let them know that they belonged. That sounds like just what we need... but it's been done." Bobby said in thought.

"Is that the party when Father received the books and Dad received the turtle?" Robert asked carefully.

"Yes, that is correct." Peter said as he continued to think.

"The party was to let Father and Dad know that all the people of the mansion wanted them to stay and cared for them. Our gesture must include the members of our family... I believe I have an idea. Bobby, where can we gain access to a computer?" Trey asked in thought.

"I have one in my room, come on, I'll show you." Bobby said and stood.

"What did you come up with?" Robert asked curiously.

"A way to solve many problems at once." Trey said and followed Bobby quickly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ronny?" Andrew asked as he saw Ronny sitting in a chair in the big entry hall.

"Hi." Ronny said quietly.

"Mind if I talk to you for a minute?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Go ahead." Ronny said and turned his full attention to Andrew.

"My son tells me that you're feeling bad about what happened earlier today. If you want, we can try again?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

"Just like that?" Ronny asked in disbelief.

"Well, it's not quite that simple. The things you said hurt, it's going to be tough for me to trust you again. But I'm willing to try." Andrew said quietly.

"Okay. I'm still working stuff out, but I'll tell you what I've got so far. That way you know where I'm coming from." Ronny said seriously.

"Go ahead." Andrew said and listened carefully.

"Mutants ain't all bad. They're people, some are good, some are bad. Gays ain't all bad. They're people, some are good, some are bad. Good guys ain't all good. They're people, some are better than others. And bad guys like me ain't all bad, we're people, some are better than others... and we can change." Ronny said from deep thought.

Andrew thought about the words for a long minute before saying, "You've figured out a lot of stuff. And I have to admit that I agree with everything you just said."

"So I'm on the right track?" Ronny asked hopefully.

"It depends on what track you want to be on. What kind of person do you want to be Ronny?" Andrew asked carefully.

"I want to be the kind of person who'll do the right thing all the time. I want to be the kind of person who can always be depended on to tell the truth and give the right answer. I want to be the kind of person who other people want to be like... I want to be a good person." Ronny ended in a whisper of a voice.

"I think you're on the right track. But I have to tell you that the super-person that you're describing doesn't exist. Real live people make mistakes, give wrong answers and disappoint people no matter how hard they try to do the right thing." Andrew said honestly.

"When was the last time you did something like that?" Ronny asked timidly.

"This morning, when I put you here." Andrew said quietly.

"I backed you into a corner. You were just protecting yourself and your friends and family." Ronny said reasonably.

"Thanks Ronny, but I did it with the intention of causing you pain. I wanted to hurt you because you hurt me so I sent you to a world where I thought you'd be all alone. I'm sorry about that, I was wrong." Andrew said in shame.

"But you didn't hurt me. Logan helped me to understand a lot of stuff, then Bobby and Robert talked to me about other stuff. Just now, Xander told me some stuff too. You may have planned for me to be alone, but I talked to more people today than I have in the past week." Ronny said with a grin.

"I'm glad Ronny. So have you figured out what you want to do when we let you out?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Not really. I mean, I know I don't fit in here. This is a good place for Bobby, but I need to be around not-mutants... just not the hateful kind I hung out with before." Ronny said as an afterthought.

"Um, Ronny. I don't know how to say it except to just tell you. You're a mutant." Andrew said and waited for the reaction.

Ronny sat silently for a minute before saying, "So I'm like Bobby?"

"No. You're still you." Andrew said seriously.

"But, I don't feel like a mutant." Ronny said unsteadily.

"And how is a mutant supposed to feel?" Andrew asked without inflection.

"I figured it was like a crazy, power-hungry feeling... like drinking too much coffee." Ronny said seriously.

Andrew chuckled at that and said, "Nope. We're just people. And just because you're a mutant doesn't mean you have to stay here with us. You still have the same choices that you did before."

"Could you give me some time to think? I mean, I'm gonna be okay, I think, but I need to figure this out." Ronny said in a tone of confusion.

"Sure Ronny. I'm going into the common room with the others. Join us if you don't want to be alone." Andrew said gently.

Ronny nodded and continued to stare out into space.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doesn't that hurt?" Jimmy asked as Warren bound his wings.

"A little, but I'm used to it. This is how I can be around non-mutants. Kurt, are you going to be okay here in the car?" Warren asked with concern.

"Ja. Just don't stay inside too long, I vill become bored." Kurt said with a smile.

"We're just going to pick up this outfit and we'll be right back out." Warren promised.

"Zen hurry, I vant to try on ze new clothing." Kurt said with enthusiasm.

"We will proceed as quickly as possible." Jimmy said in a flat Borg tone, then broke into a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hank walked to Matt Logan and looked him over carefully.

"Um, we didn't have one of these in my dimension." Logan said as he looked incredulously at Hank.

"I'm sorry, Matt this is Doctor Hank McCoy, Dr. McCoy, this is Matthew Logan." Alan said politely.

"A pleasure to meet you Mr. Logan. Can you tell me about your symptoms?" Dr. McCoy asked in a professional tone.

"Just a minute... Rorro. It's good to see you. God, you're more beautiful than I remember." Matt said with a smile of appreciation.

"Thank you Logan." Rororo said with a blush.

"Your symptoms?" Hank asked with a harsh note.

"It feels like my guts are being torn apart and I puke up blood about once an hour. I sweated blood a few days ago and I been peeing blood on and off for about a month." Matt said gruffly.

"Are you taking anything for the pain?" Hank asked professionally.

"Yeah, these." Logan said and picked up a bottle of pills from beside the couch.

"Those are extremely powerful and quite addictive." Hank said with disapproval.

"Yeah, well when you can get my spleen to stop trying to crawl outta my mouth, I'll go into rehab. Till then, these work." Matt said gruffly.

"I see. Very well, I will see what I can do in my own universe to remedy your condition." Hank said and stepped away from the couch.

"You do that. Rorro, when I'm better, you want to go out to dinner with me?" Matt asked hopefully.

Orroro glanced at Hank who had a scowl on his face before saying, "I would like that very much Matthew."

"Great. There's a lot of stuff I thought I'd never get a chance to do, but that was the most important one. I always regretted never asking you out." Matt said honestly.

Orroro blushed at the comment as Andrew walked back into the room.

"What did I miss?" Andrew asked the group.

"Matt putting the moves on Storm." Alan said off-handedly.

"Oh, go on." Andrew said and stood by Alan to watch.

"I have seen all that I need to here." Hank said dryly as he looked to Andrew.

"Okay, I'm going with Hank, anyone else?" Andrew asked.

"I'll come with you hon, Remy and Xander can visit now and we'll come back and visit later... That okay with you Matt?" Alan asked.

"Sure, stop by anytime." Matt said with a smile.

"I will be going as well. It was a pleasure to meet you Matt." Orroro said sweetly.

"I'll come back and get you guys in about an hour. Have a good visit." Andrew said as they faded from sight.

"Okay Cajun, spill it. What is it about this guy that made you switch teams?" Matt asked Remy with interest.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trey looked at the computer curiously then looked at the back of the machine.

"What are you looking for?" Bobby asked as he saw Trey's examination.

"I wish to understand the operation of this device. Could you demonstrate for me so I may know how to retrieve the information I require?" Trey asked carefully.

"Sure, let me get on the Internet, that's going to be our best source of information." Bobby said and opened a browser window.

After Bobby went to a search engine he asked, "What type of information were you looking for?"

"Architecture." Trey said as he continued to watch Bobby's every movement.

Bobby typed in the word and got a page of sites.

"We'll need to narrow the search, there's too much here to read it all." Bobby said and looked to Trey.

"What is this port?" Trey asked and pointed to a door on the computer tower's face.

"That's the floppy drive... This is a floppy disk." Bobby said and pulled out a floppy to show Trey.

"It is not floppy." Robert commented.

"Yeah, I guess the old style disks were and they kept the name." Bobby said over his shoulder.

"And this port?" Trey asked curiously.

"That's a USB port for connecting different types of hardware." Bobby said in thought.

"That is what I require, may I interface with your computer?" Trey asked carefully.

"Um, sure." Bobby said and moved from the computer.

Trey made a fist and injected his tubules into the USB port of the computer. After a few seconds the computer began to flash wildly.

"I have gained access to the Internet. This will be the most efficient way for me to retrieve the information I require." Trey said as the screen continued to flash.

After a minute Trey said, "This connection is quite slow."

"Be glad we're not on dial-up. I think this is the fastest connection that we can get." Bobby said as he watched Trey sitting motionless.

"Do you have a device to make graphic representations of the information?" Trey asked as he looked away from the computer.

"I think you're talking about a printer... it's right here." Bobby said and pointed to his printer.

"That will be sufficient." Trey said and with a glance the printer started producing page after page of pictures.

"How long is this going to take?" Bobby asked after a moment.

"Given the speed of the printing device, I would estimate thirty-two minutes twelve point four seconds." Trey said as the screen continued to flash.

"That is an estimate?" Peter asked disbelievingly.

"Yes, the operating system of this device is unpredictable. It seems to interrupt processes without reason." Trey said with a note of irritation.

"Yeah, but you can play solitaire for days on it." Bobby said with a smile.

Trey looked at Bobby with question, then looked back at the computer.

"These look like blueprints." Peter said from the printer.

Trey looked at Peter and said, "Correct."

\* \* \* \* \*

Warren and Jimmy approached the car carrying several bags each.

"Vat did you get for me?" Kurt asked with excitement as Warren and Jimmy walked to the back of the car.

"You'll have to wait till we get home." Warren said and put the bags in the trunk.

"Zen why did you bring me along if you vill not let me see ze purchases?" Kurt asked in a grumpy tone.

"For the pleasure of your company." Warren said with a smile as he got into the car.

Jimmy got in the back seat and said, "Uncle Warren suggested that we all get new clothing, so there are things for all of us in the bags."

"Zat is good. Vas ze cost very high?" Kurt asked with some worry.

"Kurt, don't worry about the cost. The clothes are a gift." Warren said seriously, feeling uneasy about the question.

"You are my uncles, Father says that every contribution we make toward the family helps us all." Jimmy said from the back seat.

Kurt thought about those words and finally said, "Zat is a good way to think. My apologies Warren for speaking of such a thing."

"It's alright Kurt. I just hope you like the clothes." Warren said quietly.

"I know zat I vill... but we vill need to make alterations for my tail, zat may take some time." Kurt said with irritation.

"Please let me help with that Uncle Kurt. I bought something that I believe will help." Jimmy said excitedly.

"Vat did you buy?" Kurt asked curiously.

"A handheld sewing machine. I don't know how well it will work, but Jimmy seems to think it is just what we need to alter your clothes." Warren said as he looked in the mirror at Jimmy who was looking with excitement at the scenery pass them by.

"I cannot wait to see it work." Kurt said with excitement.

Warren looked at Kurt and noticed the expression of anticipation and joy on his face. Deep in his soul something released and he knew that Kurt would be a part of his life from this day forward.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew, Alan, Hank and Orroro appeared in the common room.

Alan took a step, then fell to the floor.

Andrew had a flash of panic and reflexively ported the group to the MedLab without a word.

After long minutes of observing Hank's examination, Andrew finally asked, "What's wrong with him Hank?"

"His blood pressure dropped suddenly. I believe that he should not make any more interdimensional trips until the babies are born." Hank said as he examined Alan.

"Hank, would you mind if I examined him myself? I'd like to check on the artificial womb... and I need Trey." Andrew said with concern.

//Trey is with Bobby, Robert and Peter. Would you like for me to summon him?// The Professor sent with concern.

//Yeah, thanks Professor.// Andrew thought and ported his MedKit from home.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Trey, your Father needs your assistance in MedLab.// Professor Xavier sent quickly.

//I am on my way.// Trey sent and withdrew his tubules from the computer.

"Robert, the Professor said that Father needs my assistance in the MedLab." Trey said and stood to leave.

"What can we do to help?" Bobby asked with immediate worry.

"I do not know the situation, therefore, I cannot say." Trey said and began walking.

"I am coming with you." Robert said and followed.

"Me too." Bobby said as he got up.

"Then I will come as well." Peter said and hurried to catch up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy, Warren and Kurt entered the mansion. They walked upstairs in time to see Trey, Robert, Jimmy and Peter run into the elevator.

"What is wrong?" Jimmy asked with immediate concern.

"We do not know. Father needs assistance in MedLab." Trey said as the door closed.

"Comen ze." Kurt said and a second later they were in MedLab, bags and all.

"I vill take ze purchases to ze room." Kurt said and gathered all the bags.

"Dad?" Jimmy said in a small, terrified voice as he saw his Dad laying unconscious on the examination table.

"Jimmy, take this MedKit and hand me what I need." Andrew said absently.

"Yes Father." Jimmy said and ran to his Father's side.

"How may we help Father?" Trey asked as he and Robert entered the room.

Trey, go through that wall and get your big ocular implant and scanner. I need for you to check his Borg components. Robert, monitor his vitals on the tricorder." Andrew said nervously.

"I assure you that his blood pressure is low." Hank said as he watched the display.

"I'm sure you're right Hank. But *why* is his blood pressure low? I'm not ready to accept that the trip to the alternate dimension is the cause until I know why." Andrew said and noticed an unusual reading.

"Hank, check the babies... something seems strange." Andrew said as he pushed some buttons on the tricorder.

Trey ran back into the MedLab wearing his large ocular implant and a foot long metallic device on his forearm.

After a moment of scanning Trey said, "His Borg components are functioning within normal parameters."

"Good." Andrew said with a note of relief, then realized what was wrong with the readings of the babies.

"They've grown. The babies are bigger than they should be." Andrew said with worry.

"How can that be?" Hank asked as he attempted to confirm Andrew's findings.

"Temporal flux destabilization." Trey said as he scanned the babies.

"What's that Trey?" Andrew asked immediately.

"It appears that the babies were effected by temporal flux when they were moved from one temporal/spatial plainum to another... I believe I can compensate for the effect, but to correct the imbalance, we will need to return to the temporal/spatial coordinates where the imbalance occurred." Trey said in concentration.

"Could you translate that for those of us not versed in temporal mechanics?" Andrew asked with fear in his voice.

"It's like his temporal/spatial field has become stuck and we need to take him back to where this happened to unstick him." Jimmy said to Andrew, then asked Trey, "Are you going to use a verteron disrupter or an anti-tachion pulse to reverse the flux distortion?"

"I have no method for generating anti-tachions here, my scanning device can emit a verteron beam that should be sufficient to negate the flux distortion." Trey said seriously.

"On this plainum, but in the temporal plainum that did this, the flux bombardment will nullify the beam... We need my emitter." Jimmy said seriously.

Trey stood silently for a moment then said to Andrew, "Jimmy is correct. We need a piece of his hardware to accomplish this task correctly."

"But his hardware was removed." Andrew said in confusion.

"His nanoprobes retain the pattern for the emitter. We need to activate the nanoprobes to reconstruct the device we require. There is no other way." Trey said with a note of apprehension.

"Is it going to hurt?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Yes. But Dad is worth it." Jimmy said with conviction.

"If there's no other way, then do what you need to do." Andrew said with pain.

"He's just got low blood pressure." Hank said from beside Alan.

"If that's the problem, then why won't he wake up?" Andrew asked tiredly.

"I haven't determined that yet." Hank said weakly.

"We have." Andrew said and looked at Trey.

"Just a moment, I must speak to Uncle Warren and Uncle Kurt." Jimmy said quickly.

"This will hurt me, but please don't worry. I'm choosing to do this to help my Dad. When my Dad is okay again, we'll try on the new clothes." Jimmy said hopefully.

"We'll wait for you." Warren said with a smile.

"Ja, ve vill remain until you are done." Kurt said with assurance.

"Thank you." Jimmy said and hugged them both.

"I'm ready." Jimmy said and walked to face Trey.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Icheb, you need to go to the MedLab.// The Professor sent firmly.

"Marie, the Professor just said I am needed in MedLab." Icheb said in panic.

"Come on, try not to worry until you know what's happening." Marie said and quickly led the way to the nearest elevator.

As they were passing the dining room, Icheb noticed William wiping down tables.

"Come to MedLab William." he said in a normal voice.

"Did you just call me William?" Marie asked as they waited for the elevator.

"No, he was talking to me." William said as he ran to join the pair.

"The Professor called me, so it must be one of the family." Icheb said with concern.

## **[Chapter 16: In the Line of Duty]**

Jimmy climbed onto a bed with Trey's help and opened his shirt.

Trey injected his tubules into Jimmy's personal data node and there was silence in the room until Marie and Icheb ran in.

"What has happened?" Icheb asked with worry.

"Scan Dad." Robert said simply.

Icheb looked at his Dad for a minute then said, "Temporal flux destabilization."

"Can you kids tell me why this happened?" Andrew asked as he watched Jimmy carefully.

Trey withdrew his tubules and said, "One of our brothers is capable of projecting a tachion field that can destabilize space/time when he is in a state of interdimensional flux. We must project anti-tachions to destabilize the tachion field and then the temporal bonds should be reestablished."

"One of the babies did this?" Andrew asked in disbelief.

"They are the children of one Alpha level mutant and one Omega level mutant. It is a very real possibility that they would have their mutant abilities active at birth... or before." Hank said in contemplation.

Jimmy screamed as a spike forced it's way out of the palm of his right hand and continued to grow until it stood an inch tall. He stopped screaming suddenly and looked at the spike to see it open like a flower blooming. The petals spread until they lay open on the skin in a circular pattern.

"The generation of the emitter should be complete within minutes. We should take Dad to the place where he became destabilized." Trey said seriously.

Jimmy forced himself to a sitting position. Andrew helped him off the bed and down to the floor.

Hank lifted Alan easily into his arms and Andrew made a portal back to the common room.

Andrew looked around the room and pointed to the place that was closest to where Alan had been standing.

Hank carried Alan to the spot and waited.

"Please put him down, he will pass through your arms when phased." Trey said quietly.

Hank laid Alan at his feet and awaited further instructions.

"We all going?" Andrew asked and waited.

"Do it." Robert said as he and William helped Jimmy to stand.

The room became faded and fuzzy and resolved into the abandoned common room of Alan's dimension.

Both Logans, Remy and Xander watched as Alan lay unconscious.

"Jimmy, emit the anti-tachion burst." Trey said flatly with Borg efficiency.

Jimmy aimed his shaking hand toward his dad with the palm of his hand pointing at Alan's stomach. William and Robert stood on either side of him and watched carefully.

Nothing visible happened but Alan began to twitch and thrash.

Trey watched for a long moment before saying, "Discontinue emissions."

Jimmy closed his eyes and lowered his hand.

Alan finally opened his eyes and asked, "What happened?"

"You passed out." Andrew said with relief.

"Begin a low level anti-tachion emission while we phase back to our dimension." Trey said to Jimmy.

Jimmy raised his hand again.

"What happened to Jimmy?" Alan asked with worry.

"Father, you may take us home now." Trey said flatly.

Andrew looked at the men watching them and quickly said, "I'll be back in a little while and I'll explain everything."

The room changed around them and became their old common room again.

Andrew pulled Alan close and began to cry.

Robert and William took Jimmy to a nearby sofa to sit.

Andrew jumped up from Alan a moment later and went to Jimmy. "Are you okay?"

"I will be. But I must regenerate." Jimmy said tiredly.

"I'll port you directly to your alcove." Andrew said immediately.

"I'm sorry Uncle Warren and Uncle Kurt. I wanted to try on clothes with you tonight." Jimmy said sadly.

"Ve vill wait for you to be better. Ve can do it later." Kurt said with assurance.

"Jimmy will be well again tomorrow. Regeneration will recharge and repair his systems and remove any pain." Icheb said with assurance.

"Then we'll do it tomorrow. Don't worry Jimmy, we'll wait for you." Warren said with tenderness.

"Thank you Uncle Kurt and Uncle Warren." Jimmy said with a tired smile before Robert and William guided him through the portal.

"We need to get you to the MedLab and find out what has happened to your children." Hank said as he looked at Alan's distended belly.

"Holy God! What happened? Oh God, the babies!" Alan said as he looked at his belly in fear.

"Hold on love, we're going to find out." Andrew said and opened a portal.

"I'd rather take him down the elevator, just to be safe." Hank said quietly.

Andrew thought about it for a moment then closed the portal.

"Yeah, just to be safe." Andrew agreed and put his arm around Alan to support him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Marie, could you get some food for Alan? I'm afraid the rapid growth of the babies has leached the nourishment from his body." Hank said as he began to examine Alan's prone form.

"The babies seem to be healthy." Andrew said, looking at the medical tricorder.

"The Borg components are functioning normally." Trey said seriously.

"How about the temporal thing, is that all better?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Yes, the problem is corrected, but at least one of our brothers will not be able to travel to alternate dimensions... at least until he has conscious control of his mutant ability." Trey said as he scanned his dad.

"So the babies did something?" Alan asked in confusion.

"Yes. The unstable temporal state in the alternate dimension caused a reaction in one of the babies. He emitted a tachion shell that threw you and them into different timelines. So the babies were growing and aging faster than you were. They leached the nutrients, and oxygen from your blood at a rate that made you fall unconscious. Had it continued, it would have caused permanent damage." Trey said seriously.

"So no more dimension hopping for you until the babies are born... which will be in how long Hank?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Two weeks, tops." Hank said darkly.

"Okay, we can handle this." Andrew said as he thought.

"Bobby, would you get the printouts from your room?" Trey asked quietly.

"Yeah, be right back." Bobby said and ran from the room.

"I will see if Marie needs any help carrying food." Peter said suddenly.

"Father, will you port me to the boathouse, I am concerned for Jimmy." Icheb asked.

"Yeah." Andrew said and a portal opened in the middle of the room.

"We need baby clothes, cribs, diapers, strollers..." Alan trailed off.

"Don't worry Alan. I promise that all those things will be taken care of." The Professor said as he came into the room.

"Thanks Professor, but I don't know how we're going to pay for them... I was planning on us both working for the next six months to pay for all this." Alan said with worry.

"I promised that you and Remy wouldn't want for anything, and I intend to keep that promise." Charles said firmly.

"Thanks Professor." Alan said quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

After much study, Hank finally determined that the babies were normal. There was no indication of deformity, malnutrition or oxygen deprivation. They seemed to be just as they would have been had they aged in the normal way.

"I don't know how we're going to take care of everything that needs to be done in time." Andrew said with worry.

"With the help of your family." Bobby said as he came back into the room followed by Scott and Alex.

"What do you have there?" Andrew asked as he saw the stack of papers.

"These are blueprints for modifications to the boathouse." Trey said simply.

"So you drew up plans to add on a room?" Scott asked carefully.

"No, to add on a wing. It will provide a new room for Uncle Scott, Uncle Alex, Marguerite, Thomas, Chakotay and Joyce." Trey said to the group.

"May I see those?" the Professor asked.

Bobby handed the blueprints to the professor and waited for a reaction.

"This seems very well thought out. The structure seems sound and you have even provided plumbing and electrical blueprints. May I have these so I can call a professional in the morning to get this project underway?" The Professor asked Trey.

"Yes, thank you Professor." Trey said with a smile.

"Andrew, can you get Dawn back here? We are going to need her assistance." The Professor asked quietly.

"Uh, oh, yeah." Andrew said and opened a portal into Slayer Central.

"It's time to go Wesley." Dawn said and got up from the couch.

"Yes, on my way." Wesley said as he put down a book.

"Whoa, what happened to Alan?" Dawn asked with shock as she walked into the MedLab.

"The babies had a growth spurt." Alan said with a strained smile.

"Here's the food!" Marie said and pushed a cart of food into the room.

Peter followed carrying a box.

"What's all this?" Wesley asked.

"The babies had a growth spurt while you were gone and Dad needs to replenish his energy." Trey said with concern.

Alan accepted a tray of food from Marie and began to eat as if he hadn't had a bite to eat in weeks.

"What's in the box Peter?" Andrew asked carefully.

Peter handed the box to Andrew and watched.

A big smile came over Andrew's face as he said, "Cookies and Milk."

"Dawn, as the Home Sciences instructor, your first official duty is going to be to compile a list of all the baby necessities that Alan and Andrew are going to need, then to purchase said items. Remember to include the items

that you will need in the daycare classroom." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Yeah, um, Tara. Can you help me?" Dawn asked with distraction.

"Uncle Hank?" Tara asked cautiously.

"Go on. I believe that when Alan has finished his meal, he will feel well enough to go home. However, I must insist that he not use any interdimensional vortices for the remainder of his pregnancy." Hank said firmly.

"Yes Doctor. Scott, would you mind driving us to the boathouse?" Andrew asked timidly.

"I don't mind at all." Scott said quietly.

"Are you ready to begin working on a cure for Matt?" Orroro asked quietly.

"Yes. I can start that now." Hank said with a dark look.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Andy? Do you think Remy and Xander might be ready to come back yet?" Alan asked between bites of food.

"I'll check. Trey, watch your dad for me." Andrew said seriously before porting out of the room.

"He's going to be like this for a while. He always get's overprotective when I've been hurt." Alan said to the group of people.

"Thank whatever deity you believe in for that. His love for you is clear for all to see." The Professor said sagely.

"Yeah, but I know that he's going to be feeling all guilty because it happened when we phased." Alan said quietly.

"You couldn't know. There was no reason to believe that it would effect you in any way." Trey said with assurance.

"I agree, but I don't think that's going to stop Andy from beating himself up for being the cause of this." Alan said with a dark tone.

"Trey, what I think he's trying to say is that this is about what Andrew feels, not what he thinks." Warren said helpfully.

Trey thought about that for a moment then said, "I believe I understand. But what can we do to relieve Father's guilt?"

"Nothing. This is something he will deal with in his own way. Just be patient if he is moody and broods a lot. At least that's how I handle guilt." Warren finished with a shrug.

"Thank you Uncle Warren. I understand why Jimmy holds you in such high esteem." Trey said with a troubled smile.

Warren just smiled warmly in response.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey guys, are you ready to go?" Andrew asked with false enthusiasm.

"What's wrong?" Xander asked immediately.

Andrew let the false expression fall from his face and said with despair, "Something happened to Alan. I shouldn't have brought him here."

"Is he okay?" Matt asked with concern.

"Yeah, he will be. The babies... something happened to make them grow too fast and it made him pass out." Andrew said and felt the emotions bubbling up inside him.

"Come on kid, we need to get you back. You don't need to be away." Logan said firmly.

Andrew nodded, then thought to say, "We'll be back to visit soon."

"Stop by anytime." Matt said and relaxed back on the sofa.

With a burst of power Andrew brought Remy, Xander and Logan back... then began to cry.

"You said he's going to be fine, right?" Xander said as he put a comforting arm around Andrew.

"Yeah, but I didn't even stop to think that phasing him might hurt the babies. Oh Gods, what kind of a father am I?" Andrew said in grief.

"A human one." Remy said quietly.

Andrew stopped and thought about that statement, then nodded in acceptance.

"Let's go see how Alan's doing." Xander said and guided Andrew toward the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Andrew walked back into the MedLab, Alan asked, "So is everyone back to their proper dimension for the night?"

"Yeah." Andrew said quietly and walked to Alan's side.

"You ready to go home love?" Alan asked quietly.

Andrew nodded and held his hand out to help Alan off the table.

"Would you make a portal so anyone who wants to can go straight to the boathouse?" Alan asked quietly.

"Yeah." Andrew said and a portal formed in the wall.

"Come on Uncle Alex, I believe Father and Dad need some privacy." Trey said across the room to his Uncle Alex.

"Maybe we need to tell them about discretion?" Alan asked Andrew quietly.

"Don't worry about it love. I kinda like the blunt honesty thing. I don't want to change it." Andrew said warmly.

"Warren, do you think you could do me a favor?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yeah, sure." Warren said in surprise.

"Would you give us a call when Janine is ready to come home? I know she's having fun and I don't want to interrupt her. She'll be coming down to the common room in about an hour." Andrew said seriously.

"No problem, Kurt and I will hang around until she's ready." Warren said with a smile.

"Thanks guys." Andrew said with an answering smile.

"Are you guys ready?" Scott asked as everyone left to go their own way.

"Yeah, I'm ready for this day to be over." Andrew said tiredly.

"Love? I'm the one who passed out and who is now carrying eight and a half months worth of twins. I could use some attention." Alan said frankly.

"Maybe the blunt honesty thing isn't as nice as I thought." Andrew said with a teasing smile as he pulled Alan close for a kiss.

"That's better. Now let's go Andy. I've got something to talk to you about."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Scott, how would you feel about sticking around the house tomorrow and helping me with the kids?" Alan asked as they got into the car.

"Um, sure, I was going to work on a graphic design with William tomorrow anyway." Scott said as he started the car.

"Where will I be?" Andrew asked carefully.

"In your dimension." Alan answered simply.

"And what will I be doing in my dimension?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

"You'll be looking for your father." Alan said with a smile.

"Love, that can wait. You need me here." Andrew said seriously.

"No Love, It can't wait. Every day closer to the births is a day that I'll need you just a little bit more. And once the babies are born, I'll probably need you every minute of the day. You need a break, and it's now or never." Alan said just as seriously.

Andrew thought about what Alan was saying and finally said in a small voice, "You really want me to go?"

Alan pulled him close and said, "No love, I can just see that you need some time away... just a day. If it will make you feel better, you can even take one or two of the kids with you."

"Yeah, I'll see if any of them would like to visit my home dimension." Andrew said as he noticed that they were parked in front of the boathouse.

"I didn't want to interrupt, but we're here." Scott said quietly.

"Thanks Scott. Are you sure you won't mind helping Alan?" Andrew asked with concern.

"No, it's a good feeling to be needed." Scott said honestly.

"When the babies are born, you're probably going to be getting a ton of those good feelings." Alan said with a chuckle.

"Remember that you also have another brother, you need to share the wealth." Scott said as he got out of the car.

"There's going to be plenty for everyone." Andrew said with assurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

With much strain and effort, Alan carefully lowered himself on the couch and finally came to rest.

"I don't know how I'm going to get back up. We may need Hank or Peter to come over and lift me off the couch." Alan said as he brought his breathing back to normal.

"I think with all of us, we can manage." Scott said and looked at Alex, Xander and Remy.

"Yeah, no problem." Xander said confidently.

"Oooh, Andy, quick, feel this." Alan said with excitement and grabbed Andrew's hand.

Alan placed Andrew's hand on the side of his belly and watched as the hand was bumped off.

"One of the baby's is kicking." Alan said with joy.

"Guys, come here, you gotta feel this." Andrew said in wonder.

"Everyone feel this... KIDS! COME HERE!" Andrew yelled.

All the men gathered around and placed their hands on Alan's belly. A moment later Alex's hand was bumped off.

Alan and Andrew were both laughing through tears.

"Father? Is something wrong with Dad?" Trey asked in worry as he ran up the stairs.

"No Trey, come here. Put your hand here." Andrew said as he moved to let Trey in to touch his Dad's belly.

Trey cautiously put his hand where he was instructed and got a look of surprise when he felt movement.

"That's one of your brothers." Andrew said joyfully.

Icheb, William and Robert ran into the room a moment later.

"Come here, you must experience this." Trey said and moved out of the way.

Xander, Remy, Scott and Alex moved aside to let the brothers feel the baby's kick.

"That is one of our brothers." Trey said quietly as all the boys felt the kicking.

"Wow, they're really active." Alan said as they were thumping and bumping both sides of his belly.

"Perhaps they are fighting." Robert suggested.

"No, I think they're playing." Alan said as he began to giggle at a tickling sensation.

"Dad, why are you so warm?" William asked with concern.

"I'm just warm there... I don't know why." Alan said with worry.

Trey scanned the spot and smiled.

"It appears that one of our brothers has your mutant ability." Trey said happily.

"He's using an optic blast inside me?" Alan asked with a note of fear.

"Yes, but he is young and his power is weak, I believe he will only cause a warm spot to form on your skin. It only means he is a healthy mutant." Trey said with assurance.

Alan rubbed his hand over the warm spot and said, "Okay Chakotay, you can stop that anytime now."

"Kids, while you're here, does anyone want to go with me tomorrow to my dimension?" Andrew asked.

"I told Bobby I would go running with him tomorrow." Robert said with a tone of apology.

"I wish to stay with Dad, and I told Uncle Scott that I would work on a graphic design with him." William said quietly.

"I had planned to walk with Marie in the afternoon." Icheb said shyly.

"I would like to go with you Father. What is our purpose?" Trey asked.

"I'm going to try and find my father. I have some things to discuss with him and I'd like to get it done before the babies are born." Andrew said honestly.

"I would like to meet grandfather. I did not know we had other relatives." Trey said honestly.

"My relatives in the other dimension aren't the kind of relatives like we have here. The relatives here love us, the ones there are biologically related to me, that's about all." Andrew said sadly.

"Then why do you wish to visit?" Trey asked curiously.

"To let my father know that I understand why he left us when I was five years old. I don't know if it'll matter to him, but I held bad feelings toward him for a lot of years before I understood the truth. I need to do this for me." Andrew said honestly.

"Thank you for allowing me to accompany you Father." Trey said with a tender smile.

"But you'd better dress a little less Borgy for the trip. They don't even know about mutants there." Andrew said carefully.

"Understood. Uncle Scott, may I borrow a pair of your sunglasses so I may cover my ocular implant?" Trey asked simply.

"Of course Trey. There's a pair in the chest pocket of that jacket." Scott said, pointing to a jacket by the door.

"Thank you." Trey said and carefully removed his ocular implant. After retrieving the sunglasses he put them on and asked, "Do I look human?"

"Um, I guess you're close enough. That ridgy thing on your forehead isn't a standard human feature, but it's not *that* noticeable." Andrew said unsteadily.

"I believe I can help." Robert said and ushered Trey out of the room.

"I didn't think about them not looking human, I'm so used to seeing them it didn't occur to me that people might stare... maybe I shouldn't take him." Andrew said with worry.

"No love. Trust Robert, he'll find some way to make it work, I'm sure of it." Alan said steadily as he stroked his belly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is this appropriate?" Robert asked as he led Trey back into the room.

"What did you do? He looks completely human." Andrew said in wonder.

"I modified his small ocular implant to generate a holographic... camouflage." Robert said with some difficulty.

"It's perfect. No one will know that you aren't human." Andrew said happily.

"Do you prefer for me to look this way?" Trey asked with a hint of concern in his eyes.

"No, of course not Trey. In fact, I'd like for you to turn it off now, it's weird, you don't look like you. I'm just happy that we'll be able to pass you off as

human in my world. That should make our trip a lot less stressful." Andrew explained.

"How are you going to explain having a son that looks one year younger than you?" Alex asked carefully.

"I'll worry about that when the time comes. I'll just introduce him as Trey to begin with and see what happens." Andrew said in thought.

"Good idea. Will you call your Father 'Andrew' while you're in his home dimension?" Alan asked carefully.

"Yes Dad, I can be discreet." Trey said in an indulgent tone.

"Thanks son. How's Jimmy?" Andrew asked the group of boys.

"He will be fine. He extended his regeneration cycle to negate the effect of producing hardware." Icheb said with certainty.

"Good, I hated to see him in pain." Andrew said sadly.

"It was necessary. He and Janine are the only ones who have the pattern for an emitter. For any of the rest of us to generate that hardware would have taken much reprogramming." Trey said in an apologetic tone.

"Trey, it would have hurt me to see any of you in pain." Andrew said with concern.

"Thank you Father. If you have no further need of us, we will prepare for regeneration." Trey said quietly.

"So early? Before you go would you scan your Dad one more time to make sure that he's okay?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Of course... he is fine. Due to the lack of activity, I believe the babies are asleep." Trey said in a professional tone.

"Thanks Trey, I just wanted to be sure that there wasn't any after effect from the temporal thing." Andrew said in relief.

"No Father, the effect has been nullified until the next time our brother uses his mutant ability." Trey said seriously.

"Um, is there any way to stop that from happening?" Alan asked carefully.

"Until we know the effect in this dimension, we cannot counteract it." Trey said in a considering tone.

"Okay. Hopefully he won't use it until he's born." Andrew said with concern.

Alan nodded in agreement as Trey left with his brothers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt and Warren walked from the MedLab in silence.

As they went up the elevator Warren finally said, "We've only known him for a few hours."

"Zat doesn't make ze hurt less." Kurt said with pain.

"I love that little boy... how'd that happen?" Warren asked in wonder.

"Ze child is special. He loves with all his heart. He speaks his mind without restraint. Unt he loves us." Kurt said and looked into Warren's eyes.

"He asked me about starting a family and I always thought it would happen someday.. I think someday is just about here." Warren said with a pained smile as he stepped off the elevator.

"Ja, if ze opportunity should arise, I vould like to have a child as well." Kurt said quietly.

"It will, I promise my friend, there's got to be someone out there for us." Warren said and patted Kurt's back.

"Until zen, ve can visit with Jimmy. If I cannot be a poppa, I vill be ze uncle." Kurt said solidly.

"Yeah, me too." Warren said warmly.

## [Chapter 17: The New Chapter]

There was a loud knocking on the door of the mansion and much ringing of the bell.

"Eric?" Charles asked sleepily as he opened the door.

"Yes Charles, you must gather everyone, including the children." Eric said as he walked past Charles into the entry hall.

"What's the matter Eric? It's three in the morning." Charles asked with a wave of panic.

"Call them and I'll tell you all at once." Eric said seriously.

Charles looked at Eric's expression and came to a decision.

//Everyone, come to the dining room at once.// The Professor sent as he followed Eric down the hall.

"Have you considered building an auditorium? It appears that it would receive much use." Eric said off-handedly as they walked.

"What is this about Eric? You leave with barely a word, are gone for days and suddenly expect my complete trust and cooperation?" Charles asked as they entered the dining room.

"Yes Charles, and you know that I would not do this without reason. I promise, all will be revealed tonight. And I believe you will be pleased."

"So it's not another attack? Thank God for that anyway." Charles said with relief.

"No, no attack. Today history was made."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Love, I think you should get the children." Alan said as he tried on yet another shirt that wouldn't fit over his belly.

"I don't know the code." Andrew said sheepishly.

"After all that time Seven of Nine spent teaching us? Okay, I'll get Janine and she can wake the others. I'm not ready to try stairs in my condition." Alan said and finally pulled the Starfleet tunic from his closet.

"You're going to wear the dress uniform?" Andrew asked with obvious disapproval.

"It's either that or the hospital gown that won't tie in the back. I don't have any maternity clothes." Alan said helplessly.

"Okay love, let me help. That thing is a nightmare to fasten." Andrew said and moved to Alan's side.

"Thanks Andy... We'd better hurry. From the Professor's tone, they might not wait for us." Alan said as Andrew worked to fasten the clasp on the neck of the tunic.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Summers family hurried into the dining room to find everyone standing around in bedclothes and bathrobes.

"I believe we're all here now. Eric has an announcement, and I believe it is of some importance." The Professor said and moved aside.

"Actually Charles, read this and you can make the announcement." Eric said and handed him a piece of paper.

Charles took the paper and began to read.

All in the room were enthralled by the look of excitement and joy that came over his normally controlled features.

"He signed it?" Charles asked quietly.

"Yes, just over an hour ago." Eric said happily.

Charles closed his eyes and took a deep breath before calmly saying, "In my hands I hold a piece of legislation... a law. Mutants are now officially recognized as citizens of the United States. This law makes the mutant terrorism laws invalid. When suspected of a crime, every mutant is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law by a jury of his peers. Further, mutancy has been declared a protected minority status and mutants are entitled to equal housing, education, employment and opportunity for

advancement in military service. Any action taken against mutants is to be considered a hate crime."

Silence filled the room as all tried to comprehend the ramifications of this announcement.

Eric stood forward and said, "Thanks to the actions of many of those in this room and the reports of said actions by our friend Senator Kelley to the president, a new chapter has begun in our lives."

\* \* \* \* \*

Excited whispering began to spread through the room.

"Charles, Senator Kelley has been speaking with the President since the virus incident, filling him in on our side of the story. The President chose to sit quietly and watch so he could determine who was telling him the truth." Eric said firmly.

"Through the course of the past week, evidence has surfaced to expose the conspiracy against mutants in the highest levels of government. Senator Kelley, the President and I have each been working in our own ways to get this bill quietly passed through the houses of congress. Some deals were made, some palms were greased, some arms were twisted... but the end result is a law that confirms that we are citizens with all the rights and responsibilities that citizenship entails." Eric said seriously.

"I can't believe that you, the one who wanted to wipe out non-mutants, were instrumental in bringing us a step further into their society." Charles said curiously.

"I saw the error of my ways. I believed that we would prosper without the non-mutants repression. Later I understood that the qualities that I most despised in non-mutants were also present in my followers, in most all people, except those that live here. Hope Charles, that is what made the difference, hope for a better future. It was not necessary to rid the world of non-mutants, it was necessary to lead them to the truth so they might understand that we can enjoy a prosperous future collectively." Eric said with certainty.

"Perhaps, in support of the new law, we should make the Institute known to the public." Charles said in a considering tone.

Warren had been listening to the conversation and said, "That would cause more problems than it would solve."

"How so?" Charles asked and directed his full attention to Warren.

"This law is new, and was basically passed without public support. Think about race wars, protesters, anti-mutant fanatics. This will become a target for all that and more. I agree that we need a visible place for mutants to go, but this should remain a haven." Warren said seriously.

"He makes a good point Charles. What we need is a new school. One that is operated independently from the Institute. If someone we trust administrates that school, then omega level mutants and alpha level mutants with threatening abilities could be recruited to this facility to learn control and discernment." Eric said as he watched Warren's reaction.

"But how are we going to manage something like that?" Charles asked with worry.

"By opening the Wagner Institute for Mutant Education." Warren said with a smile.

"Wagner? As in Kurt?" Professor Xavier asked incredulously.

"Exactly." Warren said, then turned to Kurt and said, "You are a mutant who can't pass as a non-mutant. That should make you perfect as a role model for new students. Kurt, this is your chance to let every mutant child be proud of who they are."

"But I know nothing of school administration." Kurt said with fear.

"I'll hire someone to deal with the mundane details of running a school. Your job will be to make decisions that are in the best interest of your students. Think about it Kurt, You can change the world, one child at a time." Warren said with passion.

"You say zat you vill pay. Vat is your role in ze new school?" Warren asked carefully.

"I will provide funding until enough tuition can be brought in to make the school profitable. I'll have final approval of purchases over a certain dollar amount until the school begins to turn a profit. At that time I will withdraw from the operation of the school completely and the school will begin to

pay back the money that was invested... at a modest interest rate. What can I say, it's still a business." Warren said shyly.

"Unt vhy vould you call ze school 'Wagner' unt not 'Worthington'?" Kurt asked curiously.

"Because Worthington Industries is a corporation known for making appliances. I have many other businesses but they all have different names to keep them separate from the core business. Are you familiar with Tedesco food products?" Warren asked and looked at the group of adults that had formed around him.

"Yes. We had one of their lasagnas tonight for dinner." Charles said with interest.

"I started Mr. Tedesco's business in the same manner I'm suggesting here. At this point the company is publicly traded and I own thirty five percent of the stock in the company. If I wanted to step in and take control for some reason, I would have to acquire sixteen percent more stock... which I could do with a phone call." Warren said in his professional tone.

"So you invest in these companies, and when they begin to make a profit you get stock that continues to pay you a dividend without the need to oversee the operation of the company." The Professor said in an impressed tone.

"Yes, I make money, the business becomes independent and prospers or fails on its own merits, and many people are put to work in the process." Warren said happily.

"Kurt, please consider Warren's offer seriously. What he is suggesting might entail much hard work and some personal danger in the beginning." The Professor said with concern.

"I understand. Und Warren, thank you for ze offer. I wish to accept your offer so we might begin as soon as possible. When people know zat zey vill not be arrested for being a mutant, zey will need a place to go. Ze Wagner Institute vill also serve as a mutant community center." Kurt said with strength.

"Just one thing." Andrew said from behind Warren.

"Vat is zat Andrew?" Warren asked quietly.

"Be sure that the people in your school know that non-mutants are not the enemy. We don't want to start a mutant militia, we want to include the entire community in this project. You *have to* have non-mutants too." Andrew said solidly.

"I understand, but why do you feel so strongly about this?" Kurt asked carefully.

"Because there is a little boy in a neighboring dimension who was filled with anti-mutant propaganda that turned him into a hateful 'friend of humanity'. We can prevent another mistake by discouraging anti-non-mutant propaganda." Andrew said with a quizzical look at the long disjointed word that he had created.

"Very good thinking Andrew. Perhaps we should make a point of having some non-mutant teachers so the students will have daily contact with some non-mutants." The Professor said in speculation.

"Good idea, and while you do that, I'm going to sleep." Alex said and walked toward the door.

"Father, will you port us home? We did not get to complete our regeneration." Icheb asked in a grumpy tone.

"Yes son. I'm glad you were here to share in this special day. Go through that wall and I'll be home soon." Andrew said fondly.

Icheb gave his father and dad each a hug before walking through the vortex.

The rest of the children followed his example and one by one, after hugs, they walked through the vortex.

"Love, I really need to get home too. If you want to stay and talk, Scott could take me home and you can just port when you're done." Alan said quietly.

"That's okay, I said my part. Let's go." Andrew said and helped pull Alan to stand.

"Andrew, do you know how to drive?" Scott asked carefully.

"Yeah, I've only driven a few times, but I got the license." Andrew said with a note of question.

"I'd like to stay and help figure out the details of the new school... and the new law. Why don't you drive yourselves back to the boathouse. You don't need a license while you're on the school's property." Scott said as he divided his attention to keep up with the Professor's conversation.

"Yeah, I didn't think of that Scott. I'll see you back at the house. Thanks." Andrew said warmly.

"Yeah. It's a brother thing." Scott said with a smile before turning his full attention back to the Professor.

"It's just you and me love." Alan said and began slowly walking toward the door.

"What else could we need?" Andrew said with a smile and took his position at Alan's side.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning Tiger." Eric said in a gruff whisper by Charles ear.

"Eric-love, it is indeed a good morning." Charles said with a joyful smile and turned to give Eric a long, passionate kiss.

"There is something more I need to tell you about the situation with the President." Eric said seriously.

"And what would that be?" Charles asked as he pulled back to look into Eric's face.

"Mystique told him everything that went on in the raid to neutralize the virus, using only mutant names, of course. He was most intrigued when he heard about how Leach protected Blink." Eric said with a warm smile.

"Yes, it was a selfless act that I am quite proud of. I never knew Artie was capable of such bravery." Charles said fondly.

"The President wants to meet him." Eric said quietly.

"What?" Charles asked in shock.

"The President asked if it would be possible to meet the little boy who put his own life in danger to protect his friend. Charles, I honestly believe that

Artie's story is what made the President understand the gravity of the situation. Until that point it was adults, fighting each other. When he knew that a child had been threatened, and had been so heroically saved, it brought the point home to him." Eric explained carefully.

"When?" Charles asked with concern.

"Today. We are to be as discreet as possible, this isn't a political ploy. He doesn't want the media involved. Just Artie, Clarissa and one adult to supervise them. They will meet in Senator Kelley's office this afternoon so the President can hear the story from Artie and Clarissa directly.

Charles thought about it and finally said, "They'll be there. Which adult would you suggest accompany them?"

"It doesn't matter. Why don't you ask the children? That way they will be most comfortable." Eric suggested.

"An excellent idea Eric-love. What time is it?" Charles asked with a smile.

"Nearly six thirty." Eric said and looked back to Charles.

"Just enough time for us to take a proper shower." Charles said with a leer.

"Oh Tiger, after all these years, you're still able to surprise me." Eric said with a chuckle.

"Come along, we can talk after." Charles said as he pulled himself out of the bed and into his waiting wheelchair.

"Practical as always, Charles." Eric said fondly and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning everyone." Andrew said sleepily as he entered the kitchen.

"Good morning Father. Trey said the two of you are going to your dimension today." Janine said as she was picked up and hugged.

"Yes. We're going to see if we can find my father. What are you going to do today?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"Theresa wants to teach me a game... soccer." Janine said with a scrunched up face.

"Oh, soccer is fun. Once you've learned all the rules and how to handle the ball, maybe you can teach your brothers." Andrew said with excitement.

"You believe that they would be interested?" Janine asked curiously.

"Not at first, but once they've seen a game played, I bet they'll want to learn to play." Andrew said and put Janine down on the floor.

"Good morning Andrew, where's Alan? He's usually the early riser." Xander asked as he poured a glass of juice.

The phone rang and Janine jumped back and stared at the phone with fear.

"Remy get it." Remy said as he noticed the fearful expression.

"Don't worry Janine, it's a telephone... a comm device." Andrew said and pulled her into a hug.

"The sound is like the radiation alarm in a Borg vessel." Janine said and held tightly.

"I'll see about getting a phone with a different ringer. Don't worry about it kiddo. It's just a comm device so we can talk to other people." Andrew said in a soothing tone.

Remy hung up the phone and Xander asked, "Who was it?"

"It be Mr. Howlett. He wan Remy and Xander to come wit him an sign some papers wit Aunt Vada." Remy said seriously.

"Can I come?" Janine asked with excitement.

Remy and Xander looked at each other, then at Andrew in question.

"Hey, it's your call guys. If you'd like to take Janine with you, I've got no problem." Andrew said simply.

Andrew sat Janine down and she ran to her room. She stopped just outside the door and said, "I'm going to wear my yellow dress to show Aunt Vada."

"Janine, before you change, come here." Andrew said firmly.

Janine walked carefully to Andrew, who squatted to her level.

"Is Theresa expecting you to play with her today?" Andrew asked carefully.

Janine nodded.

"Then it would be impolite to just not show up. I'm going to show you how to use the phone so you can leave a message for her, letting her know that you won't be showing up. That way she won't be waiting and expecting you." Andrew said slowly.

"Thank you Father, that is kind." Janine said with a big smile.

"See this number, push that sequence in on this pad, then listen here and talk here." Andrew said as he pointed at the parts of the phone.

Janine dialed the number and finally said, "This is Janine Summers, can I leave a message for Theresa Rourke? Yes, I'll wait... Please tell Theresa that I'm going to visit my Aunt Vada today and I won't be able to play soccer with her... Yes.... Thank you. Goodbye."

"You did that just like you've been talking on the phone for years... maybe it has something to do with being a girl... anyway, now you can change for your trip." Andrew said and smiled as he watched Janine run to her room.

"Are you okay with us taking her to New Jersey?" Xander asked carefully.

"I trust you guys. And I know Aunt Vada is going to spoil her rotten... just make sure that she knows that Janine ate right before you got there so she won't be trying to feed her. That could cause a problem." Andrew said in a considering voice.

"Don't worry Andy, between me and the Cajun we'll make sure she's fine." Xander said with assurance.

"Yeah, I'm not worried." Andrew said and glanced toward the bedroom.

"He'll be fine. Scott and William are both going to stay here all day with him. Go and find your father." Xander said warmly.

"Yeah, I'm just going to miss him. He's my life." Andrew said with watery eyes.

"That's so cute." Xander said with a teasing smile.

Remy looked at Xander with watery eyes and said, "Remy be like dat if you leave."

Xander's heart melted and he pulled Remy in for a long, meaningful hug.

Andrew looked at the pair and said, "Looks like your days of teasing the married couples is over, now you get to tease the singles... Good morning Alex." Andrew said as Alex scuffed into the room.

"Woke up in the middle of the night... Scott banging around when he came in... wait... no coffee?" Alex stopped his mumble and glared at the group of men.

"We just got up too. No one's made coffee yet." Andrew said with a hesitant tone.

Alex didn't say a word, he just began making the coffee and between steps he would glare at the men again.

"Wow, he's grumpy when he don't get enough sleep." Xander said with a quizzical expression.

"Alex, why don't you go back to bed? It's Saturday, you don't have to be up for anything do you?" Andrew asked carefully.

"What time is it?" Alex asked darkly.

"Almost seven." Andrew answered carefully.

"And what happens at Seven o'clock on Saturday morning?" Alex prompted in a condescending tone.

"Um, I don't know." Andrew said.

"Cartoons." Xander said quickly.

"Right. I'm going to get my coffee, my cereal, and my blanket and sit in the living room and watch cartoons." Alex said in a definite tone.

"I never knew you were so serious about your toons." Andrew said with worry.

"This is what I work toward all week. My one pleasure, my one indulgence. This is mine... And I don't care if the Professor wakes me up at three in the

morning and drags me across the property, I'm not going to miss my cartoons." Alex said with finality.

"No one's asking you to... go... enjoy." Xander said carefully.

Alex looked at the coffee maker, then went into the living room.

"Damn, and I thought I was grumpy in the mornings." Xander said with a wide eyed expression.

"Maybe he need to get laid." Remy said quietly.

Xander choked on his juice as all the boys walked into the dining room together.

"What is wrong with Uncle Alex? He has wrapped himself in a blanket and is sitting before the vid screen, is he ill?" Icheb asked with worry.

"He needs this." Andrew said and poured a cup of coffee.

"Would you take this to him? He should be better after he's had his first cup of coffee." Andrew said with assurance.

Icheb took the coffee and went to the living room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby waited impatiently in the hallway outside the Professor's room. He had followed Magneto when he left the early morning meeting and saw him go in.

"I'll meet you in the kitchen. I have a few calls to make." Eric said as he walked out of the room.

"Magneto?" Bobby asked hesitantly.

"It's the young Iceman, what can I do for you this fine morning?" Magneto asked with uncharacteristic cheer.

"Can you give John a message for me?" Bobby asked without moving closer.

"I will not be your message service. If Pyro want's to contact you, he knows where to find you." Eric said and began to walk.

"Please Magneto, just one message and I won't ask again." Bobby said with a pleading tone.

"Very well." Eric said and waited impatiently, his cheerful mood a thing of the past.

"Just tell him I'm sorry. If he wants to talk, he can call me... that's all." Bobby said quietly.

"He will get the message, now please excuse me, I have to make a call." Eric said and walked past Bobby.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you feeling this morning?" Hank asked kindly.

"I feel good Dr. McCoy. Can I get out of bed today?" Chris asked with hope.

"Let me look at your wound..." Hank trailed off as he looked under the bandage.

"Angel, if I were to release Chris from his bedrest today, do you think you could keep him from overdoing or causing undue stress on his wound?" Hank asked seriously.

"Probably not. Look at him." Angel said playfully.

Both men looked at the excited, expectant expression on Chris' face.

"Very well, you are allowed to get out of your bed, you can walk for no more than five minutes at a stretch today. And you may leave MedLab if you wish, but you cannot be alone." Hank said sternly.

"Yes Doctor... Dad, can we visit William and Robert today?" Chris asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid I can't go out in the sunlight. I'm sorry Chris." Angel said as his heart broke, having to deny such a small request from his son.

"It's okay Dad, maybe they can come over here." Chris said bravely.

"Yeah, maybe they can." Angel said quietly.

//Chris, ask your father to bring you to my office. I may have a way to help you.// The Professor sent gently.

"Dad, the Professor just talked to my mind, he wants us to go to his office." Chris said with excitement.

"Is that okay Dr. McCoy?" Angel asked to be sure.

"Yes, that's just fine." Hank said and watched fondly as Angel pushed Chris out of the MedLab in a wheelchair.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I do not understand the purpose of this video." Icheb said in wonder.

"Entertainment, it's like reading a story without all the words getting in the way." Alex said as they watched the show.

There was some action on the screen and Icheb finally asked, "I do not understand what that reptile with wings is supposed to represent."

"That's Charizard, he's a fire breathing dragon." Alex said quickly.

"I am leaving now, enjoy your day Uncle Alex." Robert said quietly.

"Next Saturday, you should plan to watch cartoons with me, I do this every week." Alex said as he automatically got up and hugged Robert.

"Thank you Uncle Alex, I will do that." Robert said with a smile before going into the kitchen.

"The little yellow one seems codependent. He has sufficient strength and ability to function independently, yet he seeks validation and support from the one in the hat who is weaker." Icheb said with concern.

"They're friends, Pickachu and Ash are best friends even though they're totally different species." Alex said as he wrapped himself in the blanket.

"Do you think people of different species should be friends?" Jimmy asked quietly as he watched.

"Yeah. As long as people are good, species don't matter." Alex said with certainty then looked at Jimmy curiously.

Jimmy looked back at Alex in question.

"Are you cold?" Alex asked hesitantly.

"Yes, a little, but not enough to require more clothing." Jimmy said seriously.

"Come here." Alex said and unwrapped himself.

Jimmy moved in front of Alex cautiously and was engulfed into his blanketed arms.

After a moment of playful snuggling, Alex carefully wrapped the blanket around them both.

After a few minutes of watching the television Jimmy said, "Icheb, you should get a blanket and do this, it is quite comfortable."

"Icheb looked to Trey and William who both nodded, then left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert walked into the kitchen to find Xander and Remy talking with his Father.

"Father, could you please port me to the mansion? I'm going running with Bobby today." Robert asked hopefully.

Andrew began to laugh. Everyone watched him and waited for the explanation.

"He's going running to get exercise, but want's me to port him to the mansion... I just find that funny." Andrew finally said.

"Like de people who drive to de gym to use de treadmill." Remy said as he nodded in comprehension.

Robert got a sour look and Andrew stopped laughing. "I'm sorry Robert, of course I'll port you, do you understand why I was laughing?" Andrew asked carefully.

Robert shook his head.

"Because the purpose of running is to get exercise, but by asking me to port you instead of walking to the mansion, you are avoiding exercise. The seeming contradiction in your actions is funny." Andrew explained.

"Oh, but my purpose is to spend time with Bobby and Pete. My body is in adequate condition. If my purpose were as you say, then my actions would be contradictory." Robert said with a gentle smile.

"Okay, where in the mansion do you want to go?" Andrew asked gently.

"The entry hall, I am not sure where I should meet him." Robert said simply.

"Okay, have fun. I'll be gone today, so behave for your dad and Uncle Scott." Andrew said as the portal formed.

"I will. Enjoy your visit with grandfather." Robert said as he walked through the vortex.

\* \* \* \* \*

Icheb walked into the kitchen and asked, "Where may I find a blanket so we may emulate Uncle Alex's actions?"

"There is an extra blanket at the foot of our bed. Just be quiet so you don't wake your Dad." Andrew said as he nursed his coffee.

"Thank you Father." Icheb said and left the room.

A long moment of silence fell over the kitchen before Xander finally said, "I can't help it, I've got to see this."

Andrew got a big smile as he said, "Me too, be quiet."

Xander, Remy and Andrew went to the kitchen door and peeked out to see Alex and Jimmy wrapped in one blanket as Trey, William and Icheb were wrapped in another, all watching cartoons.

"Does anyone have a camera? That is a picture that I want to keep." Andrew said as he withdrew into the kitchen.

"Yeah, I'll get it." Xander said with a tender smile as he left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I do not understand, what creature is the pink one supposed to represent?" Trey asked curiously.

"That's Kirby... I don't know what he is, I guess it doesn't matter. Just watch the story." Alex said as he carefully watched the show.

"Species four six four." Jimmy said confidently.

"What's that?" Alex asked with interest as a commercial came on.

"They are the inhabitants of Taragah seven. Their weak musculature and fragile skeletal structure makes them unworthy of assimilation." Jimmy said from memory.

"So the Borg left them alone?" Alex asked curiously.

"Yes, there was no benefit in expending energy to terminate them. They have no technology and exist only to eat and procreate." Jimmy said absently.

"Good for them. It sounds peaceful." Alex said in thought.

"They had no purpose that was apparent. I prefer to have a purpose." Jimmy said assertively.

"I suppose. But after chasing a purpose for a long time, the thought of existing only for relaxation sounds nice." Alex said and looked into Jimmy's eyes.

"I believe a philosophy between the two extremes is most rewarding." Trey said in thought.

"I guess so. Being like a Kirby would be boring after a while." Alex conceded.

Scott walked into the room and stopped at the sight of all the guys wrapped in blankets, huddled before the television.

"We can turn up the heat if you want." Scott said seriously.

"Scott, you're doing it again... being practical. Squeeze in here beside Jimmy, then tell me if you'd rather have the room warmer." Alex said in fun.

Scott nodded and climbed into the blanket with Alex and Jimmy.

After a minute Alex asked, "Isn't this better than a warm room where we all sit alone?"

"Yeah, this is nice." Scott said with a tender smile.

There was a flash and everyone turned to see Xander holding a camera.

"What's that for?" Scott asked curiously.

"We just needed to capture this moment for future generations. If we ever need proof that we're really a family, this picture is it." Xander said with a smile.

"I figured you'd be watching cartoons with us." Alex said over his shoulder.

"Not this week, We're going to sign some paperwork... but I'll be right there with you next Saturday." Xander said as a vow.

"Good. I need your help explaining cartoons to the kids." Alex said and turned his attention back to the TV as the show started again.

"Count on it." Xander said and snapped one more picture before going back into the kitchen.

"Andy?" A voice called in the distance.

"Alan's awake." Andrew said with a smile and walked quickly to the bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning Angel. I picked up Chris' concern at your not being able to accompany him to the boathouse and remembered that there is a sub-terrainian way that you can get there." Charles said happily.

"Tunnels... here?" Angel asked in confusion.

"Yes, for the purposes of escape in an emergency. Unfortunately, we have had need of them in the recent past. With your permission, I will telepathically give Chris the layout of the tunnels so you may visit any building on the property at your convenience. It is much easier than drawing a map." The Professor said seriously.

"What do you say Chris? Is it okay if the Professor puts a map in your mind?" Angel asked carefully.

Chris nodded and looked at the Professor expectantly.

After a moment of concentration Chris smiled and said, "That was easy. I know how to get there now."

"Thanks Professor. For this and everything else." Angel said humbly.

"Your welcome. It is my purpose to help those in need by giving them the tools to help themselves. This is simply another tool." The Professor said dismissively.

Angel nodded and pushed Chris' wheelchair out of the room.

## [Chapter 18: Visits]

Bobby walked into the main hall on his way to the common room in time to see Robert walk through a wall.

"Good morning Robert. Are you ready to go running?" Bobby asked happily.

"I am unsure. I have not engaged in this activity before." Robert said hesitantly.

"I know that feeling, I just started running last week. But it's a good feeling to get the heart rate up and get the sweat flowing. It's very cleansing." Bobby said and motioned for Robert to follow him upstairs.

"I can consciously control the rate of my heart, and I believed that perspiration was something considered to be unclean and to be avoided." Robert said in confusion as he followed.

Bobby stopped outside his bedroom door and thought for a second before saying, "I guess it depends on the situation you're in. If you were standing in line at the movie theater, perspiration would be nasty, but when you're running around the track, it's your body's way of cooling you and feels good. Then it's okay." Bobby said and entered the room, then thought to ask, "You can control your heartrate?"

"Yes, it works automatically like yours, but I can change the rate at will... the same way you can consciously control your breathing if you choose." Robert said and watched as Bobby pulled some clothes from his dresser.

"I keep forgetting that you aren't human." Bobby said and handed some clothes to Robert.

"Why do we need to change clothing to participate in running?"

Bobby thought about the question before answering. "The shorts and tank top are cooler than regular clothes, so you aren't so likely to become overheated. And you don't want your regular clothes to get all sweaty if you're going to have to wear them the rest of the day."

"What of this?" Robert asked as he held up a pair of briefs.

"I noticed that you wear boxers. Briefs are better support when running... and you don't want to have to wear your damp underwear later." Bobby said with a shrug.

Robert thought about that and began to change.

Bobby turned in time to catch a full view of Robert's naked body before casually turning away.

Robert noticed the action and said, "I am sorry Bobby, I should have realized that being same gender oriented, you would be uncomfortable. I will change in the adjoining room next time." Robert said as he continued to change.

"That's okay Robert. You can change in front of me if you want. Warren talked with me the other day and I realized something... I'm not a gay man, I'm a man who is gay." Bobby said in thought

Robert thought about the statement and finally said, "I fail to see the distinction."

"A gay man is gay first, everything else is second to his gayness. Everything in his life is colored by the fact that he is gay. I'm a man who is gay. I'm me first, I make my choices and decisions according to what I want and my gayness is just my orientation." Bobby said with difficulty, never having had to put it into words.

"And this is the preferable way to be?" Robert asked as he finished putting on his shoes.

"For me it is. For someone else the other choice would be right... What size shoes... never mind, I have some old shoes for you to try on. Those aren't for running." Bobby said and went to his closet.

"They simply cover the foot, there is no difference." Robert said as he looked at his shoes.

"These offer arch support and cushioning. Try these on and see what you think." Bobby said and handed Robert the old shoes.

Robert tried them on and said, "I feel no difference."

"Of course not, you have to walk in them to feel the difference." Bobby said with a smile.

Robert took a few steps and said, "I can feel the additional cushion. Are we ready to go?"

"Just a minute, go ahead and gather your things and put them in this gym bag." Bobby said as he put his own clothes in.

"Do you think your Father would send me to Ronny's dimension after we run? I'm worried about him." Bobby said as they walked from the room.

"He is going to be in his dimension all day. He may be able to do so tonight." Robert said as they walked down the hallway.

"Oh, okay." Bobby said absently as he worried for his brother.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning love. How are you and the babies doing today?" Andrew asked as he sat on the side of the bed.

"We're all fine. We just missed you." Alan said with a tender smile.

"Do you still want me to go to my dimension today?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Andy, I don't want you to be away, but you need to do this and now is the time. But first... will you help me out of the bed?" Alan asked in a small voice.

"Sure love." Andrew said fondly as he helped Alan to stand.

"I don't have anything to wear." Alan said with concern.

"Just put on a robe for now... Come here, you need to see this." Andrew said quietly.

Andrew led Alan to the bedroom door and opened it quietly to reveal the living room.

Before them they saw Alex, Jimmy and Scott wrapped in one blanket as Icheb, William and Trey were wrapped in a second blanket.

"We need a picture of that." Alan said as he retreated into the bedroom.

"Xander took a couple pictures already. I'm going to have to go soon. Are you sure you'll be okay?" Andrew asked with obvious worry.

"Scott and Alex are here. I'll be fine, but I'll miss you." Alan ended in a whisper.

"I'll miss you too. I love you." Andrew said and pulled Alan close for a tender kiss.

"Ooof, I think Chakotay is awake." Alan said with a chuckle.

"Which one is Chakotay?" Andrew asked as he squatted before Alan to feel his belly.

"Right here, Thomas is over here, I think he's still asleep." Alan said with love.

Andrew pressed his face to the side of Alan's belly and said, "Chakotay, you behave for your Dad today. I'm going to be away and you need to be a good boy. And watch out for your brother."

Alan laughed and said, "I don't know how much of that he understood, but we'll be fine. You'd better hurry and go, so you'll be back that much sooner."

"Yeah, make sure you eat. You're eating for three." Andrew said with a smile.

"I will. Maybe I can talk someone into making breakfast for me?" Alan said in a considering tone.

"I'll do it before I leave." Andrew said immediately.

"No. You go ahead. It'll be more fun to get one of the boys to do it." Alan said with a smile.

"If that's what you want. Love you." Andrew said and pulled Alan close for another kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Trey, are you ready to go?" Andrew asked as he walked into the living room.

"Yes Father. Have you eaten?" Trey asked seriously.

"Yeah, just a little bit ago. Turn on your holo-camouflage and we'll go." Andrew said with a smile.

Trey pressed a button on his personal data node and his features altered to a human face.

"I just can't get used to that... Goodbye everyone, take care of Alan for me." Andrew said as he formed a portal.

"Don't worry, we'll be fine." Alan said fondly.

With a last look of desperation Andrew led Trey through the portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone rang and all the boys looked up with worry.

"Hello?" Alan said as he answered the phone.

"Alan? Would it be okay if Chris and I came by to visit this morning? He's been released from his bedrest and wants to visit your sons." Angel asked quietly.

"Sure, but it's just about light out... are you going to be okay?" Alan asked with concern.

"There's a tunnel that leads into your basement. I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't waking you up or intruding on private family time." Angel said with a note of worry.

"Don't worry about that Angel, we're all awake and you're part of the family. Come on over." Alan said with a smile.

"We'll be there soon. Bye." Angel said with a smile in his voice.

"Bye." Alan said and hung up.

Xander looked curiously at Alan from the couch.

"Angel is bringing Chris over for a visit." Alan said happily.

Xander looked around the room and asked, "Do you have any duct tape around here?"

"Um, yeah... in the second kitchen drawer... why?" Alan asked in confusion as he made his way to the couch.

"We need to make this place vampire friendly before he gets here. We need to tape those curtains down and... your bedroom door will need to be kept closed." Xander said as he looked at the room.

"What about the window behind the dining room table?" Alan asked with concern.

"No, it's facing north, it won't get direct sunlight, if we pull the blinds, it should be fine." Xander said and began to work.

"I wish to help you Uncle Xander." William said and followed him into the kitchen.

"Great, Icheb, would you help me too? I need someone tall enough to take the other end of the tape." Xander asked as he came out of the kitchen.

"Yes, of course." Icheb said immediately.

"Remy help too." Remy said and walkd to Xander's side.

"When Icheb and I have placed the tape in the right place, you press it down at the top. William can do the same at the bottom. We'll have this place vampire friendly in no time." Xander said happily.

"How do you know to do this?" William asked curiously.

"Spike was my roommate a few times when he needed a place to stay. I learned how to fix a house up for him pretty quick. It's rude for a host to have his guest burst into flames because he didn't think to cover a window... Who want's to welcome him into the house?" Xander asked quickly.

"What do you mean?" William asked curiously.

"A vampire can't enter a home unless he is invited in by someone who lives there." Xander said as he taped.

"I would like to be the one... what do I have to do?" William asked as he patted tape into place.

"Just say something like, "Come in Angel, you are welcomed here." Xander said as he stood back to look at the window.

"What about the doors to the dock?" Alan asked from the couch.

"I figure we can use one of these blankets to cover the doors and tape it down. I've never had to deal with double glass doors before." Xander said, looking at the doors in question.

"What is it about sunlight that hurts Angel?" Icheb asked curiously.

"I think it's the ultra-violet." Xander said unsurely.

"Perhaps we could alter the glass of the doors so that ultra-violet will be filtered out." Icheb speculated.

"You can do that?" Xander asked with surprise.

"Jimmy, can you emit the necessary particles to alter the glass?" Icheb asked.

Jimmy pulled out of his blanket and looked at the glass carefully.

After a long moment he said, "Yes, but it will take approximately forty six minutes to complete the process."

"Is it going to cause you pain or make you weak?" Alan asked with concern.

"No Dad, that only happened because I generated new hardware and used it before it was sufficiently charged. I can emit the necessary particles without discomfort." Jimmy said with assurance.

"Then go ahead, we'll keep Angel in the basement until it's done." Alan said with a smile.

Jimmy nodded and pulled a chair from the dining room.

He held his hand a few inches from the glass and began to move it slowly from left to right.

"I don't see anything." Xander said quietly.

"The emissions aren't in the visible range of light. I can see them with my ocular implant. They will alter the glass to filter all ultra-violet light from the spectrum that enter through this glass." Icheb said confidently.

"I will go to the basement to await Angel and Chris now." William said and ran to the basement doorway.

"I'll go with you, I don't remember what kind of windows you have down there." Xander said and followed.

"Alan, do you need something to eat?" Scott said with concern.

"Yeah, I will soon. Do you think you could show one of the boys how to make something for me? That way if you're not around and I can't get off the couch, I won't starve." Alan asked shyly.

"Sure... do you like omelets?" Scott asked quietly.

"Love 'em." Alan said with a smile.

"Give me a few minutes to see if we have everything we need. Then I'll start." Scott said and walked into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew and Trey walked into Slayer Central to find Faith sitting on the couch, reading the newspaper.

"Um, hi. Sorry I didn't get to call in advance to let you know we were coming." Andrew said shyly.

"No problem. What's up Andrew... and who's your friend?" Faith asked with a pleasant smile.

"I'm going to try and find my father, I haven't seen him in about... eighteen years. And this is Trey, my son." Andrew said with pride.

"You guys look about the same age. But whatever. Um, I got me a father like yours, ain't seen mine in about fifteen years... hopin for at least twenty more." Faith said without concern.

"I know what you mean, but I'm going to try for the whole closure thing, bury the demons of the past, blah, blah, blah. Trey is here so he can see my world." Andrew said with a smile.

"Got it. Good for you. I don't know how all that psychobabble stuff works, but if that's what you're into..." Faith trailed off with a shrug.

"Not really, but I just figured out that my dad wasn't the evil bastard I always thought he was, he was just a guy doing what he thought was right." Andrew said and pulled Trey into a hug.

"Mine *is* the evil bastard I always thought he was, but he's getting paybacks in spades." Faith said and set her paper aside.

"Jail?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Worse, he married my mom last year. Jail would be like a vacation compared to that." Faith said with a chuckle.

"Wait a minute, I thought you'd be in... Kansas or around there on a bus right now... how come you're here?" Andrew asked suspiciously.

"I flew." Faith said simply.

"What about Robin?"

"He's here. He has a job and can't get up and go like the rest of us." Faith said in a considering tone.

"That makes sense. How are you two doing?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Five by five. I think we're going to be together for the long haul." Faith said with a happy smile.

"Cool. I'm glad to know that one of the slayers is going to get it right." Andrew said happily.

"Oh yeah. Queen B is still looking for the corpse of her dreams. The others just don't have a clue, they think it's all about a guy's cool car and his sexy ass." Faith said with a laugh.

"And when they finally realize that they have to get along with the owner of the car and the ass, there's a major wake-up call." Andrew said with his own laugh.

"Andrew, is there a computer I can use to begin our research?" Trey asked quietly.

"You can call me Father in front of Faith, she's family." Andrew said and hugged Trey gently.

"Yes Father." Trey said quietly.

"Ain't he just the cutest? Dawn told Cari and Rona that you had a brood of kids, I just figured she meant the little snot-nosed kind. This guy's a little stud." Faith said with a smile.

"Yeah, there's six of them, six to fifteen. Trey, why don't you turn off your camouflage so Faith can see the real you?" Andrew asked quietly.

Trey hesitantly pressed the button to turn off the holo-camouflage. He watched with apprehension to see Faith's response to his true appearance.

"Even better." Faith said, then got a considering look in her eyes. "Not a demon... are you a mutant, sweet thing?"

"No, I am a non-human from another planet." Trey said shyly.

"Of course. Well if I wasn't already hooked up with Robin, I might wait a few years for you. You're a sweet little hunk of man." Faith said with a friendly smile.

Trey blushed and suddenly found his shoes interesting.

Andrew watched the scene fondly and finally decided that Trey had had enough of Faith's attention.

"Trey is right, it would be helpful if we could find a computer so we can get our search started." Andrew said with a smile.

"Right over there. But be careful, that's Willow's baby." Faith said in warning.

At Trey's look of panic and question Andrew quickly said, "It's just a figure of speech Trey. It means she treasures it like someone else treasures their child."

Trey nodded and said, "I will leave the device in the condition I found it."

"Good." Andrew said and glanced at Faith who was trying to contain her laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

William stood by the open passageway in the basement. He saw movement and waited impatiently for Angel and Chris to arrive.

"William, how are you doing?" Chris asked happily.

"I am well. Please come into my house Uncle Angel, you are welcomed here." William said with a big smile.

"Who told you to say that?" Angel asked with a note of caution.

"Uncle Xander. He is making the upstairs vampire friendly. We will need to remain here for a few minutes more." William said more seriously.

"Xander's doing that for me?" Angel asked in confusion.

"Yes, as soon as he knew you were coming, he began to make the upstairs safe for you. Give me a moment and I will check on their progress." William said quickly.

Angel watched William leave and noticed the windows of the basement were covered with cloth and taped.

"This means we are really welcomed, doesn't it?" Chris asked with a smile.

"Yes. It's an unusual feeling for me. You'll have to help me get used to it." Angel said as he squatted beside Chris' wheelchair.

William ran down the stairs and said, "Preparations should be complete in eight minutes. While we wait, I can show you my room and my alcove."

Chris nodded with excitement as William led them to the other side of the basement.

"This is my regeneration alcove." William said with pride as he pointed to the farthest alcove of three against the wall.

"Is this one Robert's?" Chris asked as he pointed to the middle alcove.

"No, that one belongs to Jimmy. We felt that he would feel most included if we positioned his alcove between ours." William said with a smile.

"So this is where you... sleep?" Angel asked, not understanding the function of alcoves.

"No Dad, the alcoves recharge, repair injuries, provide food and get rid of waste. The guys don't sleep, they just shut down." Chris said informatively.

"Correct." William said with a smile at Chris' accurate summary.

"That's really something. How does it work?" Angel asked as he looked more closely at the structure.

"Allow me to demonstrate." William said and began pushing a sequence of buttons.

"I will be in regeneration for thirty seconds, just to show you the connection." William said and took his position standing, facing out.

The alcove lit up and William's eyes closed. Several little screens came to life, some of which looked like medical readouts but in a foreign language.

Angel and Chris watched, enthralled by the display when the lights went out and William opened his eyes.

"Wow, you need to do that every night?" Chris asked with fascination.

"Yes, it is like your need to sleep, eat and use the bathroom as I understand the process." William said as he stepped out of the alcove.

"And this is your room?" Chris asked as he looked around.

"Yes, this space by the stairs is mine. Here is where I work on my graphic designs." William said and led the way.

"That's beautiful." Angel said as he saw a piece of metal cut into a pinwheel that was covered by a series of pinholes in a seemingly random pattern that meandered across the piece. He looked at the piece from a different angle and the pattern was gone, only the pinwheel remained.

"I have been working with non-computerized media for a time. I feel that sculpture is the most appropriate medium to express this type of design." William said speculatively.

"It's a galaxy, the little pinholes are stars, the speckles are planets... and the streaks... are movement." Chris said as he stared at the piece.

William looked at Chris with pride and said, "You are correct. You are the first to understand. I did not expect a terrestrial to grasp the meaning so quickly."

"Watch out who you're calling a terrestrial... alien." Chris said in a stern tone, but a twinkle of mischief could be seen in his eyes.

William looked carefully at Chris before saying, "Would you prefer ground-pounder?"

"Star Jockey." Chris countered.

"Earther."

"Cyborg Machine."

"Organic Animal."

"Robot!"

"Flesh bag!"

"Boys!" Angel said loudly to stop the name calling.

"Don't worry Dad, we're just playing." Chris said with a smile.

"Yes, such banter allows us to give vocal expression to our differences, thereby removing the need to avoid the subject later. We mean no insult or harm." William said with assurance.

"Okay, I thought you'd just degenerated into namecalling." Angel said with a little confusion.

"That too Dad, but it's all in fun. We're friends and if we couldn't make fun of each other's differences we'd always have that junk hanging between us... the stuff we can't talk about." Chris said frankly.

"Okay guys, it's safe to come upstairs." Xander called from above.

"We'll be right up." William said, then looked to Chris.

"I'm allowed to walk for five minutes at a time. If you'll help me, I'll take my five minutes on the stairs." Chris said quietly.

"No. You can walk when we get upstairs, but climbing stairs is too much work for your first walk since the surgery." Angel said firmly.

"Okay dad." Chris said and smiled.

Angel picked him up and walked up the stairs with William following close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel walked into the living room and looked around carefully, still holding Chris in his arms.

"Don't worry about the glass doors, they've been treated so they don't let in any ultra violet light." Xander said quietly.

Angel nodded and hesitantly walked to look out the double glass doors.

The view of the lake was breathtaking with just the tops of the trees glowing in the morning light.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knocking on the door.

Jimmy ran to the door and opened it.

"Please come in quickly. Angel cannot be in the light." Jimmy said in a rush, then smiled when he saw it was Uncle Warren and Uncle Kurt.

"Good morning Jimmy. Are you feeling better?" Warren asked and picked up Jimmy.

"Yes, I am well. Did you wait like you said?" Jimmy asked impatiently.

"Ja, ve have not opened any of ze packages. Zey wait for you in ze room." Kurt said with assurance.

"Please come in guys. Angel is here too." Alan said from the couch.

"Hi, we came to borrow your son for a while, so we can finish our shopping trip from last night." Warren said with a smile.

"Ja, ze shopping is not complete until ze purchases have been examined, until I still have not seen zem." Kurt said with obvious frustration.

Alan laughed and said, "Sure, but first, have you met Angel and his son Chris?"

"No, I don't think we've had the pleasure... Angel huh? I guess one of us is going to need a new mutant name." Warren said with a smile.

"How so?" Angel asked in confusion.

Warren pulled off his coat and let his wings extend, "I'm also called Angel."

"No offense Warren, but I think Angel had it first... for about two hundred fifty years?" Xander asked in confirmation.

Angel nodded but said nothing.

"Two hundred fifty years old? Is that your mutant ability?" Warren asked in an impressed tone.

"Angel's not a mutant, he's a vampire." Xander said simply.

"Vampire?" Kurt asked dubiously.

Angel nodded, obviously not thrilled at the prospect of having to show game face again.

"Yeah, but he's a good guy now. You two can work on the rights to the name 'Angel' if you need to." Xander said quickly, before Angel had to prove his claim.

"Guys, Team Leader here. Warren, how about you get promoted to 'Arch Angel' and Angel, you get the codename 'Soul Angel'?" Scott asked the group.

Warren and Angel nodded in agreement.

"I guess that's why he's team leader." Xander said with a smile.

"That's right, and Xander, do you want to be on the team too?" Scott asked curiously.

"But I'm just a plain old human." Xander said plaintively.

"I've seen you in action. I'd be honored if you'd fight along side us if the need should arise." Scott said firmly.

"Yeah, sure." Xander said and pulled Remy close for a hug.

"Good, then welcome to the X-men, 'Axeman'." Scott said with a smile.

"Why you get da name Axeman?" Remy asked curiously.

"Because my favorite weapon is a battle axe." Xander said with a peaceful smile.

"What about me? Do I get a mutant name?" Chris asked with excitement.

"Yes, please welcome 'Shambles' to the X-men." Scott said with a smile.

"Shambles, like when things fall apart?" Xander asked.

"Yeah, that seems to be his mutant ability." Scott said, then decided to change the subject before someone could ask Chris to explain.

"Who would like some breakfast?" Scott asked quickly.

Scott looked around the room and asked, "Jimmy, would you take down everyone's name and what type of omelet they would like?"

Jimmy nodded and walked to Remy to begin.

"Mutant names only during the meal, just for fun." Scott said with a smile.

"We do not have mutant names." Jimmy said in a small, dejected tone.

"No, but you have Borg designations and no one else does... but me." Alan said with a grin.

"Very well... Uncle Remy, what is your mutant name?" Jimmy asked.

"Remy be called Gambit." Remy said gently.

Jimmy looked at Remy with a smile and asked, "So Gambit, how would you like your omelet?"

## *[Chapter 19: Wounding, Healing, Scarring]*

Xander walked into the kitchen, a moment later William hurried out of the kitchen and ran down the stairs to the basement.

"Excuse me." Xander said and walked through the living room and upstairs.

"Angel, Xander be feelin bad bout de way he treated you. How you be feelin?" Remy asked bluntly.

Angel was taken aback by the question but finally answered, "It was my fault. I just don't know how to make it right with him."

"Den let Remy help." Remy said confidently.

Angel nodded in acceptance.

"Angel... how did a vampire get the name Angel, if you don't mind me asking." Warren asked carefully.

"My demon is named Angelus, now I'm cursed with a soul, so I'm Angel." he said without offense.

"So Angel isn't the name you were born with?" Warren asked carefully.

"No, my name at birth was Liam Jude Matthew Gilligan O'Rourke." Angel said with a smile.

"Mouthful. Um, would you mind if I call you Liam? It just feels wrong to me to call someone else Angel... I mean, if you wouldn't mind." Warren asked carefully.

"That's fine. I understand, calling you Angel would feel wrong to me too." Angel said with a smile.

Xander ran back down stairs and into the kitchen again.

"He's up to something." Alex said as he turned his attention away from the TV.

"Xander always be up to something, an it always be something good." Remy said with a smile.

"Oh, you got it bad." Alex said and shook his head.

"An Remy tink you need to get some." Remy said honestly.

Silence fell over the room until Alan couldn't hold it any longer and started laughing.

The laughter spread until all the adults were laughing... finally even Alex.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but there isn't much to choose from in my age group around here." Alex said to the men.

"Don't worry about it Alex, you're not the only bachelor in the group." Warren said with an honest smile.

"Ja, ve have been looking as well." Kurt said frankly.

"You mean you guys aren't a couple?" Alex asked in confusion.

"Why does everyone think that?" Warren asked the men.

"Because you're always together." Alan answered immediately.

"You thought we were a couple too?" Warren asked in a hurt tone.

"No, I knew you guys were straight, I can just see where people get that idea. It doesn't matter here anyway, as long as you treat us with respect, we'll do the same for you... even if you're straight." Alan finished with a smile.

"I'm glad you're so open minded about it." Warren said as he looked at the expressions of the men around the room.

William came from the basement stairs and ran into the kitchen.

"Why do I get the feeling that William and Xander are working together?" Alex asked as he stared at the kitchen door.

"Dey probably are." Remy said with an unconcerned voice.

"Gemini, here is an omelet and a glass of milk." Jimmy said happily.

"Havock, here is your western omelet and coffee." William said as he carried a plate to Alex.

"I should have this in the dining room..." Alex began to say when William interrupted.

"There isn't enough room at the table for everyone, so we'll bring you your plates. Please relax."

"Here is your tea Two of Seven." Jimmy said and carefully handed Icheb a steaming mug.

Xander hurried into the room and sat beside Remy.

"What you be up to Xander?" Remy asked suspiciously.

"Axeman, only mutant names during this meal." Xander corrected with a smile.

Remy smiled and moved in for a kiss.

"Gambit, here is your omelet and coffee." William said and handed the food to Remy.

"And here is your food Axeman." Jimmy said and handed a plate to Xander.

"Soul Angel, here is your breakfast." Chris said with a big smile.

"What?" Angel asked as he was handed a warm mug of blood.

"You're a guest in our house, please enjoy our hospitality." Xander said with a warm smile.

"Thank you Xander... I've never given you any reason to do anything like this for me." Angel said darkly with shame.

"Yeah, well it goes both ways. One of us had to end the hostilities, I got to it first. Enjoy your breakfast and welcome to the family." Xander said with a genuine smile.

"Thank you Xander." Angel said emotionally and took a sip of his blood.

"Do you like it dad?" Chris asked hopefully.

"Yes, it's great Chris." Angel said with a tender smile at his son's excitement.

"Shambles, please sit so you may eat." William said and brought a plate of food.

Chris sat at the coffee table by his dad's feet and accepted the plate of food.

"Where's Janine?" Alan asked and looked around.

"She is watching for Mr. Howlett's car. He could arrive at any time." Icheb said then took a sip of tea.

Alan nodded in acceptance and went back to enjoying his food.

Scott came into the living room carrying a plate of food for himself.

"Excellent food Scott." Alex said happily.

"Thanks, but Jimmy made yours." Scott said with pride.

"Really? Great work Jimmy, it's perfect." Alex said with a smile.

"Did you make mine too?" Warren asked.

Jimmy nodded shyly.

"You did a good job. It's just right." Warren said with admiration.

"Ja, very good." Kurt said before taking another mouthful.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Uncle Xander. A big car just arrived." Janine said excitedly as she ran into the room.

Remy walked to the window and said, "Dat be Mr. Howlett. Remy invite him in, non?"

"Yeah, maybe he'd like an omelet too?" Xander said.

Remy went outside and returned a few minutes later followed by Mr. Howlett.

"Good Morning Mr. Howlett." Alan said and motioned him into the room.

"Good morning lady and gentlemen. And you may call me Ken since this portion of the morning is purely social." Mr. Howlett said as he positioned his wheelchair beside Angel's sofa.

"Would you like an omelet or some coffee?" Scott offered.

"Some coffee would be good." Ken said with a smile.

"How do you take it?" Scott asked before he got up.

"Just black." Ken said and looked around the room.

"I'll get that Uncle Scott. Enjoy your meal." Jimmy said and ran to the kitchen.

"Ken Howlett, I'd like to introduce you to everyone. You may have met some of them before. This is Warren Worthington the Third of Worthington Industries, Kurt Wagner soon to be of the Wagner Institute for Mutant Education, Alex Summers, Alan Summers, Icheb Summers, William Summers, the boy getting your coffee is Jimmy Summers, and young Janine Summers." Xander said with a smile.

"A pleasure to meet you all." Mr. Howlett said to the group.

"And on this side we have Liam O'Rourke, his son Chris O'Rourke. Scott Summers and of course you know Remy and me." Xander finished.

"A lot of people. How many live here?" Mr. Howlett asked and accepted a cup of coffee from Jimmy.

"Twelve right now. Andrew and Alan, their six kids. Scott, Alex, me and Remy." Xander said with a smile.

"And two more within two weeks." Scott said with a glance at Alan.

Mr. Howlett looked around to see Alan pointing at his belly.

"You can't mean?" He asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Yeah, the one thing men can't do, he's doing it." Xander said with a chuckle.

"Thomas is awake if you'd like to feel him kicking." Alan said with a look of peace.

"Yes, thank you." Ken said and moved his wheelchair so he could reach Alan's belly.

After a moment of waiting, there was a kick and Ken smiled a radiant smile.

"Where are you going to put everyone? I can't believe you fit twelve people in here already." Ken said as he looked around the room.

"Well Alex and Scott had to double up, but we're building a wing onto the house so everyone will have their own room... even Marguerite." Xander said with a smile.

"That's great because I have some news about your adoption." Ken said seriously.

"What is it?" Xander asked with dread.

"Everything is fine, but the judge wants a social worker to check the place out before the final adoption paperwork is signed. If you have the proper baby supplies on hand and a room in the process of being built, it shouldn't be a problem." Ken said seriously.

"We don't have de baby tings yet." Remy said in horror.

Scott closed his eyes and concentrated, a moment later he smiled and said, "Dawn is taking care of that for you Remy. The Professor has her buying the things for Chakotay and Thomas already, so she'll get Marguerite's things while she's at it. She and a group of girls from the mansion will be leaving for the store in about an hour."

"But Remy don't have de money to pay for a bunch of tings." Remy said with concern.

"Remy, the Professor is taking care of this. He promised Professor Frost that he'd see to it that we have what we need." Alan said firmly.

"It be too much like charity. Remy can't do dat." Remy said in return.

"Remy, if you don't want charity, then pay him back. But for right now you need to suck it up and accept the offer... for Marguerite." Alan said in a serious tone.

"Xander, help us out here." Alex asked with worry.

"I'll stand behind Remy, whatever he decides to do." Xander said with strength.

Remy looked at Xander and his eyes went from anger to tenderness in a heartbeat.

"Remy take de help from de Professor, but we pay de money back." Remy said firmly.

"Good. I'm glad you're doing what's best for the baby. That's the most important thing you can do right now. But you don't have to worry about money. I've been working on your paperwork for almost a month. You've got millions... I think the final paperwork is in my briefcase. I just haven't been able to finish it because I've been focused on the adoption." Ken said with an apologetic look.

"I knew the Professor said I had money, but it was like a cover story. I didn't think I could actually use it." Xander said slowly.

"As soon as you sign the last of the paperwork, you'll have access to the Wainwright estate." Ken said happily.

"Is it in my name or our names?" Xander asked carefully.

"Yours." Ken answered just as carefully.

"I need for it to be put into both our names." Xander said decisively.

"Remy not take charity from de Professor, an Remy not take charity from you." Remy said with hurt.

"Are you my husband or my boyfriend?" Xander asked seriously.

"Remy be your husband." Remy said cautiously.

"Will you still be my husband tomorrow?" Xander asked without wavering.

"Oui." Remy said, watching Xander's eye.

"Then act like it. If you have money, I expect it to be ours. If I have money, I expect it to be ours. We're joined, we are *husbands*, I'm not giving you

charity, this was yours the moment you married me. You just lucked out and hit the jackpot by marrying a millionaire." Xander said with a smile.

"Oui, Remy understand now." Remy said and pulled Xander close.

"So are you going to move to Beverly Hills and get a cement pond?" Alan asked with a chuckle.

"No, I think we'll stay right here and put our money to work... I'd like to invest in the Wagner Institute if possible, get in on the ground floor." Xander said and looked at Warren.

"That's a great idea. How about a fifty fifty split? That way no one can say that either of us is the 'owner' of the new school. The Wainwrights and Worthingtons can just be cosponsors of the institute." Warren said seriously.

"An dat increase de credibility when it be known dat a mutant and a non-mutant work together to start de school." Remy said in thought.

"Good thinking. I can see that you gentlemen really get things done here. Well, if everyone is done with their breakfast, we'd best be off to meet with Aunt Vada so we can get the paperwork signed."

"Yeah, Janine, you got everything you need?" Xander asked.

"Yes."

"You guys have a good time. I'll see you tonight." Alan said and pulled Janine in for a hug and a kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, I am connected to the Internet and have found many useful sites bookmarked on this machine. Please specify the search criteria." Trey asked as he sat with his tubules connected to the computer.

"You can start by looking for me, under my old name. From there you should be able to find enough information about my father to track him down. Lee Andrew Wells, born December Seventeenth, Nineteen Eighty." Andrew said carefully.

"I have found your information... Grandfather is named Lee Donald Wells, born January Sixteenth, Nineteen Sixty Three... he is currently listed as

living in Sunnydale California and working at a restaurant called 'Bishops'. His home phone number is..." Trey said and was interrupted.

"That's enough Trey. Just store the rest of his personal information in your personal data node in case we need it later. I know where Bishops is, we can go as soon as you're done." Andrew said quickly.

"Why would he be in Sunnydale? Didn't everyone leave after the explosion?" Faith asked curiously.

"Some people couldn't afford to leave. Some didn't want to give up on Sunnydale yet. Some are just stupid." Andrew said, wondering which group included his father.

"I have saved the relevant data." Trey said and disconnected from the computer.

"You didn't hurt Willow's computer did you?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No Father, in fact I removed a virus that would have destroyed her system in less than four months." Trey said seriously.

"Good. Are you ready to go?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yes Father." Trey said with a smile.

"Then put on your camouflage and we'll go." Andrew said and looked to say goodbye to Faith.

He was surprised to find Faith gathering things, as though she were leaving.

"I'm coming with you." Faith said as she continued to pack.

"I'm just going to find my dad. You don't have to." Andrew said honestly.

"I know I don't have to, but you're going to Sunnydale. It couldn't hurt to have a slayer along with you." Faith said and hefted her backpack.

"We're just going to a restaurant." Andrew said weakly.

"You take care of your son, I'll take care of you. What good is it to have mega strength if you can't help people? Now you can either let me protect you or I'll break your arms, then you'll need me to protect you... and feed you." Faith said without humor.

Andrew nodded and opened the portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew, Faith and Trey stepped out of the vortex into an alley. As they walked onto the street Andrew and Faith were amazed at the number of people milling around in the predawn light.

"Some people don't have good sense. When half the town explodes, you should leave." Faith said as she looked in wonder.

"Let's just find my dad and get out of here. Something about this is giving me the creeps." Andrew said with worry.

The three stepped into the restaurant and waited inside the door to be seated.

"Three for breakfast?" A waitress asked pleasantly.

"Yeah, and we need to talk to someone, Lee Wells." Andrew said simply.

"I'll seat you in his section. Right this way." The waitress said and led them to a table in the back.

"My dad's a waiter?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"Someone's got to be, I guess." Faith said as she looked around.

"Good morning. My name is Lee, I'll be your waiter this morning. Do you know what you'd like to drink?" The young man asked pleasantly as he passed out menus.

Andrew looked carefully at the young man and finally said, "Um, yeah, coffee for me and a glass of water for him... Faith?"

"Coke." Faith said as she watched Andrew's examination.

"I'll be right back with your drinks." The young man said and hurried away.

"Well, it looks like your information was wrong." Faith said to Trey.

"I don't know, did you look at him? His eyes? I'm related to him, even if he isn't my father." Andrew said uncertainly.

Lee came back with the drinks and said, "I'll be back in a minute to take your orders."

Trey looked at the glass in front of him carefully.

"Yeah, the Sunnydale water was always kind of chunky. If you wait for it to settle, it's usually not too bad." Andrew said as he watched Trey.

"I must turn off my camouflage for a moment. The holo-emitter obfuscates the input to my ocular implant." Trey said quietly.

"Okay, just be quick about it. He'll be back in a minute." Andrew said in a whisper.

Trey pushed the button on his data node and looked at the glass again. Finally he looked up from his glass and restored his camouflage.

"That man is your father. I have a record of his fingerprints in my personal data node. I do not know how it is so, but I am certain of it." Trey said absolutely.

"That's just crazy, he looks like he's sixteen." Faith said dismissively.

Andrew froze at those words, the words he had been hearing for years and suddenly knew.

"Are you ready to order?" Lee asked in a friendly tone.

"In just a second. I need to tell you something, and if it doesn't mean anything to you, I'll leave here and never come again." Andrew said seriously as he looked into his father's eyes.

"My name is Lee Andrew Wells, I was born on December Seventeenth, Nineteen Eighty. I haven't aged since I was Sixteen years old... and I think I'd like the country breakfast, it looks good." Andrew said as he glanced at the menu.

Lee went pale and began to shake slightly.

"Dad, please calm down, I'm not here to do anything but talk to you, and if you don't want to talk to me, just say so and I'm gone." Andrew said in a whisper.

"Not now." Lee finally said as he took a deep breath.

"When?" Andrew asked quietly.

"I'm at the end of an overnight shift, I'm off in about an hour. Just wait here for me and we'll go somewhere to talk." Lee said nervously.

"Okay, we'll do that... And could I have English muffins with that breakfast?" Andrew asked as he looked at the picture again.

"Yes. And for you?" Lee asked as he looked at Faith.

"Belgian waffles with strawberries. But only if they're sweet and juicy." Faith said in a sultry tone.

"They're plump and sweet, just waiting for you to devour them." Lee said with a breathy whisper.

"Don't be shy with the whipped cream... I love the whipped cream." Faith said with a scorching look.

"Don't we all." Lee said in a seductive growl.

Faith and Lee held each others gaze for a moment before he finally snapped out of it and asked Trey, "And what can I get for you?"

"Nothing, thank you. I'll share his." Trey said and glanced at Andrew.

"I'll bring you an extra plate then. I'll be back soon with your orders." Lee said and hurriedly left the table.

"Faith, you just hit on my dad." Andrew said in a tone of disapproval.

"Yeah, so? He's a babe." Faith said without concern.

"What about Robin?" Andrew asked, worried by her casual attitude.

"I love Robin, and I wouldn't ever cheat on him. But I'm not going to stop being me. If things were about to turn serious between me and your dad, I'd shut him down. As long as it's all in fun, I'm good to go." Faith said happily.

"Okay, I just didn't want to see anyone get hurt." Andrew said, more calmly.

"Robin knows how I am, and he trusts me. I'd never give him a reason not to." Faith said with certainty.

"Does he flirt too?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Just with Buffy. It drives her nuts." Faith said with a smile.

Andrew chuckled at that, then retreated into thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby, Robert and Peter all ran off the track and began to stretch out.

"You did good today Robert. How do you feel?" Peter asked through heavy breathing.

"The sensation is pleasant. I did not understand that the activity would release endorphins and cause this... exuberant feeling." Robert said as he mimicked Bobby's stretches.

"I wasn't sure if you'd work up a sweat, but you seemed to do pretty good." Bobby said with a smile at the sheen of sweat on Robert's face.

"I was unsure of that as well. I am unaccustomed to such activities." Robert said and matched Bobby's smile.

"Then would you like to join us tomorrow? We run the track every morning." Peter asked welcomingly.

"Yes, I would like that. Thank you for inviting me." Robert said and stopped his stretching.

"What do you want to do next?" Peter asked both Robert and Bobby.

"I don't know. I'd planned on visiting Ronny. I guess I don't have any plans for the rest of the day. Anyone else got an idea?" Bobby asked casually.

"I have no plans today. Saturday is my day to complete outstanding projects... and I have completed them." Peter said in a helpless tone.

"We could go to my house. If the family is doing something, we could join them and if they aren't, we could play Kadis'ka." Robert suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds good." Bobby said and picked up the gym bag.

"Yes, but I am not familiar with the game." Peter said with question in his voice.

"I will teach you. It is not difficult to learn." Robert said and followed Peter and Bobby into a small building.

"What is this place?" Robert asked when they walked inside.

"It's the field house. It's a locker room, showers and a bathroom. The other door was for the girls side." Bobby said as he unlaced his shoes.

Robert began to unlace his shoes and thought to ask, "So you do not mind being unclothed before Peter?"

"No, he's my friend. He's not gay and I'm not interested in him like that, so it's not a problem." Bobby said, then looked curiously at Robert.

Robert watched as Bobby took off his shirt, then removed his own.

"If this bothers you, you can wait and shower when we get to your house." Bobby suggested carefully.

"No, that is not necessary. I only asked because I was led to believe that a same gender oriented man would be uncomfortable being near unclothed men." Robert said seriously as he watched Bobby pull off his jogging shorts.

"Maybe some are. It doesn't bother me." Bobby said and pulled off his briefs.

Robert realized that he was staring, and quickly removed his own shorts and briefs, then followed Bobby and Peter into the shower room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Howlett's car arrived before Aunt Vada's house. He quickly lowered his wheelchair and was ready to work.

Then he saw Vada's front lawn and porch. He shook his head in frustration and went back to his car.

"What's wrong Ken?" Xander asked in confusion.

"This wheelchair might... *might* make it across that obstacle course of a lawn. But there is no way it's going to make it up those stairs onto the front porch." Ken said darkly.

"Um, what do you want to do?" Xander asked, not having a clue.

"I have an old fashioned wheelchair in my trunk for times like this. If you guys wouldn't mind too much, you could push me across to the porch and lift me up there. This electric chair is far too heavy for that." Ken said seriously.

"Sure Ken, no problem." Xander said and, with Remy's help, pulled the manual wheelchair from the trunk. Ken secured his electric wheelchair back in the car and waited for Xander and Remy to bring the old buggy around to him.

"Remy sorry Ken, Remy don tink of you as a man in a wheelchair, Remy just tink of you as Ken an didn stop to tink you might have trouble." Remy said apologetically.

"Thanks Remy. There's nothing to be sorry about, and knowing that you just see me, not my chair, makes me feel better than all the ramps and level sidewalks in town." Ken said honestly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm ready to go now. Is my apartment okay?" Lee asked nervously.

"Yeah, lead the way." Andrew said as he got up to leave.

"It's just about two blocks away... Lee?" Lee asked carefully.

"I go by Andrew." Andrew said quietly.

"Your mother never wanted you to be named Lee." Lee said as he led the way.

Silence fell over the group until they reached an apartment building.

"Well, this is it." Lee said nervously and opened the door.

As Andrew and Faith stepped into the apartment they were surprised that there was almost nothing in it.

"How long have you lived here?" Andrew asked as he looked around.

"Just a few months, I came here after the explosion." Lee said and dropped into a chair.

"Why?" Faith asked as she sat on the couch.

"With everyone running away from here like rats off a sinking ship, I figured there would be some good job opportunities... and maybe they wouldn't do much of a background check." Lee said quietly.

"Dad, I need to know why you left us when I was five." Andrew said suddenly.

"Yeah, well... I was messed up. Your mom was a good woman when I met her, but we brought out the worst in each other. It started out as partying, getting drunk to unwind and have some fun... then it got to be every night... then every day. Whenever I thought about trying to get sober, your mom was there to hand me a drink, and whenever I started feeling like I was wasting my life, your mom was there to rationalize for me." Lee said in a pained voice.

"So you were an alcoholic?" Trey asked quietly.

"Yeah, I am an alcoholic. It never goes away." Lee said to Trey, then turned a pained gaze toward Andrew. "When you were five, I started drinking really hard, worse than ever before... and it made me mean." Lee said, then suddenly got up and began to pace.

"You were just being a kid. I don't remember what happened, I was so drunk. You didn't want to take your bath, or something. Whatever it was doesn't matter, I hit you. And the more you cried, the more I hit you... until finally you stopped. I don't know exactly what I did, but you just stopped crying and wouldn't wake up. I held you for about an hour before you finally opened your eyes again. The first thing you did was say you were sorry." Lee said and dropped back into the chair.

He looked Andrew straight in the eyes and said, "That was it, the last time I ever hit you. I left that night and never went back. I spent most of the next thirteen years drunk... Then one day I had a moment of clarity. It just hit me that I was an animal who lived for the next party. So I got help. I went into rehab, I was in for about a year and haven't touched a drop of alcohol since."

"Good for you." Faith said with admiration.

"So you left to protect me?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yeah, I figured you'd be better off not having a dad, than having one who was a mean drunk... Andrew, I couldn't be a part of your life... I was such a mess... I'm still a mess." Lee said and buried his head in his hands.

"Can you tell me about why we don't age?" Andrew asked quietly.

"No. It just happened. When I was about twenty two, people started telling me that I looked sixteen... and I've been that way ever since. That's all I know." Lee said and looked at Andrew with apology.

"It must be the X gene." Trey said quietly.

"What's that?" Lee asked curiously.

"The X gene is the source of mutation in humans... I've got it, so you probably do to." Andrew said quietly.

"Is it something bad?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"No, it just explains why we are like we are. That's all." Andrew said in deep thought.

"Well, you can see my life... this is pretty much it. I live from paycheck to paycheck. Will you tell me about your life?" Lee asked with hope.

"Yeah... um, mom left when I was about fifteen. I came home from school one day and she wasn't there. All her stuff was gone, she even took my crappy little TV and video game." Andrew said sadly.

"After that I hung around with friends and made some mistakes... not the kind you made. Anyway, there was an accident and I ended up in Tempe, Arizona with thirteen dollars in my pocket and not knowing anyone." Andrew said and looked to see an understanding of the feeling in his father's eyes.

"That's when someone offered to help me. His name is Scott and he's one of my closest friends. Now I'm married... to a man... and we've adopted six kids." Andrew said quietly, waiting for his father's reaction.

"You've got kids? Do you think it would be okay if I meet them? I only had one kid, you. And I screwed that up so bad that I never had another. I love kids, I'm just..." Lee trailed off.

"It's okay dad, and this is my son Trey." Andrew said and motioned to Trey.

"Trey?" Lee asked as he looked at Trey in wonder.

"Trey O'Seofon Summers." Trey said proudly.

"Summers?" Lee asked curiously.

"Yes dad, My married name is Summers, I had it changed... does that bother you?" Andrew asked with worry.

Lee sensed the worry and said with a smile, "No son, you don't need to preserve the glory and majesty of the Wells family name. You're probably better off as a Summers."

"Thanks Dad... Trey, do you want to take off the camouflage so your grandfather can see you?" Andrew asked with a note of concern.

"Grandfather, I am not human... but I am a good person." Trey said with assurance before he pressed the button to allow his true features to show.

"I'm sure you are, will you give your grandpa a hug?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Yes grandfather." Trey said with a smile and ran into Lee's waiting arms.

"So are all your kids aliens?" Lee asked as he hugged Trey.

"They don't like that word dad, but yes, they are all from other planets... to say it's a long story is an understatement." Andrew said honestly.

"I'd love to hear it sometime. But first, tell me about your other kids." Lee asked and shifted Trey to sit on his knee.

"Icheb is my oldest, he's almost sixteen. He's a natural leader and a good kid. Trey is fourteen, he's an engineer and an amazing friend. Robert and William are thirteen and are twins, Robert is an emotional kid, he's loving and considerate. William is darker, he's thoughtful and a little moody, but is an incredible artist. Jimmy is nine, he is sweet, good natured, brave and smart. Janine is six and is my little girl. She's playful and spirited. She also has a great mind for strategy."

"Are they here? In Sunnydale?" Lee asked hopefully.

"No, I work at a school and we live there... Let me show you something." Andrew said and created a small vortex, about a foot wide.

"Don't do that. They'll see it." Lee said in panic.

"Who?" Andrew asked and collapsed the vortex.

"The monsters that live on the other side." Lee said with worry.

"It's okay dad, it's part of being a mutant. And that vortex just leads to Cleveland. There aren't any... many... monsters there." Andrew said calmly.

"Really?" Lee asked carefully.

"Yeah, this is my ability, my gift." Andrew said quietly.

"Mine's always been a curse." Lee said and opened a vortex, the same size and shape as Andrew's.

"Dad, your portal is opened to a hell dimension, you need to close it." Andrew said in fear.

Lee dissipated the portal with an 'I told you so' look.

"So you can open doorways too?" Andrew asked in wonder.

"Yeah, but just into hell... what good's that?" Lee asked sourly.

"Maybe I can teach you to target? I had to learn how to use my portal ability." Andrew suggested.

"Yeah, I'd like that... so is that how you got here?" Lee asked, pointing to where the portal had been.

"Yeah... when do you have to be back to work?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Monday night. I've got the rest of the weekend off." Lee said with hope in his voice.

"Would you like to visit the family?" Andrew asked quietly, not wanting to push.

"Yeah, I mean, if you won't be too ashamed of me." Lee said with his eyes cast down.

"Ashamed of what? That my father cared enough about me to protect me by leaving? That my father overcame an addiction and has remained clean and sober for five years? Dad, I don't know if I'd be strong enough to do either one of those things and I'm proud of you for having done them." Andrew said and walked to hug his father.

Trey stepped out of the way and watched.

"Get in there Trey, make it a three generation hug." Faith said with a smile.

Trey put his arm around his father's back hesitantly and was engulfed into a three-way hug.

## **[Chapter 20: Acceptance]**

Aunt Vada walked onto the porch in time to see Remy and Xander lift Ken, wheelchair and all, as Janine stood by and watched.

"Oh dear me, I didn't even think of that... when you leave, I'll open the garage. there's a single step down, but it should be smooth sailing after that." Vada said quickly.

"Thank you ma'am." Ken said with a smile.

"Come on, we need to get inside, there's a chill in the air today. It wouldn't surprise me if it snowed by the end of the week." Vada said as she led the way into the house.

Xander and Janine followed Vada as Remy pushed Ken's chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Faith, do you want to go back to Slayer Central or come with us?" Andrew asked from the hug.

"Robin's going to be working till about five, so I'll go with you." Faith said with a tender smile.

"Okay, do you need to do anything before we go Dad? Call anyone or get anything?" Andrew asked as he reluctantly pulled out of the hug.

"Um, no. I don't really know anyone here. I'm ready when you are." Lee said in thought.

"Okay, don't worry if it feels a little weird, we're going to be crossing dimensions, just keep walking." Andrew said with assurance.

"Okay son." Lee said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert looked at Bobby, then Peter.

"Robert?" Bobby asked with a note of concern.

"Yes?" Robert answered curiously.

"You're not going to... rust or short circuit or anything if you shower are you?" Bobby asked hesitantly.

Robert got a fond smile and said, "No, my Borg components are designed to withstand various drastic conditions. Water will not harm them."

"Oh, good. I just wanted to be sure. I don't know what your Fathers would do to me if your joints rusted solid." Bobby said with a grin.

"I can simulate the effect if you would like to find out." Robert suggested with a smile.

Bobby laughed and turned on the water.

After a minute of standing under the water, feeling the spray on his skin, Robert said, "This sensation is pleasurable, I have never experienced water in this... airated form before."

"You have never showered?" Peter asked seriously.

"No. My alcove has a sonic cleansing component." Robert said simply.

"How does that feel?" Bobby asked slowly.

"I do not know. It activates while I am regenerating." Robert said and saw Bobby lathering his hair.

"May I use some of your shampoo? I wish to try it on my hair." Robert asked hopefully.

"Sure, just a little bit." Bobby said as he squeezed a drop into Robert's opened palm.

"Is it precious?" Robert asked as he looked at the dime sized drop of shampoo.

"No, that's just all you'll need for your hair." Bobby said with a smile.

"Thank you Bobby. The only time I have used shampoo before was when we shampooed Uncle Hank, we used much shampoo that day." Robert said as he worked the shampoo into his hair.

"You shampooed Dr. McCoy?" Peter asked in disbelief.

"Yes, his odor was strong and offensive so Father ported him into the lake, then we shampooed him and brushed him." Robert said as he moved back under the water to rinse out the shampoo.

"Did you get to see his... was he naked?" Bobby asked curiously.

"Yes." Robert said and brushed the water from his eyes to look at Bobby.

"Was he big? I mean, he's a big guy, is his... equipment to scale?" Bobby asked with a blush.

Robert thought for a moment then realized what Bobby was asking. "Oh, um, I don't know. I haven't seen enough to know if it is large or small in comparison."

"Okay, is it like mine or Pete's?" Bobby asked.

"Bobby, it is inappropriate to speak of such things." Peter said with disapproval.

"I know Pete, but it's not like I'll ever have a better chance to find out... and I just want to know. Aren't you curious? I mean, Dr. McCoy is such a big guy." Bobby said in a leading tone.

Peter stood and thought for a moment before saying, "I am curious as well."

"It is similar in size to Peter's but it is black." Robert said carefully.

"Black?" Bobby asked in disbelief.

"Not all of it. This part..." Robert said and pointed to the shaft of his own penis. "Is blue, a darker shade than his fur. But this part..." And he peeled back the foreskin and pointed to the glans. "Is black, or a very dark blue."

"Wow. And he's as big as Pete? That's pretty big." Bobby said and went back to showering.

"Oh, I did not know. I have not seen any but mine... and my brother's, which is the same." Robert said honestly and began to lather his upper body.

"Well, I've only seen a few. But Pete's is the biggest one I've seen." Bobby said honestly.

"Bobby, you are embarrassing me." Peter said sternly.

"I'm not saying anything bad Pete. I'm just saying that yours is the largest one I've seen. Which is good since you're such a big guy... it's to scale." Bobby said with a friendly smile.

"Is mine to scale?" Robert asked with concern.

"Yeah, and the cool thing is that you've still got a couple years of growing so it's going to get bigger." Bobby said and started to soap his legs.

"Is bigger preferable?" Robert asked as he rinsed off his upper body.

"It depends on who you ask. Some people like huge ones, bigger than Pete's. If you look at pornography, that's probably what you'll see." Bobby said as he rinsed off.

"What do you prefer?" Robert asked and stopped to enjoy the feel of the water.

"Um, I don't know. I guess when I find the guy that I want a relationship with, I'll want whatever he has... I don't really have a preference." Bobby said in a considering tone.

"I like yours." Robert said as he continued to stand with his eyes closed under the water.

"Um, thanks." Bobby said with a blush, then had a thought.

"Robert, get out of the spray and I'll wash your back." Bobby said quickly.

"Thank you Bobby. I was going to leave it unwashed because it would be awkward to reach." Robert said with a smile.

Bobby lathered up a washcloth and began to scrub Robert's back slowly.

Peter finished rinsing and said, "I will wait for you outside."

"Okay Pete, we'll be out in a minute." Bobby said with cheer.

"Bobby, your washing of my back is causing a reaction... is this inappropriate?" Robert asked hesitantly as he turned to reveal his erection.

"If Pete was still in here, yeah. But between you and me, it's fine." Bobby said and guided Robert to face away so he could continue washing his back.

"Bobby, I am attracted to you." Robert said slowly.

"Yeah, I thought so." Bobby said quietly.

"It does not make you happy to know that?" Robert asked hesitantly.

"It does and it doesn't. Robert, how old are you?" Bobby asked and guided Robert under the shower's spray.

"Thirteen... but that is only an estimate." Robert added quickly.

"I'm guessing a fairly accurate estimate. Robert, I like you. But you're too young for me to be attracted to." Bobby said with apology in his voice.

"I will get older." Robert said hopefully.

"I know, and maybe then something can happen. But until you're sixteen, nothing is going to happen. If we're both still interested then, we'll talk to your fathers and see what they say." Bobby said seriously.

"Should I tell them now?" Robert asked carefully.

"You probably should but, let them know that I won't do anything they'll disapprove of with you. If we're going to happen, then it's worth waiting for." Bobby said with a smile.

"Can I kiss you?" Robert asked hopefully.

"No. Not till you're sixteen. But hugs are okay... once we're dressed. Naked hugs are probably off the menu till you're eighteen." Bobby said with a smile.

"Did you get lost in there?" Peter called from the doorway.

"Just a minute Pete!" Bobby called out.

"Let's get dressed and go to your house." Bobby said warmly.

Robert nodded and turned off his shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everyone took a seat, then Vada said, "I didn't think to offer you anything. I made a fresh pot of coffee since I knew you were coming."

"That sounds great. I'll get it, would you like some Ken?" Xander asked as he got up.

"Yes, since you went to the trouble." Ken said kindly.

"Remy?" Xander asked and received a nod.

Xander walked into the kitchen and there was a long moment of silence as Vada got a serious look.

She looked Remy in the eyes and said in a steely voice, "Before I sign this last paperwork, I need to know something. It's been gnawing at me since I first met you Remy, a lot of little things that didn't add up. Are you a mutant?"

The clatter of cups was the next thing heard as Xander stumbled on his way into the living room with the coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander looked at the tray in his hand and let out a breath of relief as he noticed that he didn't spill the coffee, just rattled the cups.

Remy looked to Xander for a second before looking back to Vada.

"Oui, Remy be a mutant." Remy said in a whisper.

"What about Xander?" Vada asked seriously.

"No ma'am, I'm not." Xander said as he placed the tray on the coffee table.

"Perfect." Vada said without sarcasm.

At Remy, Xander and Ken's questioning looks she continued, "When Scott couldn't take off his glasses in the house, I suspected something. Then I met Alan's children who are... not your standard children. Then there's the institute. A lot of little things added up to one or both of you being mutants. Then I had to decide how I felt about that. If you weren't mutants, then I needed to know your feelings about mutants, to be sure Marguerite wasn't being raised by mutant hating fanatics, if you were

mutants, I needed to be sure you weren't going to teach her to hate non-mutants. I'm guessing that neither will be a problem since you're a mixed couple."

"No, it won't be a problem Aunt Vada. The Institute is a mutant friendly place where mutants and non-mutants are all welcomed as long as they respect each other." Xander said seriously, then took a sip of his coffee.

"That's good. It occurred to me that I didn't know your feelings about such things and I have a very strong belief that mutants are people too. It pains me to see the mutant terrorism laws that they've put into place... and most of the public don't even care." Vada said, ending in a disbelieving tone.

"The president signed a bill last night. It clarified that genetic mutation does not make a person less of a human, or a citizen. And went on to declare that mutancy is a protected minority." Xander said seriously to Aunt Vada.

"Really? I hadn't heard about that yet." Ken asked with interest.

"Yes, we heard about it at three in the morning." Xander said with a chuckle.

"Then maybe the dark ages are over. The mutants can finally come out into the light." Ken said with a smile.

"Why do you take this so personally Mr. Howlett? Are you a mutant?" Vada asked curiously.

"Me? No, not at all. My wife, Loretta was a mutant. When she became excited her skin would glow the most beautiful patterns of colors... that's all. That was her ability, she glowed pretty colors. We went to see a movie and on the way out, someone had noticed when she glowed a little during the movie. They attacked us in the parking lot... they broke my back and killed Loretta, they beat her to death. While I was in physical therapy, I met a young man whose mutation had caused his legs to stop working and we became friends. Charles and I have worked together ever since to try and stop such things from happening again." Ken said in distant sadness.

"Gods of Hell, they kill your wife, cut out Remy's eyes, what's it take for people to stand up and notice the injustice?" Xander asked with fury.

"Calm down Xander, we can't stop the 'friends of humanity' today. But with this law on the books, maybe their days are numbered." Ken said in speculation.

"Perhaps." Vada said uncertainly.

"Then are we ready to get down to some paperwork?" Ken asked the group.

"What do you have planned for later today?" Vada asked as she looked to the men.

"Dis be it." Remy said and Xander nodded in agreement.

"I normally don't work on Saturday, this was just the only day this week that I was free to drive down here... so this is it for me too." Ken said simply.

"Then would you indulge an old woman's curiosity and take me to visit the Institute? I'd feel better about signing the paperwork if I could see where Marguerite is going to be living." Vada said sweetly.

"That would be fine. Do you gentlemen have any problem with that?" Ken asked Xander and Remy.

"No, no problem at all. I can't wait to show you around." Xander said with a smile.

"Oui, you love de boathouse. It be de perfect home for Marguerite." Remy said with a smile.

"How about you Janine, do you mind if I visit your house?" Vada asked with a smile.

Janine perked up and said, "I want to show you my room and introduce you to my friends."

"Good, it's settled then." Vada said and stood to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee, Andrew, Trey and Faith walked into the living room to find Alex still wrapped in a blanket and everyone else sitting around talking.

"Andy love, I didn't expect you back so soon... I missed you." Alan finished in a whisper.

"Everyone, I'd like for you to meet my father, Lee." Andrew said proudly, then motioned to Alan. "And this is my husband, Alan Summers."

Alan fought himself to a standing position and walked to shake hands with his father-in-law.

"It's good to meet you. Your son is an incredible man." Alan said as he firmly shook Lee's hand.

"Nice to meet you." Lee said cautiously and looked at Alan's belly between them.

"Andy, you didn't tell your dad about the twins?" Alan asked as he saw Lee's look of question.

"Um, no... that's part of why we're back so soon. I thought it would be better to show him than try to explain things he probably wouldn't believe anyway.

"Angel?" Faith said with surprise.

"Faith, how are you?" Angel said happily.

"Five by five... and Chris?" Faith asked, straining her memory.

"Yes... Chris O'Rourke, my son." Angel said proudly.

"That's great Angel, I'm glad you've settled down. After two hundred and fifty years, it's about time." Faith said with a genuine smile.

"Come over here and let me know what's going on with you." Angel said and patted the couch beside him.

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"Alan is carrying our twins, Chakotay and Thomas." Andrew said proudly.

"Your twins?" Lee asked in wonder.

"Long story. Do you want to feel them? They're both awake and active." Alan asked carefully.

A look of fear came over Lee's face but Andrew took his hand and guided it to Alan's belly.

After a minute of waiting Alan finally said, "I guess they know we're wanting them to kick, that's why they're quiet."

"That's okay." Lee said and pulled his hand away carefully.

"Now I'm going to give you the short version of introductions, for the sake of time and you can get to know people afterward." Andrew said as he looked around the room.

"This is Warren and beside him is his friend Kurt." Andrew began.

"It's a monster." Lee said in fear and took a step back as he looked at Kurt.

"He's a mutant like us Dad..." Andrew said to his father, then turned to Kurt and said with a look of apology, "At least he didn't try to hit you."

"Perhaps it would hurt less if he had." Kurt said sadly.

Jimmy jumped on Kurt's lap and hugged him tightly then flashed a scathing look at Lee.

"Please don't be angry at your grandpa Jimmy, before today the only people he saw that didn't look human were hell beasts." Andrew said quietly.

"He hurt Uncle Kurt." Jimmy said firmly.

"I'm sorry Kurt, I didn't know... maybe I should leave." Lee said in a devastated tone.

"No dad, please just give us a chance." Andrew said quickly.

"I accept your apology Lee, I understand that you did not know." Kurt said softly as he hugged Jimmy.

"Thank you Kurt. And I'm sorry I upset you Jimmy, I didn't mean it." Lee said seriously.

Jimmy looked away from Kurt and looked at Lee cautiously. Finally he asked, "I am not human, do you see me as a monster too?"

"No Jimmy, I see my grandson who I just hurt by speaking before I thought." Lee said seriously.

Jimmy nodded and turned his attention back to Kurt.

"Dad, this is my son Icheb." Andrew said hesitantly.

"Nice to meet you." Lee said timidly as he looked into Icheb's expression of caution.

After a long moment of hesitation, Icheb extended his hand.

Lee took the offered hand and shook it carefully.

"This is my friend Scott." Andrew said and gestured to Scott.

"My son has told me that you are a good friend to him. It's a pleasure to meet you." Lee said, still a bit timidly.

"Thank you. I'm proud that Andrew is my brother-in-law." Scott said seriously.

Lee looked at Scott, then at Alan and finally nodded.

"And this is another brother-in-law, Alex." Andrew said and gestured to the bundled form of Alex in the floor.

"Nice to meet you." Lee said quietly.

"Why do you look sixteen?" Alex asked, then noticed everyone in the room looking at him with disapproval.

"Someone had to ask." Alex said in an exasperated tone.

"I just do. I've been this way for over twenty years." Lee said shyly.

"This is your grandson William." Andrew said and cast an imploring look to his son.

"It's nice to meet you William." Lee said with a hopeful smile.

William looked closely at Lee, then at his father.

"I can see the features you have in common... you could be brothers."  
William said in thought.

Andrew smiled at that and said, "Dad, over here we have my friend from back home, Angel and his son Chris."

"Nice to meet you." Lee said a bit more solidly.

"Yes, a pleasure." Angel said and held out a hand to shake Lee's.

When Lee took Angel's hand he looked up in surprise.

"It's cold as ice." Lee said in wonder.

"Don't worry about that Dad, Angel's just like that." Andrew said dismissively then said, "And I think you already met Faith."

"Well, we weren't formally introduced." Lee said with a warm smile directed toward her.

"I guess you'll get to meet Robert, Janine, Xander and Remy later." Andrew said as he looked around the room.

"Robert will probably be here soon. He went to run with Bobby." Alan said from the couch.

"You have a big family." Lee said as he was led to sit on the couch beside Angel and Faith.

"Yeah... getting bigger all the time." Alex said from in front of the TV.

"So you said you work at a school. Would you tell me about that?" Lee asked Andrew quietly.

"Yeah, I teach Computer Science." Andrew said with pride.

"You're a teacher? That's great." Lee said with a smile and moved to hug Andrew.

"Um, it's just a job dad." Andrew said quietly.

"It's a career. Something I've never been able to do. I'm so proud of you."  
Lee said happily.

Andrew felt tears welling up in his eyes and quickly said, "Excuse me." before he ran from the room.

Alan pushed, pulled, shifted and finally dragged himself to standing, then followed Andrew into the kitchen.

Lee had a devastated look on his face and quietly asked the room, "What did I do wrong now?"

Scott smiled and said, "You didn't do anything wrong. You just did something very right. That's the first time you've ever told him you're proud of him... I think he just needs a minute to deal with that. He just got something he always wanted."

Lee took a moment to digest that information, then stood and walked to the kitchen.

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"So little one, are you a mutant too?" Aunt Vada asked as the car traveled back to the mansion.

"No, I am just not human." Janine said with a proud smile.

"Oh, and how did that happen?" Vada asked as she put an arm around Janine's shoulders to hold her close.

"My brothers and I were found on a ship that was going to be destroyed. My fathers took care of us and loved us. Then when they got married, they adopted us." Janine said as she happily snuggled into Vada's side.

"That was nice of them. Are you happy with them?" Vada asked in a gentle voice.

"Oh yes. I have lots of friends, my daddies, my brothers, lots of aunts and uncles, and I'll get to start school next week." Janine said with a smile.

"Oh my, that's a lot of people who love you. What do you think about Marguerite coming to live with you?" Vada asked as she pressed her cheek to Janine's head.

"It's going to be great. I won't be the littlest anymore, I won't be the only girl. And Marguerite is going to be like my sister." Janine said happily.

Vada smiled and said, "I'm glad she'll have a big sister like you to watch out for her. Being the littlest isn't always easy."

"Yeah, but I'll show her how it's done. I've been the littlest long enough to know how." Janine said with assurance.

Vada laughed and looked out the window to watch the road.

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"He said it, he said he's proud of me... and he meant it." Andrew said through his tears.

"I know Andy. Just let it out. I know you've been waiting a lifetime to hear those words. You can let all that old pain out now that you've heard them." Alan said in a soothing whisper as he rubbed Andrew's back.

"I should be in there with him... I found my dad Alan, and he loves me and he isn't a monster." Andrew said through his tears.

"Just take a few minutes to deal with this in your own mind. The family will take care of him till you get back." Alan said soothingly.

Alan looked up to see the kitchen door open.

"Is it okay if I come in?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, talk to your son." Alan said and shifted Andrew into Lee's arms.

Alan took a long look at the pair before returning to the living room.

"Andrew, I *am* proud of you. You've done so many things I never could. You've got a huge, wonderful family, a career, friends, and respect. I couldn't even get one of those things to work for me." Lee said as he stroked Andrew's back.

"Dad, I've got something to tell you... Why I came to find you." Andrew said and pulled back to look in his father's eyes.

"Go ahead." Lee said quietly.

"A while back, before Alan and I got married, something happened and I became violent... I hurt Alan... bad." Andrew said with pain.

Lee felt tears forming in his own eyes at his son's admission.

"I told him that if I ever tried to hurt him again, that I wanted him to... basically, to kill me... and if he didn't promise, that I'd leave to protect him." Andrew said as tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Shit." Lee whispered as his own tears fell.

"Because that happened, I understand how you felt and I don't blame you or hate you for leaving. I'm proud that you were strong enough to do something that hurt so much... for me." Andrew said sincerely.

"And that's why you wanted to find me, to let me know that you understand?" Lee asked carefully.

"Yeah, and maybe to get to know you." Andrew said with a weak smile.

"Son, I've got so much to make up for and I don't even know how to start." Lee said sadly.

"We can't live our lives making up for the past. Besides, you don't have to make up for anything with me. I agree with what you did and why you did it. We're here now, let's just begin with today and leave the past behind." Andrew said with pleading in his voice.

"I don't deserve this... I never did anything but hurt the people around me... and myself. I don't know what to do." Lee said in a lost tone.

"Come in and sit with me and our family. That's all for now. Just get to know us and let us get to know you." Andrew said softly.

Lee nodded.

"So before we go out there, I just need to know... are you okay with me being gay?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Not a problem, I've swung that way a few times myself over the years." Lee said seriously.

"Okay Dad, Um, that was more information than I really needed but I'm glad you're okay with it." Andrew said shakily.

"Let me speed this up for you son. I'm okay with you being gay, being married to a man, having kids from other planets, and having a friend who

is blue with a pointy tail. The pregnant husband thing is messing with my mind a little, but that's not disapproval, just disbelief... I'll get there. Does that cover it?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Just about. What do you know about vampires?" Andrew asked carefully.

"I lived in Sunnydale, I know more about vampires than I can tell you while I'm standing in your kitchen." Lee said with certainty.

"I have a friend who is a vampire... who was cursed with a soul. He's a good guy and doesn't bite people anymore. How are you with that?" Andrew asked with apprehension.

"I'd be a little nervous around him, but once I was sure for myself that he wasn't going to bite me, I think I'd be okay." Lee said cautiously.

"Good, Angel is a vampire." Andrew said with relief.

"The guy in the living room?" Lee asked incredulously.

"Yeah. I just wanted you to know so there wouldn't be any misunderstandings. I think you know everything now." Andrew said with a smile.

"I can see why you didn't want to tell me all this, I wouldn't have believed half of it." Lee said honestly.

"I know. Who would?" Andrew said with a smile and put an arm around his father's shoulder.

## [Chapter 21: Unions, Reunions, and Observances]

Robert, Bobby and Peter walked into the boathouse to a room full of people.

"Did I miss the memo about the group meeting?" Bobby asked as he entered.

"No Bobby, we're just having family time. Come on in and join us." Scott said with a smile.

Bobby looked in surprise at Scott.

"Bobby, you *are* part of the family. Come in and sit down... but you might want to pull in chairs from the dining room. We're out of couch space. That spot is for Andrew and his dad." Alan said peacefully.

"Grandfather is here?" Robert asked with excitement.

"Yes, he is talking with Father in the kitchen." Trey said emotionlessly.

Bobby, Peter and Robert all pulled chairs into the living room and sat down.

Andrew came out of the kitchen with his arm around Lee.

"Grandfather?" Robert asked in a disbelieving voice.

"Dad, this is your grandson Robert." Andrew said happily.

Lee walked over to Robert who pulled him close and hugged him.

"It's good to meet you Robert. Would you introduce me to your friends?" Lee asked with love in his voice.

"Yes, this is my friend Bobby and this is my friend Peter." Robert said quickly, keeping an arm around Lee.

Lee put an arm around Robert's shoulder and asked, "Would you like to sit with me?"

Robert nodded and sat beside Lee on the couch.

Andrew walked to the chair that Robert had pulled into the room and took a seat.

"So what's the topic of conversation out here?" Andrew asked as he looked around the room.

"There isn't one, we're all kinda stunned." Alex said and reached up to turn off the TV.

"Are the cartoons over?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Yeah, now it's all sports stuff. What are we going to do today?" Alex asked as he turned himself to face the group.

"Trey, I have a job for you." Andrew said in thought.

"Yes Father?" Trey said and walked to Andrew.

"Do you remember the vid chips that Tom gave us as a wedding present?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yes." Trey said flatly.

"Do you think it would be possible to rig up something so we could watch them on the television? We never got around to watching them and maybe Alex would like to see them." Andrew said with a smile.

"There is no isolinear circuitry available... with a conversion data node from a padd, and a tricorder interpreter interface... yes, I believe I could create a device to transmit a signal to the vid screen." Trey said seriously.

"Would you be able to accomplish the task most easily alone or with help?" Andrew asked carefully.

"The task would be accomplished most quickly and easily with the help of my brothers." Trey said immediately.

"Okay guys, what do you say, who wants to help Trey?" Andrew asked the group.

All the boys but Robert immediately volunteered.

"Could Bobby and Peter help?" Robert asked from Lee's side.

"And Chris?" William asked.

"Yes, there are sufficient tasks for everyone. Lets go to the basement to begin this project." Trey said to the group.

All the boys trooped out of the room and down the stairs.

Angel lifted Chris and took him down the stairs behind the other boys.

"He can't walk?" Lee asked with concern.

"He was stabbed, today's the first day he's been allowed out of bed." Alan said seriously.

"Who would stab a little boy?" Faith asked with concern.

"A slayer." Angel said as he came back up the stairs.

"Who?" Faith asked in panic, flashing back to one of her own darker moments.

"Kendra, she was trying to stake me and Chris protected me... and nearly died." Angel said sadly.

"I'm sorry Angel... He's going to be okay?" Faith asked with hope.

"Yes. He's healing now. He is going to be fine." Angel said with assurance.

"How horrible. I guess life isn't any easier here than anywhere else." Lee said with a dark look.

"Life is what you make it." Alex said quietly.

Lee gave a dark chuckle and said, "And if you don't make anything of it, it's nothing."

"Andy, feed him." Alan said firmly.

"What?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"He has that look you get when your sugar is low. He needs to eat something." Alan said seriously.

Andrew looked at his father then nodded and left the room.

"What do you mean?" Lee asked in confusion.

"The thing that makes Andrew's moods go all crazy, it's low blood sugar, he has to eat regularly or he gets..." Alan trailed off, looking for the word.

"Moody." Scott said quietly.

"Bitchy." Alex said seriously.

"Whiny." Alan said as he nodded in agreement with the others.

"Angry." Angel threw in, understanding the condition.

"Pouty." Faith said in realization, remembering a few of Andrew's episodes from the previous year.

"Silly." Warren said, and looked around the group to find agreement.

"Or depressed." Kurt said with a nod.

"It doesn't always effect him the same way or as strongly, but when we see the signs, we make sure he has something to eat and we give him a few minutes to come back to himself." Alan explained.

Andrew walked back into the living room, and asked, "What did I miss?"

"We were just telling your dad the story of the seven hypoglycemic dwarves." Alan said with a smile.

Andrew laughed and said, "A classic, Bitchy is my favorite."

The room erupted into laughter.

"Dad, I've made you a sandwich, come in the kitchen for a minute." Andrew said quietly.

Lee followed obediently.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Go ahead and eat and I'll sit with you. You'll need a few minutes to feel better." Andrew said with understanding.

Lee began to eat his sandwich.

"Dad, I've got a question, but if it's none of my business, just go ahead and tell me, Okay?" Andrew said quietly.

Lee nodded as he continued to eat.

"I don't understand what happened in your life to make it turn out this way. Where did it all go wrong for you?" Andrew asked and took a seat.

"Son, you probably can't relate to this. You're popular, loved, respected... I never was. I was always alone, then I met your mother. She paid attention to me, just me. She made me feel important and special. This beautiful woman wanted to spend time with a nerdy, scrawny guy like me and it changed my life." Lee said in distant memory.

"She loved to drink and she wanted me to share in her good time. Son, I don't want to talk bad about your mom, but she could pack away the booze. She could drink a sailor under the table every day of the week and twice on Sunday... I couldn't keep up with her and just wanted to share in her good time. And I was afraid if I didn't, she wouldn't want me around anymore and I'd be alone." Lee said as he stared off into the distance.

"Then she got pregnant. I was so happy, but... she didn't stop drinking... she didn't even slow down. I was scared to death that she was going to kill you in the womb or poison you with all her drinking and drugs... but the day you were born, the doctors said you were perfectly normal." Lee said with a pained smile.

"The party kept on until the day I left, but I was hooked. No matter what I did, I couldn't put down the bottle... or the needle. Son, I was a junkie, the bad way. I'd do anything for the money to buy booze and drugs, I cheated people, I lied to them, I stole from them, hell, I even whored myself for a fix a few times." Lee said in shame.

"So what's it like now for you dad?" Andrew asked carefully.

"It sucks. I've got this gnawing need in my gut every single hour of every single day that's trying to pull me back into all that. And if I give into it, even once, I'm done. I'll never come back. I'll be one of the junkies that you try not to look at when you walk down the street. But I don't know how much longer I can keep going like this. I live from paycheck to paycheck doing one crappy job after another while I wait

for someone to notice that I don't get any older. When that happens, I move on to another crappy job." Lee said tiredly.

"What kind of life would you like to have?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Honestly? Yours. God Andrew, you've got everything I ever wanted... And I never thought it was so much to ask for. You've got the family that loves you, the respect of the people around you, a loving... okay, actually I wanted a wife, but you know what I mean... and you've got a career that you can be proud of. I'm not asking for money or fame, just a normal family life like you have." Lee said as he looked into Andrew's eyes.

Andrew smiled and said, "Dad, my life is so far from normal that you can't even see normal from it. My husband is from another dimension... my kids are from other planets... literally... and they're not fully organic. They have machines inside their bodies... and so do I. My best friend Scott was my boyfriend before I married his brother. Alan is carrying our sons, Chakotay and Thomas who are both mutants, one of them has an optic blast, the other can effect time, we'll see how when he's born. I don't even know what our daughter Joyce is going to be like, she'll be born after the twins. Her frozen zygote is in the headboard of our bed. I've had two strokes in the past six months, Alan's nearly died twice, Robert nearly died once... My life is far from normal."

"It sounds like heaven compared to being alone." Lee said honestly and took a drink of milk.

Andrew thought about that and cast his mind back just a few months before... before Alan... before Scott... before the X-men. Finally he said, "You got me there Dad, I've been alone. It blows. So how would you feel about not being alone anymore?"

"What do you mean?" Lee asked with a tired look.

"Live with me, you're my dad, you could move in with us." Andrew said simply.

"Just like that? I think the other people in the house might have something to say about that." Lee said seriously before taking the last bite of his sandwich.

"Dad, you're family. That means something to everyone here. They're all my family, either by marriage or adoption. But if it will make you feel better

about it, I'll ask everyone what they think. One great thing about my family is the blunt honesty. They'll tell you the truth." Andrew said with a smile.

"Alex sure doesn't seem to have a problem with it." Lee admitted, then finished his milk.

"He's just grumpy because he didn't get enough sleep last night. I promise that they won't have a problem with it. Well maybe one, but that'll be solved when the wing is added on." Andrew said in thought.

At his father's curious look Andrew clarified, "All the rooms are full. We're adding on to the house. Once that's done you can have Scott and Alex's old room. But until then, you'll get the couch in the living room."

Lee stared at Andrew without saying a word.

"Dad?" Andrew asked carefully.

"You're serious." Lee said in wonder.

"Yeah, Dad, I don't make offers I don't mean." Andrew said with worry at the change in his father's mood.

"I mean about not hating me, about everything, you really love me and want me." Lee said as he started to cry.

"Yeah." Andrew said cautiously.

"Andrew, people say a lot of things. I guess hanging around with drunks for a few decades makes a person stop taking what people say seriously, but... you mean it. You really want me to stay... you want me." Lee said in disbelief.

Andrew smiled and pulled his father into a full hug that had been accumulating throughout his life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert walked into the kitchen with an uneasy look on his face.

Lee moved out of the way, sensing that Robert needed to talk to his father.

"Robert, what's wrong?" Andrew asked with immediate concern.

Robert went to Andrew and hugged him.

"That means I'm probably not going to like it, huh?" Andrew asked as he returned the hug.

"I am unsure of your probable reaction. Father, I am in love." Robert said in a timid voice.

Andrew was stunned for a moment.

"Bobby?" Andrew asked without emotion.

"Yes, I love him." Robert said with his head buried in Andrew's shoulder.

"And how does he feel about you?" Andrew asked carefully.

"From his actions, I believe he loves me as well. But he is cautious due to my age." Robert said as he pulled out of the hug to look his Father in the eyes.

"He'd better be." Andrew muttered in thought.

"I had hoped you would be happy that I have found my mate." Robert said in a tragic voice.

"Robert, you're too young to choose a mate. What you're feeling may be hormones, influencing your judgment." Andrew said, sympathizing with Robert's feelings.

"But I am sure of it. The sight of him causes a physical response in me, thoughts of him preoccupy my mind. He is beauty, grace and kindness." Robert said in a pleading voice.

"I know. Robert, I'm not saying that you aren't in love, I'm saying that you're too young to make a commitment of that scale. You're thirteen, it's too soon for you to choose a mate... What does Bobby think about this?" Andrew asked carefully.

"He believes as you do. He thinks me incapable of having such feelings and too young to act on them. He said that if the feelings are true, they will wait until I am sixteen, then we can ask your permission to date." Robert said sadly.

"Good for him. I'm glad he understands... Robert, Bobby is right. True love will wait." Andrew said honestly.

"But that is *years*. What am I to do until then?" Robert asked in pain.

"You enjoy the company of your friend Bobby... What do you want to do that you can't?" Andrew asked carefully.

"I want to hold him. I want to kiss him. I want to share my love and my body with him." Robert said in desperation.

"Um, hold that thought. This conversation is *not* over, but I need to talk to Bobby before I do anything else. Will you go and get him?" Andrew asked in a controlled voice.

"Yes Father!" Robert said with excitement.

Andrew watched as Robert ran out of the room then hung his head.

"I hope I don't have to kill Bobby, I like him." Andrew said absently to Lee as he began to pace.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remy walked cautiously into the house and looked around. Without a word he walked back outside.

"What do you suppose that's about?" Alex asked the room.

"I'm guessing we'll find out in a minute." Scott said, keeping his attention on the door.

Moments later, Xander walked in followed by Remy, Aunt Vada and Mr. Howlett. Janine was bringing up the rear.

"Aunt Vada!" Scott said happily and got up to hug her.

"Scott, it's good to see you too." Aunt Vada said with a smile.

When Scott released Aunt Vada from the hug, Alex was next in line, finally out of his blanket cocoon.

"Oh dear, it's been an age since I was greeted so. It does my heart good to be welcomed like this." Vada said happily.

"You're always welcomed here Aunt Vada. Come in, have a seat. And Ken, it's good to see you again." Alan said warmly from his seat on the couch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby walked up from the basement hesitantly. Robert was right beside him, but that didn't provide much comfort in this circumstance.

"Bobby, how are you?" Xander asked enthusiastically.

"Uh, okay, I guess. Andrew wants to talk to me." Bobby said weakly.

"Sounds like someone's in trouble." Xander said in a teasing tone.

"Something like that." Bobby muttered.

"What did you do? Break a window?" Xander asked with a chuckle, remembering how such a little thing seemed to be so major when he was Bobby's age.

Bobby got an offended look, then leaned close to Xander's ear to whisper, {Robert, Andrew's *thirteen* year old son, is in love with me and wants to start a sexual relationship.

Xander sat stunned for a moment before saying to the room of curious onlookers, "Okay, I'm sorry Bobby. And good luck, have a happy life wherever he ports you."

Bobby gave a nervous nod and noticed Andrew standing outside the kitchen door.

"Bobby, lets talk." Andrew said gravely and walked back into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Aunt Vada, let me introduce everyone. Um, Warren, Kurt, Angel, Faith... I think you know everyone else." Xander said in a considering voice.

"Yes, good to meet all of you." Vada said looking around the room, then her gaze fixed on Kurt.

After a moment, Kurt began to squirm under the scrutiny.

"Oh, I'm sorry my boy. Please forgive an old woman for staring. I suppose that's what comes of not getting out of the house much. I never get to meet the more interesting people." Vada said and took a seat beside Alan on the couch.

"Zat is all right ma'am. I am glad you did not scream... or call me a monster." Kurt said shyly.

"My poor boy. If anyone does that, you send them to me and I'll teach them a manner or two." Vada said solidly.

Kurt smiled and looked toward the kitchen. The temptation was great but in the end he decided to let it go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby walked into the kitchen with a tremble of fear in his gut. He saw Lee sitting at the kitchen table.

"I know that Robert is an emotional boy, and sometimes his perceptions are clouded by his emotionalism. That's why I need to know from you what is going on." Andrew said calmly... too calmly.

"Robert is in love with me." Bobby said quietly.

"I got that part, what do you feel for Robert?" Andrew asked shortly.

"I love him too... I'm just not sure if it's as a brother, a friend or something else." Bobby said cautiously.

Andrew thought about those words, then asked more gently, "Are you attracted to him?"

Bobby looked hesitantly into Andrew's eyes. When he didn't see accusation or anger there, he relaxed enough to say, "I don't know. I mean, when I'm talking to him, I enjoy his company. He's a lot of fun and very understanding. He gives great hugs. But when I look at him... he's a little boy. I can't be attracted to that. But I really do feel *something* for him."

"Okay. I was worried that you were just being kind. I'm glad that you're worried about him." Andrew said seriously.

Bobby gave a puzzled look.

"Yeah, what did you think I was worried about?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"I thought you'd think I was having sex with your son." Bobby said honestly.

"I trust you Bobby, and I trust Robert. He wouldn't take that big of a step in his life without talking to me or his dad. I'm just worried that he'll get his heart broken, and at thirteen, it could scar him for life." Andrew said with worry.

"So you don't have a problem with it being me?" Bobby asked to be sure.

"Bobby, you need to work on the self esteem thing. I like you. I'd be proud to have you as a son-in-law... in about five or ten years. Right now we need to figure out how we're going to protect Robert. I know that if I forbid him to see you it will drive a wedge between us... and I can't do that. But saying, 'Okay, go for it.' is out of the question too." Andrew said and dropped into a seat at the table.

"Andrew?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Yes dad?" Andrew said from deep thought.

"I think I can help, if you'll let me." Lee said quietly.

"How?" Andrew asked with hope.

"Let me talk with Robert for a minute. I can't promise that it will help, but I don't think it will hurt." Lee said honestly.

"Thanks dad, anything you can do would be appreciated." Andrew said with relief.

Lee nodded and left the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee walked out of the kitchen and looked at all the people in the living room.

"Robert, would you walk with me?" Lee asked as he spotted Robert in the basement stairway.

After a nod, Robert walked to Lee's side.

Lee led Robert to the front door and they left the house.

"Um, who was that?" Xander asked curiously.

"Andrew's dad." Alan said with a smile.

"His dad's sixteen?" Xander asked with confusion.

"Yeah, I guess he doesn't age... neither does Andrew." Alan said without concern.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee and Robert walked around the side of the boathouse.

"Robert, can you tell your Grandpa what's going on?" Lee asked as he walked with Robert onto the dock.

"I'm in love." Robert said quietly.

Lee nodded then looked around for a place to sit.

"Okay, can you tell me about it?" Lee asked as he went to the end of the dock and sat with his feet hanging over the water.

"I'm in love with Bobby, but my Father thinks I'm too young to be in love." Robert said with despair.

Lee thought about the words, then pulled Robert close to his side and said, "I think your father is probably worried about all that comes with being in love. It's not that you're too young to be in love, but you're too young to be in an adult relationship."

"But what am I to do? I can't behave as if I don't love Bobby because my fathers disapprove, it would be a lie. I can't stop loving Bobby, I am incapable of turning off my emotions like that. But I can't act on my feelings because it is considered inappropriate." Robert said with frustration.

"Robert, if your fathers said it was okay for you to have a relationship with Bobby, that you two can be boyfriends, what would you do?" Lee asked carefully.

"I would hold him close and love him. I would share my body with him and do whatever I could to bring him pleasure... like my fathers do." Robert said with a dreamy look.

"Then what?" Lee asked calmly.

"What do you mean?" Robert asked curiously.

"Then how do you live? Where do you go? What type of life can you have as a thirteen year old boy with a fifteen or sixteen year old boyfriend?" Lee asked seriously.

"We would need to be together... I would move into the mansion... with my alcove. Bobby and I would go to school." Robert said in thought.

"How do you think other kids would treat you, how would they treat Bobby?" Lee asked carefully.

"I do not know. I do not know many others." Robert answered distantly.

"They might think Bobby is doing something wrong by being with someone so young and treat him badly. Or they might feel that they can't relate to you because they are single and you are a couple." Lee said with concern.

"Yes, that is possible." Robert said distantly.

"Robert, it's fine to have passionate feelings and it's wonderful to be in love. But just because you have an impulse, doesn't mean you have to act on it. You don't only have a heart, you have a brain. Use them both and find what will make you and Bobby happy in the short and long term." Lee said and looked out across the lake.

"So I should not listen to my heart?" Robert asked in a timid, confused voice.

"Listen to your heart, but don't be led by it. Consider your emotions, but also consider your well-being. Moving away from your fathers isn't something that would be good for you. Making Bobby an outcast in the school wouldn't be good for him. It's okay to indulge your heart, but not

without restraint." Lee said and looked into Robert's eyes to find comprehension.

"I believe I understand. Thank you Grandfather." Robert said and pulled Lee close for a strong hug.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee and Robert walked back into the house. Robert walked through to the kitchen, Lee went into the living room and took a seat in the floor by Alex since all the couches were filled.

"You're Andrew's father?" Xander asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, I'm forty two years old... I just look young for my age." Lee said shyly.

"So you don't age... what's it like?" Vada asked, enthralled by the idea.

"It's lonely." Lee said honestly.

"How so?" Vada asked curiously.

"Everyone around me ages. People who were my friends look like they're my parents now. When someone I work with notices that I don't age, I leave that job and find another because it's the beginning of the end for me there... it makes me a freak." Lee said sadly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I can see what you mean. It sounds good on the surface, but it has it's own set of problems." Vada said in thought.

"Yeah. And think about how styles, customs, and language changes in a normal lifetime. As time goes on it isolates you more and more." Xander said in thought.

"Yeah, I've noticed... How do you know about that?" Lee asked curiously.

"My ex-girlfriend, Anya. She was twelve hundred years old when I met her. She was awkward, blunt and always unsure of how to behave." Xander said in remembrance.

"Oh dear, how awful. To be that old and always feel out of place.." Vada said as one of her secret wishes was exposed for the trap that it was.

"You should probably talk with Angel. He's one of the few people over a century old that I know who fits in." Xander said in thought.

Lee nodded and looked to Angel who had a look of gratitude directed at Xander.

\* \* \* \* \*

Remy looked around the room and came to a decision.

"Who would like some down home Louisiana cooking for lunch today?" Remy asked all in attendance.

"You want to go to Guillaume's?" Xander asked in a confused voice.

"Non, Guillaume not be de only one who knows how to cook. Remy make lunch for everyone. Aunt Vada be here to see our home, Remy wan to show her some home cookin." Remy said with a smile.

"NO!" Xander said in panic, then took a breath and said in a quieter tone, "I mean, please don't go to the trouble. I can make something up really quick..."

Remy got a hurt look on his face and said simply, "Remy can cook. Eider you trust Remy or you don't."

Xander lowered his head and looked properly chastised before saying, "I'd love to try your cooking Remy. I'm sorry."

Remy walked to Xander and gave him a peck of a kiss on the cheek before heading into the kitchen.

"You haven't tasted his cooking before?" Lee asked as he took the seat vacated by Remy, the other end of the couch from Vada.

"No, and I'm a little scared. He's a Cajun." Xander said and looked with worry at Aunt Vada.

"Don't worry about me Xander, I won't eat anything that would bother me." Vada said as she relaxed and looked around the room.

## ***[Chapter 22: Considering and Reconsidering]***

"Charles?" Eric said in question as he knocked on the door of the office.

The door was unlocked, so Eric entered cautiously.

"Charles!" Eric said as he ran to the slumped form of Professor Xavier behind the desk.

Eric flexed his power and caused Charles' wheelchair to follow him as he ran to the nearest elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert walked into the kitchen to find his Father and Bobby looking expectantly at him and Remy putting pots and pans on the stove.

"Father, Bobby, I'm sorry I acted so impulsively." Robert said shyly as he stood just inside the kitchen door.

"Are you still in love with Bobby?" Andrew asked carefully.

Robert nodded shyly.

"What do you want to do about it?" Andrew asked with a little fear.

"I will do as you say and wait. I am too young for an adult relationship... Bobby, will you continue to be my friend?" Robert asked hopefully.

"Of course. We're going to go running every day and hang out all the time." Bobby said with assurance.

"Bobby, I will wait. But when I am sixteen, I will ask you to be my boyfriend." Robert said as a vow.

"Robert, that's a long way off. Let's just enjoy today, when that day comes, I'll give you my answer." Bobby said with a comforting smile.

Robert nodded.

"He needs a hug." Andrew said and glanced to Bobby.

Bobby smiled and moved to pull Robert close.

Robert melted into the hug and made sure to imprint each and every sensation into his data-node for later review.

\* \* \* \* \*

Warren whispered to Jimmy.

After a nod, Jimmy jumped off Kurt's lap and ran into the Kitchen.

A moment later Jimmy ran out of the kitchen and said, "He said an hour."

Warren smiled and said to the room, "We're going to go to the mansion for a little while. We'll be back in time for lunch."

"I vill take us. It vill be faster." Kurt said anxiously and opened his arms.

Warren walked to Kurt's left as Jimmy walked to Kurt's right. Then in a BAMF they were gone.

"Goodness!" Vada exclaimed as they disappeared.

"I'm sorry Aunt Vada, I guess I should have warned you about that." Xander said sheepishly.

"No, no. It's fine. Even if you had told me... to actually see such a thing... it's beyond imagining." Vada said in wonder.

"You get used to it." Alex said simply.

"Apparently Kurt and Warren took Jimmy shopping, but they haven't had a chance to look at the stuff yet. Kurt said the shopping isn't done till you look at what you bought." Scott said with a smile.

Andrew walked out of the kitchen and walked to Alan.

"Love, since Remy is making a special lunch, I was wondering if you wanted to make something for the kids... they haven't tried food yet... maybe they'll like it. And since it's a special occasion..." Andrew said quietly.

"It's a good idea but I don't know if I'm up to cooking. I don't think I could stand all that time. Love, I'm *really* pregnant." Alan said with apology.

"I could help." Alex offered quietly.

Andrew and Alan both looked at Alex in question.

"If you could tell me what to do, I could do it. You wouldn't have to get up from the kitchen chair." Alex said simply.

"Thanks Alex. With your help, our children will have their first meal today." Alan said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby walked into the living room and walked quietly to Andrew's side.

"Um, Andrew? I was wondering if you could send me to Ronny so I could visit with him today. I'm worried about him." Bobby asked in a whisper.

Andrew got a considering look then said, "I'll go with you. If Ronny wants to, he can join the family for lunch today."

"Really? You mean you're going to let him out?" Bobby asked with a smile.

"On a trial basis. If he can behave himself around us... let's just see how the meal goes, okay?" Andrew asked shakily.

"Yeah, from the way he was last time I talked to him, I think he'll be okay." Bobby said with hope.

"We'll see." Andrew said, wondering if this was such a good idea.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What you've had is a mild seizure which is directly related to your level of stress and exhaustion." Hank said seriously.

"What is your recommendation Doctor?" Eric asked seriously.

"He needs a vacation. For no less than one week, he needs to be completely away from here. The stress he has been carrying has finally reached a toxic level." Hank said, looking Eric in the eyes.

"I'll see to it Doctor." Eric said with certainty.

"Don't I get a say in this?" Charles asked weakly.

"No. You've worked yourself into this state by doing it your way. Now you're going to come with me for at least a week and we are going to relax. End of story." Eric said in a commanding voice.

"But the school, I can't leave things as they are." Charles said desperately.

"Charles, go to your office, tie up your loose ends and turn over control to someone within the next two hours, because in three hours we'll be on our way to an island in the Bahamas for an undetermined amount of time." Eric said forcefully, then turned to Hank and asked, "Is that acceptable to you Doctor?"

"Yes, and if I can be of assistance, just let me know." Hank said with caring.

"Of course." Eric said with assurance.

"I can't turn over control. There's too much to do." Charles said, working himself into a state of anxiety.

"Doctor, may I use your phone for a moment. I need to show Charles how it's done." Eric said calmly..

"Right here. Help yourself." Hank said with a smile.

Eric dialed the phone and waited for an answer.

"I need to speak with Senator Kelley." Eric said forcefully.

"Mystique, I'll be leaving for an undetermined time. See to things while I'm gone." Magneto said with strength.

"No, I'll be out of touch. Use your best judgement... Professor Xavier will be leaving with me, be sure to offer your assistance to whoever he puts in charge in his absence." Eric said and smiled tenderly at Charles.

"Fine. I'll be leaving immediately so you're in charge as of now. I'll contact you when I return." Eric said. After a moment he hung up the phone.

"You see Charles, that's how you do it. She will sink or swim on her own merits. Given Mystique's talents, I believe she will face the challenge and flourish." Eric said as he turned to Charles.

"You win. I'll go get things in order. Thanks Eric-love." Charles said with a gentle smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what are you going to fix the kids?" Alex asked as he helped Alan to sit in the kitchen.

"I was thinking about some tofu soup, some boiled carrots, and some diluted lime Jell-O for dessert." Alan said as he considered the alternatives.

A shiver ran up Alex's spine and he made a sour face. "Damn... What did they ever do to you?"

"Alex, the kids have never eaten food before and they have enhanced senses. Our food would be too strong for them, even if they could force themselves to eat it, it would make them sick." Alan said seriously.

"Oh, okay... but boiled carrots? That's just nasty. What about boiled potatoes? We can make up a variety of low taste toppings for them to choose from." Alex said seriously.

"I didn't think of that. Alex, that's a wonderful idea." Alan said with excitement.

"If you like, Remy can boil some potatoes for everyone. Den you can make toppings for all de people." Remy said as he shelled and veined shrimp.

Alan got a smile and said, "Thank you Remy, that will make the kids feel like they're really part of mealtime if they can have something that everyone else is having. Just make sure to boil the flavor out of their food." Alan finished with concern.

"Remy cook all de potatoes together, den take out dose for us. De rest have de water drained off and new water to finish de boiling. Dat should get rid of de flavor." Remy said without missing a move of his shrimp shucking.

"Excellent. and while you're doing that, I'll work on the toppings and Alex can work on the Jell-O and the soup. I made sure to buy the stuff we needed in case one of the kids wanted to try food." Alan said happily.

"If they can only have tasteless food, why don't I make up some poi? I can't think of any food that has less taste than traditional poi." Alex said seriously.

"I've never had it, but if you want to make some, we'll offer it to them. Who knows, they might like it." Alan said with a shrug.

"Well, I can't make it today, I'll need to go to the store first. but I'll do it soon." Alex said as he pulled the Jell-O from the pantry.

"You'll need to get the unflavored gelatin too. It needs to be diluted for them to tolerate it." Alan said quickly.

"Yeah, I'll get it... But what's with the lime? It's like hospital food." Alex said and got the unflavored gelatin envelope.

Alan just stared at Alex until Alex looked up and caught his gaze.

Alex thought for a moment, then said, "Because hospital food is mostly tasteless and tolerated by people with weak stomachs."

"Right. There's no how-to manual with these kids. I just do what I think best." Alan said seriously.

"You do a good job. Marguerite be lucky to grow up in de house wit you and de children." Remy said from over his cookpot.

Alan got a big smile and said, "Thanks Remy. The kids are lucky to have you and Xander here too, and I know they'll love Marguerite."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Excuse me everyone. Bobby and I decided that we need to invite someone else to lunch. We'll be back soon." Andrew said boldly.

"Who? Isn't everyone you ever met here?" Xander asked with a teasing grin.

"No, one got away, we're going to get him now." Andrew said with a smile and made a portal.

Vada watched with astonishment as Andrew and Bobby walked through the portal and it closed behind them.

"You people sure do come and go in some unusual ways around here." Vada said in astonishment.

Lee nodded in agreement.

Trey, William, and Peter walked to the television and pulled it sideways in the entertainment center.

"Be careful kids, that's breakable." Scott said in warning.

"We will be careful Uncle Scott. It is necessary for us to see the size and type of connection to the vid screen so we can make the proper attachment." Trey said as Peter showed him the attachment that he was looking for.

After a moment of looking, they carefully put the television back in its original place and went back to the basement.

"What are they doing?" Vada asked curiously.

"I'm not really sure. I think they're making some sort of video feed so we can watch something that Alan and Andrew brought from the future." Scott said in thought.

At Vada's questioning look he said with a smile, "It's a really long story and I don't know it all. You'll need to ask Andrew or Alan when they get back in here."

Vada nodded and looked at the group of people around her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew cast his mind out and found Ronny in the common room.

With a flex of his power, he and Bobby were phased. They walked into the room to find Ronny standing over Logan who was vomiting blood into a wastebasket.

"Oh gods, is he okay?" Andrew asked as he watched.

Ronny turned a concerned gaze to Andrew and said, "Yeah, he's been doing this for most of the night. He says it's like this sometimes."

"Bobby, wait here. Go ahead and ask Ronny. I'm going to talk with Hank for a minute." Andrew said with determination flaring in his eyes.

Bobby nodded and watched as Andrew faded from view.

"Ask me what?" Ronny asked while continuing to watch Logan.

"If you want to come to lunch with us. It'll be like a break for you." Bobby said as he watched Logan retching in obvious pain.

"I can't. I won't leave Logan alone." Ronny said with concern.

Logan picked his head up and said, "You go ahead kid. You need a break and all you're going to miss here is more of the same."

"But I can come back after lunch, right?" Ronny asked with worry.

"Yeah, whenever you want. We've got a bunch of family at the boathouse and Andrew thought you'd like to meet them. There are even some not mutants there." Bobby finished with a smile.

"It's okay, Andrew already told me that I'm a mutant. But being around some people who don't care what I am sounds nice." Ronny said and continued to watch Logan.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hank!" Andrew called as he walked into the MedLab.

"He's in the BioLab." Tara said quietly.

Andrew nodded and made his way past the operating room and to the back of the MedLab.

"Hank, Logan... Matt really needs help. He's puking his guts up right now and he looks really weak. Ronny said he's been sick all night." Andrew said strongly.

"I haven't been able to come up with anything that will cure the virus." Hank said as he looked up tiredly from his work.

"Then can you do anything about the symptoms? He's been fighting this thing for months, and it looks like he's losing." Andrew said with worry.

"Perhaps. Logan's healing factor counteracts many medications. What I really need is a way to induce a powerful fever in him... but I can't think how." Hank said with exhaustion.

"A fever? Is that all you need?" Andrew asked incredulously.

"Yes, but there isn't anything that I can give him that will work with his healing factor." Hank said darkly.

"If I can provide the fever, what else would you need to do to heal him?" Andrew asked in a professional tone.

"He would need to be in observation until it was certain that the virus had been completely destroyed. I suppose I could adapt the containment chamber in the BioLab to be more... habitable." Hank said, starting to perk up with the glimmer of hope.

"How long till it's ready?" Andrew asked shortly.

"Give me... three hours. I think I can have it all set up in that time frame." Hank said in thought.

"Get Logan to help you. He can provide things that will make Matt more comfortable... and make sure there's beer. If he has to be in a cage, at least he should be able to relax." Andrew said forcefully.

"Why are you adamant about this?" Hank asked at Andrew's fierce look.

"Hank, he's suffering. I'd want to help anyone who's in that much pain. Please start on the room. I'm going to go back and let him know." Andrew said with a forced smile.

"You're sure that you can induce a fever?" Hank asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, that's one thing I'm sure of." Andrew said and opened a portal back to the common room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew faded into view and asked, "Well Ronny, would you like to join the family for lunch today?"

Ronny cast a concerned glance toward Logan before saying, "Yeah, but I can come back as soon as lunch is over, right?"

"Sure, you just say the word and I'll bring you right back." Andrew said assuringly.

"And Logan, Hank has a treatment to try out on you. He said he'll be ready for you in three hours. That okay with you?" Andrew asked carefully.

Logan looked at Andrew and nodded.

"I'll be back for you in about three hours. Don't worry Logan, it's almost over." Andrew said with concern.

Logan rested back on the couch and said, "Go on, the sooner you get your stuff done, the sooner I can get outta here."

Andrew smiled and said, "It's a deal."

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew, Bobby and Ronny ported into the living room of the boathouse to find the people in groups chatting.

"How about I introduce you around Ronny?" Andrew asked.

Ronny just nodded, not used to all the noise after being nearly alone for so long.

"Ronny, this is Scott, Aunt Vada and Mr. Howlett." Andrew said formally.

"Please call me Ken. I'm only Mr. Howlett when I'm on duty." Ken said with a smile.

"It's nice to meet you Ronny... What's your relation to this family?" Aunt Vada asked with a gentle smile.

"I... Um..." Ronny stammered, trying to think of a decent answer for that.

"He's Bobby's brother." Andrew said and put a hand on Bobby's shoulder.

"Oh, and Bobby's related to you how?" Vada asked curiously.

"He's been accepted as part of the family. He's friends with my son Robert and has been a friend to me since I arrived here." Andrew said frankly.

"It's good to meet you Bobby. It's a pleasure to meet two fine young men like yourselves. Are you students here?" Vada asked pleasantly.

"I am, Ronny is visiting me." Bobby said quickly.

"Does that mean it's the first time for you to visit this family Ronny?" Vada asked gently.

"Yes ma'am." Ronny said shyly.

"Well I'm new here too, so if you feel overwhelmed, come and talk with me, we can prop each other up." Vada said in a tone that was nearly a chuckle.

"Thank you, I'll do that." Ronny mumbled and was led by Andrew to another group of people.

"Angel, Faith, I'd like to introduce you to Ronny, Bobby's brother." Andrew said with a smile.

"We've met... but you were more vocal last time." Angel said teasingly.

"I had some time to calm down." Ronny said with a note of shame.

"You see, this is what happens when a girl goes off the market." Faith said with exasperation. "I'm with Robin for a few weeks and cute guys start crawling out of the woodwork."

Ronny blushed as Bobby smiled radiantly.

"Before you're completely corrupted by Faith's attention, come over here and meet my dad." Andrew said happily.

Andrew led Ronny and Bobby away to the sound of Faith's laughter.

"This is my father Lee and my friend Xander." Andrew said with appropriate gestures, then continued, "And this is Ronny."

"You're looking a lot less transparent. How are you doing?" Xander asked carefully.

"I'm worried about Logan. He's really sick." Ronny said quietly.

"Hank's working on converting the containment room into something livable for Logan. If we can burn the virus out of his system, he'll need to stay in observation for a while to make sure it won't come back." Andrew said with his own concern showing.

"Are you sure it's going to work?" Xander asked with caring.

"Sort of, if it was anyone but Logan, the fever would kill them. But it should work fine. We'll find out in about three hours." Andrew said seriously.

"I'm glad, he didn't look good when I saw him yesterday." Xander said in thought.

"Ronny, my dad's here for the first time today too. So like Aunt Vada said, you can talk to him if all these people get to be too much." Andrew said with a smile at his dad.

"Your dad's the same age as you? How did that happen? And what kind of a sick freak was your mom?" Ronny asked, then felt shame at the statement.

Lee was about to answer when Andrew said, "Dad and I don't age. He looked like this when I was born. And mom's just your standard, run of the mill type sick freak."

"Andrew, it's not nice to talk about your mother like that." Lee said sternly.

"But dad, she's a drunk and a whore..." Andrew began but was interrupted.

"I don't care what you think of her... but she *is* your mother. If you can't say something nice about her, then don't talk about her." Lee said sternly.

Andrew cast his eyes down and said, "Yes dad."

Ronny began to laugh, and drew Andrew's attention.

"Sorry, I couldn't help it. You were so... so fatherly... with me, now I just got to see your father rip into you. It's kinda cool." Ronny said through his chuckles.

"Okay. Now you see you're not the only one with things to learn." Andrew said with a smile and a wink to his dad.

Ronny nodded and continued to chuckle.

Andrew looked around and something occurred to him.

"Before I take you to the basement with the other kids, I'll give you the grand tour, you want to join us dad?" Andrew asked pleasantly.

Lee nodded and moved to Andrew's side.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy, Kurt and Warren appeared in Warren's bedroom in the mansion.

"Can we open ze packages now?" Kurt asked with excitement.

"Sure, Jimmy, why don't you hand them out?" Warren asked as he turned a chair to sit backward on it, so it didn't interfere with his wings.

Jimmy grabbed a large bag and took it to Kurt.

Kurt opened it with excitement and came out with a pair of black casual pants.

After a look of confusion, Kurt asked, "Did you give me ze correct package?"

Jimmy was handing Warren a bag and looked back to say, "Yes, this color will go best with the most shirts."

Kurt looked at the pants carefully and said, "Ze size is too small for me."

"Please just try them. If you'll hand them to me, I'll make the alteration for your tail." Jimmy said as he placed several more bags at Kurt's feet.

Kurt handed over the pants and began to look through bags.

"Jimmy, I'll need to alter the shirts so I can fit my wings through." Warren said as he looked at the stylish avocado green shirt Jimmy had picked for him.

Jimmy finished setting up his little sewing machine and said, "I can make the alterations if you can provide an example of one that has already been altered."

Warren went to his closet and chose a shirt at random to show how he needed the majority of the back opened for his wings.

After a minute of sewing, Jimmy said, "Uncle Kurt, could you try this on before I complete the alteration?"

Kurt took the pants and looked at the little flap that Jimmy had quickly stitched. A moment later he went into the bathroom to change.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew raised his voice slightly and asked, "Aunt Vada, have you been given the grand tour yet?"

Vada smiled and said, "Not yet. Although I notice that you have stairs, I hope they're not on the itinerary."

"Only as a feature as we pass by them. Ken? You haven't seen the place yet either have you?" Andrew asked pleasantly.

"No, just this room." Ken said honestly.

"Well, this is the main attraction. Come on and I'll give you the tour. It's short, but worth every cent." Andrew said with a smile and walked toward the stairs.

"These are the infamous stairs that none of us want to deal with right now, so we'll move on to the door under the stairs. This is Janine's room..." Andrew said then walked back to the other side of the stairs to call down to the basement. "Janine, do you want to show your Grandpa, Aunt Vada and Ken your room?"

"Yes." She answered with excitement and was up the stairs a moment later.

"This is my very own room." Janine said proudly and opened the door.

"My, it's so neat. What is that on the wall?" Vada asked as she looked in from the doorway.

"That is my regeneration alcove." Janine said proudly and walked over to initiate regeneration.

She stepped into the alcove and her eyes closed as the alcove lit up.

"What's she doing?" Vada asked with concern.

"The machine recharges her. This is why she doesn't eat or use the bathroom. And this is as close as she comes to sleep." Andrew said informatively.

"Please turn it off." Vada said with a pained look and turned away.

"Eyleish bolegg kah tah, neveree." Andrew said quickly and the alcove shut down.

"Thank you... It reminds me too much of the last time I saw Maggie... in the hospital hooked up to all those machines." Vada said with tears in her eyes.

"I'm okay Aunt Vada. That's just how I sleep." Janine said with a smile.

"Don't mind your Aunt Vada. Sometimes people my age get weepy at the oddest times." Vada said with assurance.

"This is my bedroom." Andrew said quietly and opened the door.

"Very nice. plenty of space." Ken said as he rolled into the room followed by Lee.

"Yeah, sometimes I feel guilty that Alan and I have so much room while Scott and Alex are sharing a room." Andrew said honestly and walked back out the door.

"That situation will be corrected when the new rooms are built." Janine said seriously.

"Yes Janine. And when they do that, they're going to enlarge your room." Andrew said with a smile.

"I have sufficient room. It accommodates me perfectly." Janine said honestly.

"But you're going to grow." Andrew said and waited for a reaction.

"Correct, the larger room will be needed in time." Janine said, then moved to walk beside Aunt Vada.

"Remy, can we come in so I can show Aunt Vada the kitchen?" Andrew asked through the closed door.

"Oui, come in." Remy said with happiness in his voice.

Andrew walked in to a wondrous smell.

"Oh Remy, that smells incredible." Andrew said as his mouth watered.

"Dat jus be de rue. Remy not start de real cooking yet. Xander gone to get some white wine an more onions." Remy said as he quickly chopped vegetables.

"Remy, when you've got a second, I need to speak to you privately." Andrew said quietly.

"Alan and Alex are making some food for the children. What's on the menu guys?" Andrew asked more loudly to Alex who was stirring something on the stove and Alan who was mixing something at the table.

Alan looked at the group and saw Janine, then he said, "It's going to be a surprise. But thanks to Remy's suggestion, I think all the kids should be able to find at least one thing that they'll like."

Andrew nodded then looked at the group standing in the doorway.

"Through this door is the dining room." Andrew said and led the group to the next stop on the tour.

"Very nice." Vada said as she looked at the large room, immaculately clean.

"This room is Scott's pride and joy. He keeps it spotless." Andrew said with a smile and led the group through double doors which led back into the living room.

"And we will conclude our tour with the Summer's children shadowbox. Janine, will you show your Grandpa, Aunt Vada and Ken the shadowbox?" Andrew asked carefully.

Janine happily ran to the side of the shadowbox and pressed a button.

"This box is my brother Icheb's. These are his eyes watching out for us..." Janine said reverently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt poked his head out of the bathroom door and said, "Ze pants are too small."

"Come on out and let us see them Kurt." Warren said gently.

Kurt hesitantly walked out of the bathroom and stood before Jimmy and Warren.

"You do not wear undergarments?" Jimmy asked as he saw Kurt's semi-erect penis clearly outlined in the pants.

"No, mein tail makes zem too much trouble. Zis is why I do not wear tight clothing." Kurt said with a purple blush.

Warren stared for a moment, then walked to his dresser and pulled something out.

"Try this on." Warren said and handed Kurt a jockstrap.

Kurt looked curiously at Warren.

"I like to have extra support when we go on a mission. Just give it a try before you give up on the pants." Warren said seriously.

Kurt took the jockstrap and walked quickly into the bathroom.

"I think he will look good in clothing that fits." Jimmy said as he looked at the bathroom door.

"I think so too, but if he isn't comfortable, we won't ask him to wear it." Warren said with concern.

Jimmy nodded as they waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Remy, my dad's an alcoholic. Can you not use wine in your cooking?" Andrew asked quickly as he walked into the kitchen.

"Oui. De wine jus to smooth de flavor." Remy said simply.

"And if we have any alcohol in the house, we need to get rid of it now. I don't want him to be tempted while he's here." Andrew said seriously.

"No, dere not be any alcohol here cept maybe in de mouthwash an tings like dat." Remy said as he efficiently snapped green beans.

"Thanks Remy, would you let Xander know? I just don't want my dad to get hurt while he's here. He's been sober for five years." Andrew said with concern.

"Oui, it a good ting you look out for you poppa. It de way it should be wit family." Remy said and looked seriously at Andrew for a brief moment.

Andrew smiled and went back into the living room.

### ***[Chapter 23: Gathering]***

Kurt walked out of the bathroom again and seemed a little more confident.

"That looks great Uncle Kurt. Here, try on the shirt and vest so we can see the whole outfit." Jimmy said with excitement.

Kurt took the orange shirt from Jimmy and set it on the bed as he pulled off the striped shirt he had been wearing.

Jimmy looked in wonder at the scars that covered Kurt's chest and arms.

"Jimmy, why don't you try on your shirt too?" Warren said quietly, not wanting Kurt to feel self conscious about his scars.

After a nod, Jimmy walked to Warren and accepted the shirt that he had picked out.

"I vill need some help with ze buttons. Zhey cause me difficulty." Kurt said with frustration.

Jimmy shrugged on his shirt and left it open as he moved to help Kurt with the small silver buttons.

After the buttons were all done, Jimmy said, "Turn around and I'll adjust the waist of the vest."

Kurt turned and looked over his shoulder to watch Jimmy sliding a strap to make the vest fit comfortably.

Jimmy stood back and looked at Kurt in approval.

"Here's your jewelry. Let me put it on you." Warren said and moved to Kurt, holding a small bag.

Kurt stood in stunned disbelief as Warren placed a silver bracelet with a small turquoise stone on his wrist and a bolo tie with a large turquoise stone around his neck.

Warren finally stepped back and looked carefully.

"The bracelet is aesthetically displeasing. It does not work with this outfit." Jimmy said in a considering tone.

Warren nodded and held out his hand for Kurt to return the bracelet.

Kurt reluctantly handed over the bracelet and watched as Warren circled to his left and Jimmy circled to his right, looking carefully at him.

"The hair. I think we need to change the hair." Warren said speculatively.

"Yes." Jimmy said definitely.

"Would you let us fix your hair differently?" Warren asked gently.

Kurt nodded and moved to take a seat on a chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

"...And this box is for Marguerite. It was empty so we put in all the things we think she'll need." Janine said happily.

"What's the bird?" Lee asked curiously.

"Friendship." Janine said and noticed Andrew watching them.

"Father. I forget, what does the turtle mean?" Janine asked seriously.

Andrew smiled. He knew she didn't forget, she just liked to hear the story.

"If everyone will come back over to the couches, I'll tell you." Andrew said as he picked up Janine onto his hip and carried her to the couch.

"Alan and I had been hurt and were confined to a week of bedrest..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Warren and Jimmy both worked on Kurt's hair silently for a long minute before Warren finally said, "Your hair doesn't look this long the way you have it styled."

"I do not like to have mien hair cut. To have someone behind me with scissors makes me uncomfortable." Kurt said quietly.

Jimmy stood back and shook his head.

"Let me try something Uncle Warren." Jimmy said and moved behind Kurt again.

After another long minute, Jimmy had combed Kurt's hair down, simply parted in the middle.

"This style frames his face and accentuates his features..." Jimmy said as he continued to work.

Warren stood back to take in the effect.

"I agree. It really brings out his bone structure... I think you're going to be surprised Kurt." Warren said with a smile.

"I am finished." Jimmy said and joined Warren before Kurt, looking him over.

"Vell?" Kurt asked timidly.

"What's missing?" Warren asked in an almost pained voice.

Jimmy tilted his head, then jolted upright as he was assaulted by inspiration.

"Uncle Warren, could I alter the bracelet that you bought? I believe I know what we need." Jimmy said with enthusiasm.

"Sure." Warren said quietly and picked up the bag with the bracelet from the dresser.

Jimmy pulled out the bracelet and after a quick look at Kurt, began to bend it out of shape.

"I will do this the proper way when we have more time, but I can make this work for now." Jimmy said with effort.

"Do you need some help?" Warren asked as he saw Jimmy struggling with the metal.

"No, not unless you have a torch, hammer and anvil so I may do this the correct way." Jimmy said and continued to bend the bracelet.

"I didn't bring them this trip." Warren said with a smile.

"Done. Uncle Kurt, if you like the way this looks, I can reconstruct this piece the proper way." Jimmy said and walked to Kurt.

Kurt took the mangled bracelet and looked at Jimmy in question.

Jimmy held out his hand for the bracelet and when he had it, he took Kurt's hand and slipped the newly made ring onto the first finger of his right hand.

"A ring." Jimmy said with a smile and stood back.

"Amazing." Warren said as the entire ensemble seemed complete.

"May I look now?" Kurt asked cautiously.

"Yes." Warren said and walked with Kurt to the mirror on the back of the closet door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"And since that day, the turtle has been a symbol to us of someone who gives up something important to them for someone else." Andrew said with a smile.

Janine got up from Andrew's lap and ran from the living room into Andrew's bedroom.

The others looked at each other curiously until Janine came back into the room more slowly and reverently placed the ceramic turtle on the coffee table.

Andrew smiled and said, "Yes, this is the turtle that Artie made and gave to Alan."

Ronny didn't want to insult something that Andrew obviously felt so much about, but he looked at the lump from one angle, then another trying to see a turtle.

Andrew noticed Ronny's examination and reached down to turn the lump the appropriate way.

"This is the head." Andrew said and pointed at a protrusion from one end of the lump.

"Oh." Ronny said quietly and sat back.

"Okay, Ronny, Bobby and Janine. Let's go to the basement and see how the guys are doing." Andrew said and got off the couch.

The named children all got up and followed Andrew down the stairs.

"That was a sweet story. Was it really like that Scott?" Ken asked carefully.

"I guess so. Andrew left out the part of the story where we were a couple, I dumped him without warning and acted like a big jerk and didn't even talk to him." Scott said sadly.

"But you're still friends after all that?" Vada asked with admiration.

"Yeah, Andrew understood and let me know exactly what I could do to make everything right." Scott said with a smile.

"And what was that... if you don't mind telling." Ken asked curiously.

"He asked me not to date anyone for a year. He figured out that since I'd been an adult, I'd never been single. He said that if I would take a break from dating and get to know myself that he would leave everything else in the past." Scott said peacefully.

"And how is it working?" Ken asked quietly.

"I have good days and bad days. But I know that he was right. I'm learning to be Scott the individual so I won't lose myself the next time I'm part of a couple." Scott said gently.

"A very wise choice. I believe that happens more often than most people realize." Vada said in a considering, distant voice.

The moment was broken when Xander walked into the front door and went directly to the kitchen, carrying a plastic bag.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt stared in wonder at his reflection. He was looking at a stranger in the mirror. The silver nearly glowed out from the outfit giving an air of

regality. The hair made his face look thinner and more angular, which was attractive. The orange shirt was in contrast to his skin color, but in a complimentary way.

After a minute of silence Warren finally asked, "Do you like it?"

Kurt snapped out of his shock and finally said, "Ja, it is amazing. Ze difference is.... I have no words... not even German ones."

Jimmy smiled radiantly and looked at Warren who held a gentle smile and peace in his eyes.

"Now we do ze same for Jimmy?" Kurt asked as he looked at his two friends.

Warren smiled and said, "That sounds like a great idea. Go ahead Jimmy, take your things and change."

Jimmy grabbed up his bags and ran into the bathroom.

Kurt and Warren looked at the closed bathroom door and Kurt finally said, "My life has changed in so many ways... One week ago I vas depressed, alone, unsure of my direction in life. With ze help of you and Jimmy I have found peace within myself zat I had only known briefly before. You are my dear friends unt I have a future zat I may anticipate at ze new institute."

"It's the same for me Kurt. I was feeling adrift. Like my life was going through the motions... then I met you... then Jimmy. Now... I don't know, I can't really tell you what changed, just that something did... it's like my heart opened, after being closed for a very long time. This is something that I've never had before... I've had friends, but you two are more than that, closer... you're my family." Warren finished in a whisper.

Jimmy walked out of the bathroom and proudly displayed the teal shirt and gray pants for the men to see.

"Zat looks good on you. Unt I believe your eyes have changed color." Kurt finished curiously.

"Yes, the shirt accentuates my eyes in an unexpected way." Jimmy confirmed.

Warren looked at Jimmy consideringly, then said, "I think you need a tie."

Jimmy looked with surprise at the statement but only watched as Warren pulled a tie from the rack in his closet.

"This may be a little too big for you but it will give us the idea of how it looks." Warren said and handed the tie to Jimmy.

"I am unsure how to tie this properly." Jimmy said shyly.

Warren sat sideways on the chair to accommodate his wings and said, "Stand here and I'll show you."

Jimmy walked before Warren, and Warren gently turned him to face away.

"It's easier for me this way. I'm not used to tying anyone's tie but my own so it would be backwards if I were facing you." Warren said as he draped the tie to fall over Jimmy's shoulders.

Warren looked over Jimmy's shoulder and moved his arms over Jimmy's to demonstrate tying the tie. "Now you take the two lengths so the small one is a little shorter. Then wrap the large one around the small one... and under... halfway around... up through the neck and down through the knot. Once you have the knot tightened the way you want it, you can adjust the tie by sliding the knot up and down the small end."

"Thank you Uncle Warren." Jimmy said happily and ran to look in the mirror.

"What do you think?" Warren asked happily.

"You are correct. The black tie accents the look and gives depth. It is very appealing." Jimmy said and looked happily away from the mirror.

"Now it is Warren's turn to try on the new clothes." Kurt said happily.

"No, mine have to be altered too much to do it now." Warren said with a small note of disappointment.

"Uncle Warren, I can make the alteration as I did for Uncle Kurt if you like. It is sufficient for demonstration purposes, but not sustained wear." Jimmy said carefully.

Warren smiled and handed the green shirt to Jimmy.

Jimmy began to cut the material then thought to say, "Uncle Kurt, if you will take off those pants, I will complete the alteration."

"I do not want to take zem off. Zey look and feel good as zey are." Kurt said shyly.

"The alteration I made will not hold if you put any significant stress on the seam." Jimmy said as he quickly worked, stitching around the open back of the shirt.

"I vill take zem off, but vill zey be ready before we go to lunch?" Kurt asked with hope.

"Yes. The difficult part is done. All I need to do is reinforce the key points in the seams to diffuse stress from the opening. It will take less than five minutes to complete." Jimmy said, then cut the thread from his little sewing machine and held out the shirt to Warren.

Kurt walked hesitantly to the bathroom.

Warren accepted the shirt from Jimmy and began to take off the shirt he was wearing.

"Uncle Warren, may I help you?" Jimmy asked with concern.

Warren looked to see Jimmy's expression and nodded.

Jimmy moved behind Warren and waited for Warren to finish unbuttoning the shirt.

When he was done, he shrugged the shirt off his shoulders and pulled his arms out.

Jimmy took hold of the shirt by the neck, and after Warren knelt down to accommodate Jimmy's smaller size, Jimmy was able to pull the shirt from around Warren's wings.

"Uncle Warren?" Jimmy asked as he folded the shirt and began to pull the green shirt over the wings.

"Yes?" Warren responded and held out a hand, waiting for Jimmy to hand him the edge of the shirt so he could pull it on.

"Why do you and Uncle Kurt have scars?" Jimmy asked timidly.

Warren looked down to the intricate design of scars on his torso that had accumulated through many painful years of his life and thought about his answer. Finally he said, "We were hurting Jimmy. We didn't know how else to express our pain so we let it out by making it physical."

Jimmy thought about that answer and handed Warren the edge of the shirt so he could finish dressing.

"Would it not be better to discuss the pain with your family and let them help you?" Jimmy asked timidly.

"Yes Jimmy. But I didn't have a family, or any friends at the time I did most of these. I was alone and it was the only way I could deal with what I was feeling. I'm not saying it's the right way. It was just all that I knew at the time." Warren said as he finished buttoning the green shirt.

"Hold still." Jimmy said quietly and began to preen some of the feathers that had become ruffled during the change of shirts.

Warren smiled peacefully as he felt Jimmy's gentle touch carefully smoothing his feathers and making all the little irritating sensations quiet.

"Thank you Jimmy. That is much more comfortable." Warren said with a look of bliss.

Kurt walked out of the bathroom wearing pants that looked absolutely baggy now that he had worn some pants that fit properly.

"I will have these ready in minutes." Jimmy said and took the pants from Kurt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew, Bobby, Ronny and Janine went down the basement stairs to find all the boys working on various things.

"What's going on guys?" Andrew asked as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"We are working on the iso-chip decoder." Icheb said, then looked with disapproval at Ronny.

"Icheb, I need to talk with you for a moment. Everyone else, this is Ronny, Bobby's brother, he'll be joining us for lunch. Please make him feel welcomed." Andrew said then motioned for Icheb to go up the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ze shirt looks good. Do you have any gold jewelry to wear with it?" Kurt asked quietly.

"I think I have something." Warren said and looked through a box on his dresser.

"What about this?" Warren asked and put on a gold herringbone chain.

Kurt looked and thought before saying, "Zhat is good, but you need something more... Jimmy, vat does Warren need to complete ze look?"

Jimmy glanced up from his sewing and said, "An earring, either a simple gold hoop or a diamond stud." Then turned his attention back to his sewing.

"I don't have a pierced ear." Warren said as he considered the idea.

"You should think about it. The look would be quite attractive with your features and coloring. The gold accessories would compliment you." Jimmy said without looking up from his work.

"Is there anything we can do now?" Warren asked hopefully.

Jimmy cut his thread and looked over the stitching of the trapdoor carefully before handing the pants to Kurt.

"May I look at your other jewelry?" Jimmy asked as he walked to Warren.

"Sure." Warren said and gestured to the box.

"Take off that chain and wear this one." Jimmy said and pulled out a thick, gaudy gold chain from the box.

"That's awful." Warren said with a sour look.

"Please try it." Jimmy said and offered the chunky chain again.

Warren took the eyesore and put it on, sparing a glance toward Jimmy.

Warren walked to the mirror and was astonished to see that the chain looked beautiful on him.

"In the absence of other accessories, this large one takes the focus and completes the look." Jimmy said as he looked at Warren's image in the mirror.

"Thank you Jimmy. We need to show Orroro before we leave. This was a gift from her two years ago and I've never worn it. She'll be happy to see it." Warren said happily.

Kurt walked out of the bathroom, once again wearing his entire new outfit.

"Are the clothes comfortable?" Jimmy asked as he looked at Kurt's outfit again.

"Ja, I have never had clothing fit me so well. I am used to loose clothing zat hides me." Kurt said and joined Warren and Jimmy before the mirror.

"Let's find Orroro, then get back to the boathouse. I'm ready to show off." Warren said with a smile.

Jimmy began to gather his clothes when Warren said, "You can just leave those things here if you want. We can take them back later."

Jimmy nodded and walked to Warren's side as they left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello Ronny. Are you well?" Robert asked from a desk where he was working on something that looked like a piece of plastic with etchings on it.

"Yeah, your dad said I could come for lunch with your family." Ronny said shyly.

"How is Logan?" Robert asked with concern.

"He's really sick. Your dad said that they're going to try something to make him better in about three hours." Ronny said with worry.

"Please do not worry. My father is not only competent when it comes to healing, but also aware of his limitations. If he believes that the treatment will be successful, then it probably will." Robert said with assurance.

Ronny looked around and noticed Chris sitting in the wheelchair.

"What happened to him?" Ronny asked Robert.

"He was stabbed by someone who was trying to kill his father." Robert said as he continued to work.

Ronny was stunned with disbelief, then thought to ask, "Who's your father?"

"His name is Angel... mine is Chris." Chris said and put down the spool of wire that he had been wrapping to extend his hand.

Ronny gently shook Chris' hand and looked around the room.

"Peter, I'd like you to meet my brother Ronny." Bobby said across the room.

Peter put down the piece of wood that he was sanding and said, "A pleasure to meet you."

Ronny nodded as Bobby said, "This is Trey, you know Robert, this is Robert's twin, William... Jimmy's not here, and you met Janine upstairs."

"Hi." Ronny said quietly and looked around the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Warren, Kurt and Jimmy walked down the hallway of the mansion and noticed that several people were staring at them.

Finally Warren said quietly, "Either we look really good or really bad."

Kurt nodded and followed into the common room.

Marie looked up from the book she was reading and stared in astonishment.

"Whoa guys. What happened?" Marie asked with wide eyes.

"We went shopping." Warren said timidly.

"Well I need for you to take me shopping if you do it like this. You all look great!" Marie said and stood.

"Thank you." Kurt said shyly.

Marie smiled at Kurt's timid expression and walked around the three to check them out.

"Kurt, you look completely different. I mean, wow. You look fantastic." Marie said and looked him in the eyes.

"Marie, do you know where Orroro is? This chain was a gift from her and I'd like for her to see it being worn." Warren said quickly, trying to take some of the focus from Kurt who was blushing wildly under the attention.

"She left with Artie and Clarissa. I don't know when she'll be back." Marie said as she stared at the gold chain, glistening in the light.

"I'll catch up to her later then. We need to get back to the boathouse for lunch, Remy is cooking a family meal." Warren said with a smile.

"That sounds nice. I'm going to visit my family for Thanksgiving this week, it'll be the first time I've seen them in months." Marie said happily.

"That sounds nice. Try not to eat too much." Warren said as he turned toward the door.

"Are you kidding? My mom's turkey and stuffing is the best ever. I'm going to eat every bit that I can hold and probably bring some home if there's any leftover." Marie said with joy.

"Enjoy your holiday Marie, we must go now." Kurt said gently as he followed Warren.

Jimmy nodded to convey his own well wishes before following Warren and Kurt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew and Icheb walked up the stairs, then when they reached the living room, Andrew turned and continued up the next flight of stairs to the second floor, then on to the attic.

Finally when the door was shut Andrew said, "Icheb, Ronny is going to be here for lunch and I need to know if that's going to be a problem for you."

"Why would you invite him here? He is mean and a bad person." Icheb asked in confusion.

"Because Bobby is worried about him, and because I was wrong to phase him somewhere that he would be alone. I know it's going to be uncomfortable but I have to do it to try and make up for trying to cause him pain." Andrew said quietly.

"So you did not heed your own advice?" Icheb asked in confirmation.

"That's right. I told you not to let his words make you do something to hurt him, then, not five minutes later, I ported him to your dad's dimension. And at the moment I did it, I intended on leaving him there." Andrew said in shame.

Icheb thought about that, then said firmly, "I will try to endure his presence, and if he tries to hurt me, I will attempt to remain calm. But if he attacks a member of the family, I will hurt him."

"You'll have to find him first." Andrew said, matching Icheb's determined tone.

At Icheb's look of question, Andrew continued, "If he attacks a member of the family I'll port him somewhere so remote that it doesn't even have a name."

Icheb thought about that and nodded in agreement.

\* \* \* \* \*

John hesitantly pressed the doorbell, feeling a swell of anxiety in his stomach.

Less than a minute later the door opened to reveal Warren, the blue guy who showed up right before he left and a kid he didn't know.

"Hi John, can I help you?" Warren asked pleasantly.

John was a little surprised at the greeting. First of all, he didn't know that Warren knew his name, and second, if Warren knew who he was, he expected to be greeted with animosity.

After a moment to let the pleasant greeting sink in, John finally said, "Um... I came to talk to Bobby, do you know where he is?"

"Yes, he's at the boathouse. That's where we're going, you want to come with us?" Warren asked politely.

"Yeah, um... sure." John answered brokenly, not sure why this was freaking him out so badly.

As the four people began to walk away from the mansion, Jimmy said, "I am Jimmy Summers, I don't think we've met."

"I'm John, John Allerdyce... or Pyro." John said quietly.

"Oh, I am also known as Six of Seven." Jimmy said quickly.

"What kind of mutant name is that?" John asked curiously.

"I am not a mutant, I am not human. That is my designation." Jimmy said as the group continued to walk.

"Not human? Wow, that must be tough. It's hard enough being a mutant." John said seriously.

"No, I have a large family who love me. When I have difficulty, they help me. Uncle Kurt and Uncle Warren have helped me to understand many things." Jimmy said honestly.

"Your family, are they like you? I mean your same... race?" John asked with difficulty.

"Species. And no, I am the only one of my kind that I am aware of on this planet. My brothers Robert and William are of the same species, they are twins. And I believe that my brother Trey and my sister Janine may be of the same species, but I have not sought to verify that hypothesis." Jimmy said in a considering voice.

"How many of you are there?" John asked, truly interested.

"Six of us children. The rest of our family are human. There are currently twelve of us living in our house, but my brothers will be born soon and that will make fourteen of us." Jimmy said happily.

"Wow, that's a big family. How do you all get along?" John asked in fascination.

"We learned very early on when our fathers adopted us that we must communicate our displeasure immediately if we are to live in harmony. It

has been nearly three months since we were adopted and we all get along well." Jimmy said and looked at John curiously.

John caught Jimmy's gaze and understood what he wanted to know, "It was just me and my dad, we didn't get along so good."

Jimmy nodded and said, "I understand such things, that is sometimes the case. When it is not possible to adapt to the family you have, sometimes it is necessary to create the family you want."

John looked in surprise at the words and allowed himself to lag behind the others so he could have a moment to think about them.

## **[Chapter 24: The Assumption and The Pain]**

As Jimmy, John, Kurt and Warren approached the door of the boathouse, Jimmy said, "We must knock on the door and wait for it to be answered. The sun is at an angle to come in the door and Uncle Angel will have to seek shelter before we enter.

John looked at the others in puzzlement when Kurt said, "I can teleport us into ze room. Zen ve would not have to open ze door."

"With so many people in the house, I am concerned that you would teleport in on top of someone." Jimmy said seriously.

"Ja, zat is very possible." Kurt said quietly.

Jimmy walked up to the door and knocked firmly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew went to the door to open it and felt that someone was holding the knob.

"Is Uncle Angel out of the path of sunlight?" Jimmy asked through the door.

Andrew looked back to see that Angel had moved into the basement stairway.

"Yes, he's hidden." Andrew said through the door.

Jimmy opened the door and walked in followed by Kurt, Warren and John.

"Wow, you guys look great! Who's your new friend?" Andrew said with laughter in his voice.

"This is John Allerdyce, also known as Pyro. He wishes to speak to Bobby." Jimmy said as he walked into the room.

"Nice to meet you John, and Bobby is in the basement, just go down those stairs." Andrew said, pointing.

"Thanks." John mumbled and walked quietly to the stairway.

"Looking good guys!" Scott called out with a smile.

"Yes, the new look is very becoming on all of you." Vada said as she looked at the three with a happy expression.

"Thanks everyone. I guess we weren't too late for lunch then?" Warren said as he walked to a footstool and took a seat.

"No, I think Remy should be done any minute." Andrew said, still a bit stunned by the transformation.

"Kurt, you look fantastic. I can't believe the difference." Faith said in wonder.

With a purple blush, Kurt forced himself to say, "Jimmy unt Warren thought new clothing would be good for me."

"Yeah, but that's just the beginning. You're stylin. The hair, the jewelry... and the sophisticated thing you've got going on... the look just works." Faith said in appreciation.

"Thank you." Kurt said shyly.

"And you're looking pretty daring too Warren. The green and gold just... it's like finding the perfect frame for a picture." Ken said in wonder.

"And Jimmy looks like he's ready to model in GQ." Scott said through a chuckle of amazement.

"Thank you Uncle Scott." Jimmy said with a proud smile.

"Jimmy, why don't you go in the kitchen and show your dad." Andrew said with joy in his eyes.

Jimmy was nearly glowing with happiness as he ran into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

John walked down the stairs and could feel the tremble of fear turn into pure anxiety.

"Hello?" Chris said as he noticed the feet coming down the stairs.

"Hi. I'm... uh... looking for Bobby." John said unsurely to the boy in the wheelchair.

"He's over there with Robert and William." Chris said and pointed to the far side of the basement.

"Thanks." John said quietly and forced himself to take the next steps.

Trying to keep the tremble out of his voice, he said, "Bobby?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy walked into the kitchen to find his dad, Uncle Alex and Uncle Remy all intently working on the family meal.

Alan was the first to look up and he said, "Look at you Squirt. You're looking great!"

Alex looked up at the statement and said, "Jimmy, that looks fantastic. Now I'm going to feel underdressed for lunch."

Remy added, "You be making all de men in de house look uncivilized."

Jimmy looked to his dad with concern.

"Don't worry about it Jimmy. If they don't have the sophistication to dress for a family get together, it's not your problem." Alan said warmly and opened his arms to invite Jimmy into a hug.

Jimmy moved into the hug and felt that his world was complete.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby looked around the room, everyone but Trey was watching him and John. Ronny had a look of question in his eyes.

"Robert, is there someplace John and I can talk privately?" Bobby asked quietly.

Robert nodded and walked a few feet away and pressed the concealed door release into the tunnels.

"Cool." Ronny said as he saw the door open.

"Come on John, let's talk." Bobby said in nearly a whisper.

John hesitated for a moment, then followed Bobby into the tunnel.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's all that about?" Ronny asked as everyone went back to work.

"They used to be lovers." Peter said as he brushed the paint evenly onto the surface of the wood.

Robert's eyes went wide and he glanced back to the closed tunnel door.

"Oh... I didn't even think about that." Ronny said and looked around.

"Ronny, if you wouldn't mind, I could use your help." Peter said carefully.

"Sure, what can I do." Ronny said and walked to Peter's side.

"First, open a window. The fumes from the paint are getting strong. And second, hold this wood by the edges so I can paint the underside." Peter said as he finished the first side of the wood.

Ronny opened the window and silently thought about his brother, talking with an ex-lover.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Magneto said you were sorry." John said quietly.

"Yeah. I really am." Bobby answered, just as quietly.

"For what? I mean, sorry for leaving me? Sorry for not loving me? Sorry for ever meeting me?" John asked in a brave voice.

Bobby smiled tenderly and said, "I'm not sorry I met you John. I'm just sorry that I hurt you... Everything you said out at the rocks was true. I didn't know... didn't care... about your feelings. I was just in it for the thrill. Now I can't think of any way to make it up to you. The things I did... there's no way to make up for it all."

John thought about the words and looked into Bobby's eyes that were showing his true remorse. Finally he asked, "Do you love me now?"

"Yes John, but not like a lover. I love you like a friend, a brother... family. I'm sorry if that isn't enough." Bobby trailed off and tears welled up in his eyes at the thought of how inadequate it was.

John thought about the words and let a small smile form on his face.

At Bobby's look of confusion, John said, "That's what I wanted all along you big goofball. Sex was just the only way I could get close to you... even though it was only physically. Bobby, I've had time to think. When Marie told me that you never loved me, it woke me up. The sex, it was just a substitute for what I really wanted. I wanted someone to love me... and it didn't even have to be you. I used you too Bobby."

Bobby stood stunned, unable to speak.

"You used me to satisfy your physical desires, I used you to keep me from feeling alone. I think that kind of makes us even. Is that okay with you?" John asked hopefully.

Bobby snapped out of his trance state and said, "Yeah, I'm glad you've figured all that out... you really aren't mad at me now?"

"No. I'm mad at myself a little for being so pathetic. I asked you to do everything that you did, and the moment you stopped giving me what I wanted, I exploded like a spoiled kid. I just want to know where we stand now." John asked seriously.

"As friends, the friends we should have been all along. Come on. Let's get back to the others, I want to introduce you around." Bobby said with a smile.

"Sure." John said with a little surprise. He had thought they would have their own little 'Jerry Springer' type scene at the mansion today.

Bobby smiled and led the way back to the tunnel entrance.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Everyone come upstairs. It's lunch time." Scott called from the top of the stairs.

Trey, William and Janine continued to work as the others went up the stairs, with Peter carrying Chris.

Scott walked down the stairs and said, "That includes everyone."

"But we do not eat. We can complete the iso-chip decoder while you enjoy your meal." Trey said from his work.

"That can wait. Your dad, Uncle Alex and Uncle Remy made food for everyone... including you." Scott said seriously.

"Food for us?" Trey said in surprise and actually looked up from what he was doing.

"That's right. They cooked food especially for you so you could try it. Now you'd better get upstairs and wash your hands before lunch." Scott said with a smile.

Trey quickly put away his tools and went to the stairs, followed by William and Janine. Scott was about to follow when he saw Robert standing at the far side of the basement, facing the wall.

"Robert?" Scott asked quietly.

Robert didn't acknowledge him, so Scott walked across the room with increasing worry.

When he reached Robert's side, he turned Robert to face him.

The look of stricken grief on Robert's face tore immediately into Scott's heart.

"What happened?" Scott asked quietly as he squatted before Robert and pulled him into a hug.

"Bobby... he's... he's... with his... love... lover." Robert forced out between hitching breaths.

"You love him?" Scott asked as he held Robert tightly.

"Yes, but I'm... I'm too young for him." Robert said, then broke down into heaving sobs.

Scott kept hugging Robert, and began a soothing rocking.

Robert buried his face into Scott's shoulder and let his tears flow freely.

Scott turned at the sight of movement and saw Bobby and John coming into the basement through the tunnel door.

Bobby hurried immediately to Robert and Scott, obviously worried.

Scott looked from Bobby to John, trying to decide what would be the best way to handle this.

\* \* \* \* \*

The line of children at the bathroom prompted Aunt Vada to say, "Marguerite is going to have quite a wait in line when mealtime comes around."

"We'll make sure she gets a spot toward the front. The older kids can stand to wait a few minutes." Xander said with a chuckle.

"Xander, we need your help." Alex called from the kitchen door.

"Duty calls." Xander said and hopped up from his spot on the couch.

"Can you believe all these people?" Faith said in wonder.

"Child, I had fourteen brothers and sisters in a house not much bigger than this one. It seems like a lot, but I feel more at home here than I've felt in many a year. I'm glad Marguerite is going to be raised with a large family. I never knew what a blessing it was until I was away from them." Vada said as she watched the children waiting to wash up.

"I was one of twelve children. We're all still very close, in fact, we're having Thanksgiving at my sister Denise's house this year. All of us will be there." Ken said with a tender smile.

Peter pointed forcefully toward the couch and Chris hung his head and left the line.

"What's the matter son?" Angel asked with concern.

"Peter said that I was standing too long. He's going to call me when he reaches the front of the line so I can take my place." Chris said quietly.

"That's nice of him. Chris, Peter is concerned for you." Angel said seriously.

"I guess. I just want to be able to do like the other kids." Chris said sadly.

"And you will. It'll just take a little time. You look tired. After lunch you need to take a nap." Angel said with concern.

"But DAAA-AAD." Chris said in a classic cranky kid voice.

Angel smiled and fought back a laugh as he said, "We'll talk about it after lunch."

Chris nodded and looked back to the line at the bathroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Robert, I know it hurts. And I know Bobby loves you." Scott said, looking directly at Bobby.

John looked questioningly at Bobby as he noticed that Bobby was nodding in agreement.

"Do you want Bobby to hurt?" Scott asked carefully.

Robert shook his head in Scott's shoulder.

"Then you need to be his friend. Let him know how you feel and support his decisions." Scott said quietly.

"I will." Robert mumbled.

Scott freed a hand and motioned for Bobby to take over.

Bobby quietly pulled Robert into a hug as Scott shifted him over.

"Robert, John and I are friends. That's all, that's all we ever should have been. Please don't worry. I'm not planning on looking for anyone else, and I know how you feel. What I said before is still true. If it's true love, it will wait for us." Bobby said and held Robert tight.

"Thank you Bobby." Robert said and tried to pull himself back together.

"Now, Robert Summers, I'd like for you to meet my friend John Allergyce." Bobby said, trying to sound confident.

Robert pulled himself up straight and looked John in the eyes.

"I love Bobby. And if you are his friend, then I will try to be your friend too." Robert said with strength.

John stood stunned at the statement, then finally said, "I'll try too."

"Good. Now let's all get upstairs for lunch. This is going to be something." Scott said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert wiped his eyes and made his way upstairs, lagging behind the others.

Ronny noticed when Bobby walked into the room followed by John and an obviously distraught Robert. He moved from his place in line to walk to Bobby's side.

"What's up Bro?" Ronny asked with concern.

"You know when I told you that I used people and hurt them?" Bobby asked quietly.

Ronny nodded carefully.

"John is one of the ones I hurt the most." Bobby said with shame.

"He looks to be in a lot better shape than that little guy." Ronny said, looking at Robert.

In a barely audible whisper, Bobby said, "If everything works out right, that little guy is going to be your brother-in-law in a few years."

"Really?" Ronny asked disbelievingly.

"Yeah. I don't want to make any promises to him yet. Too many things might happen between now and then, but if our feelings don't change before he's eighteen, I'm going to marry him." Bobby whispered.

"Bro, you're serious?" Ronny asked in astonishment.

"Yeah... I just hope I'm serious enough to keep my mouth shut and my zipper closed until he's ready. Self control isn't one of my strong suits." Bobby said with concern.

"It sounds like you're doing it smart Bro, taking it slow. If you feel yourself getting shaky, just talk to me... or imagine what his fathers will do if you hurt him." Ronny finished with a chuckle.

"Yeah, today I thought Andrew was going to port me to the middle of the desert, and Alan was going to fry me where I stood." Bobby said with a smile.

"Hey, freeze pop, You're holding up the line." John said from behind Ronny and Bobby.

Bobby and Ronny moved forward as Bobby said, "Don't get your pilot light in a twist."

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert fought to maintain his expression as he listened to Bobby and Ronny's whispered conversation.

Joy infused every fiber of his being at the revelation that Bobby intended to marry him when he was old enough.

He absently took a step forward in line as Bobby's words replayed in his mind in an endless loop.

'That little guy is going to be your brother-in-law in a few years... I'm going to marry him.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex and Xander came out of the kitchen carrying the table.

"Scott, have you put the leaf in the dining room table yet?" Alex asked as he tried to see where he was walking.

"Both of them. And all the chairs are at the table.

"Good. Ken, It's good that you brought your own chair, you might not get one otherwise." Alex said with a teasing smile.

"I hope that doesn't go for me." Vada said firmly.

"No Aunt Vada, even if there were a hundred people here, we'd always have a chair for you." Alex said reverently.

"What a nice boy." Vada said in a sweet, grandmotherly voice, then continued less sweetly, "He can really suck up when he talks himself into a corner."

Several people laughed as Alan made his way carefully out of the kitchen.

"And don't think I'm not going to ask you about how that happened Alan. I've just been waiting till we have plenty of time to sit and talk." Vada said as he passed her by.

Alan stopped, turned and went back to Aunt Vada.

"May I escort you to the table dear lady?" Alan asked formally.

Vada got a big smile and said, "Yes you may, kind sir."

Alan helped her up from the couch and extended his elbow to properly escort her into the dining room.

"Where do you want us Scott?" Alan asked as they approached the table.

"You're asking me?" Scott asked in surprise.

"You're the keeper of the sacred dining room. We will bend to your will while we are in your domain." Xander said with a flourish.

"Fine, Xander and Remy can sit here. Andrew and Alan next... Ken, do you prefer to be at the end of the table or in the middle?" Scott stopped to ask.

"The chair fits best at the end." Ken said simply.

"Okay, Ken gets the end spot. Then Aunt Vada, Warren, Kurt, Angel... Faith and Lee, do you think you can share that end?" Scott said seriously.

"We'll manage." Faith said with a sultry look at Lee.

Lee saw the look, then mouthed, "Thank you." silently to Scott.

Scott chuckled, then said, "At the next table we'll have Alex, Icheb, Bobby, Me, John, Ronny, Trey and... Robert."

"William, Peter, Chris, Jimmy and Janine can use the coffee table." Scott said as he looked around, hoping he got everyone.

"One more person and someone would be eating off the floor." Alex said as he made his way to his assigned seat.

"It always seems that way in a large family, but somehow, you can always fit one more in." Vada said as she relaxed into her chair.

"Alex, Andrew, Scott, Xander. Come help Remy serve de food. If Remy try to do it all alone, de first person be finished before de last person start." Remy said with a chuckle.

The named individuals followed Remy into the kitchen, then came out a few minutes later, each carrying two bowls.

"Aunt Vada, here is some gumbo. Remy swears it's not spicy at all." Xander said and sat it in front of her.

"And something warm and AB negative for Mr. O'Rourke." Xander said as he sat a warmed mug before Angel.

"Icheb, here is some soup for you, and some for you too Robert." Alex said as he placed the soup before the boys.

"Trey and William, I have your soup." Andrew said as he passed Alex who was returning to the kitchen for another load.

"And here is yours Ronny, and John." Xander said and placed the bowls before the boys.

"Why is ours different from theirs?" Ronny asked suspiciously.

"Try a taste of theirs. If you want some, I'll bring it to you." Andrew said sweetly.

"You mind?" Ronny asked Trey carefully.

"Please do, I have not tasted it before either." Trey said and waited.

Ronny took a spoonful of soup and carefully tasted it.

"It tastes like nothing. It's hot water with little things floating in it." Ronny said with a wrinkled nose.

"Exactly." Andrew said and returned to the kitchen.

"I guess it sucks being an alien if you gotta eat crap like that." Ronny said, looking at Trey with sympathy.

Trey was about to give Ronny the 'alien speech' then decided that he wasn't insulted after all.

The soups were finally all placed and Kurt spoke to the room. "I would like to bless ze food."

Everyone stopped with their spoons in mid-air, then collectively put them back into their bowls.

"Dear God, Bless zis food, Bless zose zat provided it, zose zat prepared it, unt ve who vill receive it. Thank you for providing a family for all of us vere ve can be accepted unt loved. Amen." Kurt said reverently.

Everyone started to eat their soup. Trey and Icheb looked at each other in question, then finally each took a spoon of soup and tasted it.

Trey had a look of wonder. He savored the taste of the soup until the flavor began to fade, then he carefully took another spoon of soup to his mouth, making sure to get every drop.

Ronny watched in wonder at the expressions of ecstasy on Trey's face.

"He acts like he never ate before." Ronny said in wonder.

"He hasn't." Icheb said as he pushed his bowl of soup away.

"You do not like it?" Trey asked in amazement.

"No. I find the underlying flavor displeasing." Icheb said seriously.

"Do you like yours Robert?" Bobby asked curiously.

"Yes, it is very good." Robert said with a dreamy smile (that actually had little to do with the soup).

A moment later Robert rushed to ask, "And how is yours?"

"Delicious. Remy is a good cook." Bobby said with a smile, enjoying Robert's happiness.

"Ronny, does all this seem a little sappy to you?" John asked frankly.

"Oh good, it's not just me. I thought I was having Brady Bunch flashbacks." Ronny said with relief.

"I'll bet you that there's going to be a group hug before the end of the day." John said gruffly.

"Given. No bet. What do you want to bet there's going to be a group hug by the end of the *meal*?" Ronny asked with a mischievous twinkle.

"Group being more than two people, not all of them?" John asked speculatively.

"Yeah, three or more people hugging, before the end of the meal." Ronny said with challenge flaring in his eyes.

"What marks the end of the meal?" John asked cautiously.

"Let's make it dessert, when it's served, the official meal is ended." Ronny said seriously.

"Okay, what's the stakes?" John asked with a grin.

Ronny thought and his face finally fell, "I got nothin to bet."

John saw the crestfallen look and said, "Then it's just for the satisfaction of knowing you were right."

"Okay, I can afford that." Ronny said with a small smile.

"We can't influence them in any way. We just watch and listen. If spontaneous hugging breaks out, you win bragging rights. If it doesn't, I win." John said confidently.

"It's a bet." Ronny said and took another spoon of his soup as he watched the others.

## **[Chapter 25: Admissions and Omissions]**

"Remy, this soup is delicious. How did a young man like yourself learn to cook so well?" Vada asked pleasantly.

"De man who took Remy in off de street. He teach Remy 'bout a lot of tings, cookin be one of dem." Remy said vaguely.

"He did a fine job of it. This is excellent." Ken said with appreciation.

"We ready to bring out de main course?" Remy asked hopefully.

Xander just smiled and nodded.

Alex, Scott and Andrew automatically got up and followed Xander and Remy into the kitchen.

"And all this time I thought Guillaume's had the best gumbo ever." Ken said as he savored the soup.

"I've never tasted anything like this. It's great." Lee said in astonishment.

"Yeah, the stuff in the can don't taste nothing like this." Faith said as she also enjoyed her soup.

"Robert, William, do you want to clear the bowls?" Alan asked and looked across the room.

"We're still eating." William said happily, enjoying his soup.

Robert didn't appear to have heard Alan's question at all.

"If you're finished, just pass them down here. I'll make a stack." Vada said in a commanding tone.

More than one person could be seen scraping the last taste of soup from their bowl before passing it down the line.

Remy walked into the room holding two plates and said, "For Aunt Vada and Ken."

He sat their plates down to reveal sautéed shrimp on a bed of dirty rice, black beans with sausage, boiled potatoes and steamed green beans.

As Remy walked away from the table, Andrew approached with a tray of assorted toppings to put over the potatoes. Butter, Cheese sauce, sour cream and chives, steamed broccoli, and even some chili.

"That's how you cook for a group alright. Make food that can be customized to each person's taste." Ken said with a smile.

"That's right. Pass me some of the broccoli and cheese, that looks lovely." Vada said and accepted the toppings from Ken.

"Here you go guys. This tray is for Summers kids only, and the one Scott is bringing is for everyone else." Alex said as he put down the low taste toppings.

"What's the difference?" Ronny asked carefully.

"You know that soup you tasted? This tastes about the same." Andrew said as he sat plates on the table.

Trey looked at his plate, then at John's. "Father, we have some of the same food." Trey said in wonder.

"Yes, that was your Uncle Remy's idea. This is potatoes. You can put different toppings on them to give them different flavors. Go ahead and try a little of each and decide which one or two you enjoy most." Andrew said, then retreated to the kitchen.

Trey looked back and forth from his plate to John's, then got a big smile as he began to put a small dab of each topping on different parts of his potatoes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jimmy, do you like your food?" Chris asked quietly.

"Yes, very much. I find the potatoes most pleasing without any toppings." Jimmy said happily.

"I like the white topping. The flavor is most curious." William said as he spooned more of the diluted sour cream onto his potatoes.

"I like the yellow one." Janine said happily.

"Because it is yellow?" Jimmy asked with a teasing smile.

"No silly, because it tastes good... but the color is pretty." Janine said, admiring the color of the thin cheese sauce.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can you fill me in here? I've never met most of these people before." John asked as he looked around the room.

"Sure, I don't know everyone, but I was introduced around... The guy with one eye is Xander. He's pretty cool. The red haired guy is his husband. The kid who does most of the talking is Andrew, the really fat guy is his husband. Um... the hot girl, that's Faith and the kid she's sitting by, that's Andrew's father." Ronny said, trying to remember.

"Okay, so the one kid is the husband to the fat guy and the son of the other kid?" John asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, and he's, like, the father to all the alien kids too." Ronny said hesitantly.

"Wow, that's a big job. Think about it, he's our age and he's got a husband and... six kids?" John asked, looking around.

"Yeah. You wanna know what the freakiest thing is?" Ronny asked quietly.

"What?" John asked, turning his full attention to Ronny.

"As sappy and mushy as they all get... I think it's for real. Watch them. None of the kids are trying to get away. The parents aren't yelling. No one is putting on an act. Ain't that something?" Ronny said in wonder.

"Yeah. If me and my dad got in the same room, I'd best be ready to duck or throw. I can't imagine living like this." John said in disbelief.

"I can." Ronny said in a whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So John, how are you doing?" Scott asked as he took his seat again at the table.

"Um, fine." John said hesitantly.

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

"Aren't you mad at me for leaving?" John asked, bracing himself for a blowup.

Scott thought carefully about his next words and finally said, "I was disappointed. Not in you, in myself. If you felt that you needed to leave, I obviously missed a sign or something that you weren't having your needs met. John, you're still welcomed here. You chose to leave, if you wanted to, you could choose to come back... and I don't want to sound like I'm trying to talk you into anything, I just want to let you know where you stand with us."

John sat silently for a long minute before saying, "I don't know if I could. I mean, I can't go back to the way it was before... I was so alone."

Scott thought about that, then looked to Ronny and considered.

"Ronny, what do you think about this?" Scott asked seriously.

"Me? I'm just visiting." Ronny said cautiously.

"Yeah, that gives you a unique perspective. I'm the recruiter, you're the visitor. I think your opinion is going to mean a lot more to John than mine." Scott said honestly.

"Yeah, give, what do you think about it? If I was to come back here, how could I make it better?" John asked with a playful smile.

Ronny almost missed the desperation that was hiding in the back of John's eyes.

"I don't know what you should do. Maybe find someone... one person who you can trust. Like an anchor, then while you've got that one person who's got your back, you can check out other people and maybe find some more you can relate to." Ronny said in thought.

"Like who?" John asked hopefully.

"Like me." Ronny said timidly.

"Yeah, well it's a nice dream. But the most that dreams will get you are sticky sheets." John said sourly and looked away.

Andrew stood and said loudly, "May I have everyone's attention?"

All the conversations quieted as Andrew continued, "My father Lee is visiting with us today and I've invited him to stay here with us. He didn't give me an answer yet, and I think he needs to know how you all feel about it."

"I think it would be great if you could stay. I know Andy loves having you here." Alan said with a warm smile.

"Remy tink Lee be good for de children." Remy said seriously.

"Yeah, and it'll be good to have someone older living here... even if he does look younger than me." Xander said with a chuckle.

"We could use the extra hands with all the kids." Scott said with a smile.

"How are you at changing diapers?" Alex asked with a chuckle.

"It's been a few years, but I think I still remember what goes where." Lee said with a teasing twinkle in his eye.

"Kids? You know how it is, if you have any problem, you need to let us know now." Andrew said across the room.

"I would like for grandfather to stay with us." Robert said happily.

"I too would like for grandfather to stay." Trey said calmly.

After a moment of silence, Andrew asked, "Anyone else?"

Janine walked across the room to Lee's side and asked, "Are you really my grandfather?"

"Yes. I really am. I'm your father's father." Lee said gently.

"If you stay with us will you tell me stories?" Janine asked hopefully.

"Sure, I know a lot of stories." Lee said with love.

"Then I want grandfather to stay too." Janine said to Andrew.

"Okay dad, the votes are in. Now all we're waiting for is for you to decide." Andrew said with hope in his voice.

"Yeah. I'll stay."

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of a cell phone ringing interrupted the meal.

"Excuse me." Warren said shyly and got up from his seat, careful not to smack anyone with his wings as he moved away from the table.

"Hello."

"Yes, that's right."

"Excellent... Set up a meeting, as soon as possible."

"That won't be a problem... And have the paperwork written up to form a partnership on the project... Fifty fifty... Alexander Wainwright... Yes, I found him. In fact I'm having lunch with him and his husband right this minute."

"Just a second." Warren said then walked back to the table and asked Ken quietly, "Ken, can I have the partnership paperwork forwarded to you?"

Ken nodded and pulled a small case from his chest pocket. He withdrew a card and handed it to Warren.

Warren took the card and walked away from the table again.

"Mr. Wainwright's attorney is named Kenneth Howlett. When the paperwork is complete, send it to him."

"I need for you to leak information about this to a few key people... No, more like educators, liberal media and maybe one of the human rights organizations. Hopefully that will get some of those who are most in need queued up at the front door the day we open, and if anyone inquires who is in desperate need, get in touch with me immediately and I'll see that they're taken care of until we're ready." Warren said seriously.

"Yeah, full speed on this one. As it stands, we're first in line on this. If we do this right, the public will end up associating the concept of mutant

education automatically with the name Wagner... Yeah, get PR all over it, full blast."

"Thanks Rome, you've really earned the outrageous amount of money I pay you today. I'll wait for your call about the meeting. Bye."

Warren shut off the cell phone and went back to the table where everyone was staring with question.

"I made a few calls this morning. My assistant found a little college a few miles from here that's on the brink of closing its doors. It is privately owned, has a minimal staff and a full campus. The dean, Dr. Hoffman, was enthusiastic at the prospect of us keeping the college open." Warren said as he carefully took his seat again.

Everyone looked at Warren with shock.

"You *were* serious weren't you?" Warren asked hesitantly.

Xander snapped out of his shock first and said, "Yeah, but we talked about this at three this morning and you've already got paperwork being drawn up... I don't know, do you always move this fast?"

"Not always, but we're going to be the first to open a public 'Mutant Friendly' school. If we move quickly, we'll be established before anyone can rally support against us. And, the best case scenario involves us opening satellite campuses to accommodate the overwhelming need." Warren said, then took a bite of his food.

"What are we going to do about the staff that's already there?" Xander asked carefully.

"We're going to talk to them, one by one, and find out how they feel about mutants. If they are mutant friendly, we'll keep them on... I need to talk to the Professor about hiring away some of his teachers. We're going to need mutant teachers too..." Warren trailed off, obviously thinking outloud.

"I don't think that will be a problem. We have a few to spare." Scott said from the other table.

"Good... I'm sorry that I interrupted the meal. No more business till after dessert. I promise." Warren said shyly.

"That's fine Warren, the way you're going you'll probably have the doors open and the first students sitting in the classrooms waiting for us by the end of the meal." Alex said with a teasing smile.

"I could." Warren said arrogantly, then broke into a smile.

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"What's he talking about?" Ronny asked Scott quietly.

"Warren, Kurt and Xander are going to open a new school. It's a place where mutants don't have to hide, but it's open to non-mutants too." Scott said seriously.

"Will it be like this place? I mean, will there be... dorms or something?" Ronny asked carefully.

"I don't know... Warren, do you know if the new school is set up with dorms?" Scott asked more loudly.

"Yes, there are four dorm buildings." Warren said as he looked over from the other table.

"Do you think I could go there?" Ronny asked in thought.

"Kurt, I think we have your first student here." Scott said with a smile.

"Zat is good. As soon as ze paperwork is signed, you will be enrolled." Kurt said immediately.

Ronny nodded, then slumped.

"I can't pay for it." Ronny said quietly.

"I'm sure Mom will pay, like she does for me." Bobby said with assurance.

"Mom and Dad cut you off the minute they found out you were a mutant. They talked about what they would do when you showed up on their doorstep." Ronny said to his brother.

"What were they going to do?" Bobby asked darkly.

"I don't know it all, but some of it involved jumper cables." Ronny said, trying to hide his emotion.

"So they haven't been paying my way here?" Bobby asked and turned to Scott for explanation.

"No Bobby. They haven't sent any money since the incident. The professor and I decided that you could stay." Scott said quietly.

"So I'm a charity case." Bobby said with shame.

"No. You're family." Scott said with assurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wesley walked into the common room to find Marie and Ethan watching a movie.

"Excuse me, where might I find Andrew? I need to make a request of him." Wesley asked distractedly.

"He's at the boathouse. It's at the other side of the property." Marie said as she turned her attention to Wesley.

"Could you possibly show me the way? I cannot continue my research without his assistance." Wesley said seriously.

"I'll show you the path Wesley." Ethan said eagerly.

"Thank you young man." Wesley said with a genuine smile.

Ethan got up and led Wesley out the door.

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Andrew got up from his empty plate and walked to the other table.

"What did everyone think of the food?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"I enjoyed the potatoes. All the toppings were appealing." Icheb said happily.

"The soup was my favorite." Trey said peacefully.

Andrew turned his gaze to Robert, waiting for his response, and noticed his lovestruck gaze fixed on Bobby.

"Robert, could I talk to you for a minute?" Andrew asked forcefully.

Robert snapped out of his trance state and followed Andrew to the bedroom.

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As Robert walked away, Scott looked at Ronny and came to a decision.

"Ronny, if you want to go to the new school or this one, I'll see to it that you can... but there are going to be some conditions." Scott said firmly.

"Okay, like what?" Ronny asked with a tone of challenge.

"As long as you're a full time student and maintain a 2.0 or better grade point average, your tuition, books and housing will be paid. You will also receive a monthly stipend for additional expenses, like clothes or whatever you decide to use it for. When you turn sixteen, the stipend will stop and you will be expected to get a part time job to pay for your own extras. When you turn eighteen, you will be expected to pay for your housing. But the remainder of the offer stays in effect. As long as you remain a full time student and maintain your grades, your tuition and books will continue to be paid, even if you decide to go on to law school or medical school." Scott said seriously.

"What if I screw up?" Ronny asked hesitantly.

"Then it's over. If you drop classes and become less than a full-time student, or if your grades drop below 2.0, then you're done. You can either leave or find a way to pay for it yourself. You won't get a second chance. This *is* your second chance. Take the time to think about what you really want and let me know when you've decided." Scott said then turned his attention back to his meal.

"Dude, you gotta take this, it's gold." John said quickly.

"What?" Ronny asked in confusion.

"What he's offering, I'd give my left nut for a chance like that. Dude, I've been living in the real world for a couple months and I'm here to tell you, it sucks ass. Don't nobody care about what you're going through, the only things you get is what you get for yourself... God, there's been a few days when I couldn't scrape enough money together to eat. Food man, I didn't

have food. Your life is getting pretty shitty when you're looking at dumpsters and thinking that maybe it wouldn't be so bad to dig in there and find something to eat. What he's offering you is a place where you can live, have food, have some pocket money, and get enough education so you don't end up a waste... like me." John finished in a whisper.

Scott continued to eat and tried to hide the fact that he was listening to every word.

"But what if I screw it up? I'm not that good in school." Ronny said quietly.

"Get help. There's people here that will help you, all you got to do is ask. They won't charge you money or even look at you funny. If you're having trouble with math, then someone good with math will sit down with you an hour each day and help you. All you gotta do is your part, which is go to class and really try." John said with desperation in his voice.

"Why are you so freaked by this?" Ronny asked in nearly a whisper.

"Cause I fucked up my free ride. Now I gotta pay full price. When I left, I screwed up my financial junk. None of the welfare programs or grants or nothin will pay for me to come here no more. Take this offer and you can come and visit me in a couple years and see who got the best deal. You'll be working toward your college degree while I'm wearing a paper hat and asking some yahoo if he wants to super-size his meal." John said with pain in his voice.

Ronny thought about what John was saying and about his current situation.

"Okay, I'll go for it. And I'll make sure to really try. Most of the reason I wasn't good in school before is because I was screwing around instead of trying to do good." Ronny said honestly.

"If you feel like screwing around, just let me know. I'll take you to the house where me and some of the guys crash. After you've seen how I live every day, you'll want to try harder than ever. Dude, I'm living the future that's waiting for you if you pass this up." John said honestly.

"I think I'd like to see where you live... I think I need to see it." Ronny said quietly.

"Just say the word and I'll show it to you. Dude, this is important. This is your life you're deciding." John said imploringly.

Ronny nodded and stared out into space.

\* \* \* \* \*

After pointing Wesley down the right path, Ethan went back into the mansion.

Wesley looked around the grounds of the Institute and admired the scenery. A peaceful feeling washed over him as he casually made his way down the path toward the boathouse.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you going to call mom and let her know you're okay?" Bobby asked Ronny quietly, which jolted him out of his thoughts.

Ronny thought about it and turned to Scott to ask, "Does she think I'm dead?"

"Yeah." Scott said quietly.

Ronny nodded and thought for a moment before saying, "Good. I want to leave it that way."

At Bobby's look of question, Ronny continued, "Bobby, when they found out you were a mutant, they said you were dead to them. Now I'm a mutant, so I'm dead too. At least this way I don't give her the satisfaction of disowning me."

"Do you really think she'd do that?" Bobby asked with a furrow of worry in his brow.

"The house was burned down last night, right?" Ronny asked Bobby and Scott collectively.

Scott nodded.

"And as far as she knows Dad and I died in the fire. Right?" Ronny asked the pair.

Scott nodded again.

"She hasn't called. Your father and brother died in a fire and she hasn't called you. What does that tell you?" Ronny said with pain.

"That I'm dead to her." Bobby said in realization.

"So I guess we're the corpse brothers." Ronny said with forced humor.

"I'm surprised that when they decided I was dead to them that they didn't call me so they could get the pleasure of hurting me." Bobby said as he looked into a distant place only he could see.

"They wanted to, but thought it would hurt you more if you found out by yourself." Ronny said and pushed his plate away, suddenly not hungry.

"It would have been if I didn't have another family, a better family." Bobby said and smiled at Scott.

"Good for you bro." Ronny said with a weak smile.

"Good for us. Just because I'm part of their family doesn't make you any less my brother." Bobby said seriously.

"But after all the stuff I said... They don't want me here." Ronny said in quiet shame.

"That's something you'll have to get used to with this family. They're not like our family was. These people will forgive you. They'll love you no matter who or what you are. I know it's hard to understand, I'm just coming to terms with it myself." Bobby said seriously.

Scott looked at Bobby with question.

"Mom and Dad did this thing, it was like a mind game, 'You be what we want you to be or we won't love you anymore'. If they were pissed, they would act like they didn't love us. We just didn't notice they were manipulating us because it's all we ever knew." Bobby said to Scott, then turned his attention to Ronny, "These people practice unconditional love. Once they love you, they won't stop. If you piss them off, they'll be angry, but they'll still love you. It'll take some time to get used to it, but just look around you and you'll see it in the way they deal with each other."

Ronny and John both looked around the room and saw everyone talking pleasantly, enjoying each others company.

"It's freaky. I thought stuff like this only happened on TV. I didn't think any family actually got along like this." Ronny said seriously.

John nodded in confirmation of the statement.

"I know. It took me a while to understand what it was that fascinated me about this family. Then I realized what it was. The love..." Bobby said, then turned to Trey with an inquisitive expression.

"Trey, what would happen if you told one of your fathers that you felt like a woman trapped in a mans body and wanted to dress as a woman and be called Loretta?" Bobby asked seriously.

Trey thought only for a second, then said, "They would discuss the consequences of such a choice, then allow me the freedom to choose and support my decision."

"See? He's right, that's what they would do." Bobby said simply.

Ronny nodded silently.

"What would Mom and Dad do if you told them the same thing?" Bobby asked Ronny.

Ronny smiled and said, "After the screaming fit, maybe getting beat up a little, they would tell me to get out of their house and never come back."

"Yeah, that's about right." Bobby said seriously.

"What about you John?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I'm pretty sure dad would try to beat the gay out of me." John said seriously.

Ronny nodded.

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"Robert, I need you to tell me what's going on." Andrew said with worry.

"I'm in love with Bobby." Robert said in a dreamy, happy tone.

"I know. But why are you floating on air?" Andrew asked with a furrow of worry.

"Bobby loves me." Robert said with delight.

Andrew's serious look broke and he pulled Robert into a hug.

"That's great little man. But can you try to tone down the cow eyes expression a little?" Andrew asked quietly.

"I don't think I can." Robert said as he enjoyed the hug.

"Please try. Having you look all lovestruck is a distraction. Please try and be your normal self, I promise that when the guests leave, you can get as sappy and dreamy as you want... you might even think about getting with Jimmy and writing some poetry." Andrew said with a smile.

"Poetry? I had not thought of that. Thank you Father." Robert said happily.

"Can you behave normally now?" Andrew asked as he pulled Robert out of the hug.

"Yes, I believe I can behave normally. I am just so happy that it is difficult to contain." Robert said softly.

"Do you want to know a little secret?" Andrew asked and squatted to look into Robert's eyes.

Robert nodded with a smile.

"The way that you're feeling right now, that's what I feel for your dad every day. And every now and then, I can't contain my happiness either." Andrew said with a look of peace.

Robert's eyes went wide as he thought back on some of the past actions and expressions of his father.

"You feel this every day?" Robert asked in wonder.

"Every day." Andrew confirmed with his own dreamy, cow eyed expression.

"Father, please help me to have what you have." Robert begged.

"That's why I'm asking you to go slow and be sure. As good as this feels now, if it isn't real love, it will hurt so bad... Take the time to do this right, then you have the rest of your life to enjoy it." Andrew said with love.

"I will Father. Thank you... I love you." Robert finished in a whisper.

"I love you too, little man. Now let's get back to the dinner. We've still got dessert." Andrew said as he pulled Robert to his side and guided him to the door.

As Andrew opened the door, Robert asked again, "Every day?"

"Every day."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Andrew and Robert walked out of the bedroom, there was a knock on the front door.

"We've got it." Andrew said and guided Robert to walk with him to the front door.

"Wesley! Come in. We're just having lunch, would you like to join us?" Andrew asked pleasantly as he ushered Wesley into the room.

"No thank you. I just had a sandwich." Wesley said as he looked at the groups around all the tables.

"Then will you join us for dessert?" Andrew asked as they walked to the tables.

"Yes. Thank you." Wesley said as he looked for a place to sit.

"Robert, would you get the chair from the desk in my room for Wesley?" Andrew asked as he released his hold on Robert's shoulder.

Robert responded by running to Andrew's bedroom.

"You can sit here." Alex said and scooted his chair to make space at the end of the table.

"Thank you." Wesley said, a little overwhelmed by the acceptance.

Robert carried the chair into the room and at Alex's motion, he brought it to the end of the table.

"We be ready for dessert." Remy said and stood.

Alex, Scott, Xander and Andrew automatically followed Remy into the kitchen.

Alan noticed Vada's curious look and said, "Aunt Vada, I would like you to meet Wesley Wyndom-Price, Wesley, this is Vada Jeffers."

"A pleasure." Wesley said as he half turned in his chair.

"Are you a member of this family too?" Vada asked curiously.

"No, just a visitor." Wesley said shyly.

"But if he ever needs a family, he's got one waiting for him here." Alan added with a smile.

Wesley looked at Alan in stunned amazement.

"When you're ready." Alan said with a shrug.

Wesley nodded, then turned back to the table when Alex sat a plate before him then placed one before Aunt Vada.

"Oh my goodness, I haven't had a cherry cobbler in ages. This looks wonderful." Vada said in delight as she looked at the cobbler and ice cream.

"Yes, and fresh from the oven, unless I miss my guess." Ken said happily.

Alex sat a plate of green Jell-O before Icheb, Trey and Robert.

Ronny crinkled his nose at the sight.

"Would you like to try some?" Trey asked with a teasing smile.

"I fell for that one once already." Ronny said with a chuckle.

Trey and Icheb both took a bite and stopped in wonder at the flavor of the Jell-O.

Alex took his seat again after delivering the last of the food.

"Uncle Alex? Did you prepare this?" Icheb asked curiously.

"Yes, why?" Alex asked as he took a bite of his cobbler.

"Would you show me how to prepare this? I find it to be pleasing." Icheb said happily.

"Sure, remind me tomorrow and I'll show anyone who wants to learn how to make it." Alex said with a smile.

## **[Chapter 26: Unruffled]**

"So Remy, how is it that you had all the ingredients for this fantastic meal?" Ken asked curiously.

"Remy plan to make a meal for de family tomorrow. But all de family be here today..." Remy finished with a shrug.

"Everything has been excellent. You are a very good cook." Ken said with appreciation.

"Thank you." Remy said humbly as he continued to enjoy his dessert.

"Yes, it's very good. Now I know that Marguerite will be well fed." Vada said as she took another bite of cobbler.

"Remy can cook de big meal like dis. Xander be a good cook for de everyday meals." Remy said seriously.

"Thanks love." Xander said and gave Remy a kiss on the cheek.

"So Wesley, what brings you to the boathouse this afternoon?" Andrew asked curiously.

"I actually had some questions about your experience closing the hellmouth, if you wouldn't mind talking about it." Wesley said as he turned in his chair again.

"I wouldn't mind at all. In fact, we have several people here who can tell you about it. Xander was there, Faith... Angel had a part in it. And if we need to we can get Dawn to come over when she gets back from shopping." Andrew said seriously.

"I believe she told me the relevant information from her point of view last night. There are just a few details I'm curious to know. The arrival of a bringer prompted me to do some research." Wesley said, then turned quickly for another bite of his food.

"Okay, let's take our desserts to the living room and discuss it. Who would like some coffee?" Andrew asked as he rose from his place.

Andrew looked around the table and called, "Jimmy, could you take down coffee orders?"

"Yes father." Jimmy said and bounded into the dining room with his padd.

"And Wesley, we have sassafras, chamomile, oolong and Darjeeling tea if you're interested." Andrew said with a smile.

Wesley got a big smile and said, "Thank you, Darjeeling would be fine."

After taking everyone's drink orders, Jimmy looked at the list and said, "Father, I can prepare the drinks."

"If you need my help, just ask." Andrew said seriously.

Jimmy nodded and went to the kitchen.

As people began moving to the living room, Icheb said, "We will take care of the dishes."

\* \* \* \* \*

One by one the children finished their desserts and began to clear dishes.

Bobby and Robert went immediately to the sink and began to prepare dishwater.

Icheb grabbed a towel and moved to Robert's side.

Trey waited by the empty cupboards where the dishes were kept.

William, Peter and Janine carried dishes from the dining room.

Ronny and John took the plates and scraped them off before handing them to Bobby.

Chris sat in a chair that Peter had dragged into the kitchen and watched helplessly.

Jimmy noticed Chris' expression and said, "If you will take this padd and tell me what each person wants, I will prepare their drinks."

Chris smiled and accepted the padd.

\* \* \* \* \*

All the adults sat in the living room and waited for someone to start the conversation.

"Dawn told me how you closed the hellmouth permanently, but I need to know about the vampire who sacrificed himself. As I understand the underlying principle of the spell, his motives would have an influence on the overall effect." Wesley said with concern.

"Um, Spike was in love with Buffy." Andrew said in thought.

"No, he wasn't." Xander said immediately.

"What?" Andrew asked in surprise.

"He loved her, but he understood that she didn't really love him in return. He accepted that and his love was more like friendship at the end." Xander said with a note of sadness.

"How do you know that?" Angel asked curiously.

"Spike and I became... sort of friends. We weren't the buddy type friends like I am with the guys here. But if either of us really needed to talk about some serious stuff, we'd get together, have a few beers and talk it out." Xander said quietly.

"So what do you think his motive was for sacrificing himself?" Wesley asked with concern.

"To save the lives of the people he cared about." Xander said darkly, reliving the pain of losing someone he considered a friend.

"Altruism... That creates an imbalance." Wesley said in thought.

"What do you mean?" Aunt Vada asked, genuinely interested in the statement.

"If Spike had sacrificed himself for the love of a woman, it would have been sufficient to seal the hellmouth. That was the intention of the basic spell. But if his true motivation was to save the lives of friends, not a lover, at the cost of his own life... it creates an imbalance in... karma, for lack of a better word. But that alone wouldn't account for the bringer." Wesley said with difficulty.

"What would?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Possibly a shrine. Some sort of monument erected in his honor." Wesley said seriously.

"What would that do?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"His soul was destined to be transmogrified to a specific plane upon his final death. If he had died for the love of Buffy, then a quid pro quo arrangement is in place. But in this case, his altruistic intent made for an imbalance which forced him into limbo. Then someone created a monument in his name, which gave him a form... albeit an insubstantial one." Wesley rambled.

"So he's a ghost?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I suppose that would be an apt description." Wesley said consideringly.

"I still don't get where the bringer comes into this." Faith said cautiously.

"Spike is stuck between worlds... bound to the hellmouth. And that imbalance keeps the hellmouth open, just a little. Like a foot in the door." Wesley said carefully.

"So you mean he sacrificed himself for nothing?" Xander asked in horror.

"No. The imbalance keeps the door open, fix that and the door is closed permanently." Wesley said with certainty.

"Can we restore the balance?" Angel asked with concern.

"Yes. It is possible. That's why the bringer arrived. The forces that want to reopen the door know this as well and are sending minions to try and prevent us from permanently closing it." Wesley said in thought.

"What do we need to do?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Resurrect Spike."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny and John were still scraping off plates and handing them to Bobby to wash.

"The coffee is ready. Who would like to help carry it out?" Jimmy asked as he began to fill the cups.

"We're done, we can help." Ronny said as he sat the last of the dishes by the sink to be washed.

"Thank you Ronny, this one is for Mr. Howlett and this one is for Aunt Vada." Jimmy said as he handed the cups to Ronny.

"This is for Uncle Warren and the one with cream is for Uncle Kurt." Jimmy said and handed cups to John.

"William, this is the last of the blood you got for Uncle Angel." Jimmy said and handed the mug to William.

Jimmy took two cups and followed the boys out of the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Resurrect Spike? How? He was destroyed." Xander asked as he moved to the edge of his chair.

"His physical form was destroyed. His essence still exists. He is nearly reconstructed, a novice witch could do the spell to give him physical form." Wesley said simply.

"But?" Andrew said.

At Wesley's questioning look, Andrew made a rolling motion with his hands to indicate for him to continue.

"But we must enact the ritual at the monument and will need the blood of an immortal to complete it." Wesley said in a rush.

"Is that all?" Andrew threw up his hands in an exaggerated gesture.

"What kind of monument are we looking for?" Angel asked carefully.

"It must be something valuable, rare, or incredibly special that is dedicated to his name." Wesley said darkly.

"What is it?" Xander asked at the look in Angel's eyes.

The boys walked into the room and started handing out cups.

"I don't know. We're overlooking something... Something that's right in front of us." Angel said as he accepted the mug from William.

"Say it again Wesley." Andrew said in thought.

"It must be something valuable, rare, or incredibly special that is dedicated to his name." Wesley said with less enthusiasm this time.

"Hold on." Andrew said as he thought.

"His name! William." Alan said with wide eyes.

"That's it. William is named after Spike, William Alan Spike Summers." Andrew said with excitement.

"And he is valuable, rare and incredibly special." Alan said with a smile.

"Now we need to find an immortal." Wesley said with concern.

"Can I do it?" Angel asked.

"No, I'm afraid your blood is... borrowed. This must be a human immortal." Wesley said with a tone of apology.

"How immortal?" Alan asked carefully.

"What do you mean?" Wesley asked hesitantly.

"Do you need someone indestructible or just someone who doesn't age?" Alan answered with a question.

"Someone who doesn't age should be sufficient, do you know of such a person?" Wesley asked hopefully.

"Wesley, I am twenty-three, this is my father who is forty-two. Will we do?" Andrew asked as his mood turned dark. He couldn't help but think about the future.

"Yes, how extraordinary, I thought it would take weeks to find someone." Wesley said with excitement.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We have two people who can perform the ritual, and we have the monument. If no one objects, we can perform the ritual and be done with this entire situation before the powers working against us can do anything to stop us." Wesley said.

"Now? You mean, perform a ritual here? Now?" Alex asked in disbelief.

"Yes. It is not complicated, but it will require the blood of one of you." Wesley said as he looked at Andrew and Lee.

"May I move this table so I can perform the ritual here?" Wesley asked, puzzled by Andrew's sudden dark change in mood.

"Sure." Andrew said quietly and snuggled into Alan's side.

Wesley moved the table and marked out a circle on the floor with chalk.

"If that doesn't come up, I'm sending you the cleaning bill." Scott said seriously.

Wesley nodded as he continued to mark out the circle.

"It works better if you have a piece of string and someone standing in the middle." Xander said to Wesley.

Wesley paused to flash an exasperated look at Xander before completing the circle.

"William, would you stand in the center?" Wesley asked commandingly.

"Father?" William asked hesitantly.

"It's your choice William. He's trying to bring Spike back." Andrew said quietly.

William walked into the circle and waited.

"Now I will need one of you to provide me some blood for the ritual." Wesley said hopefully.

Andrew was about to stand when Lee hopped up and walked to Wesley.

"Dad?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"I can't let you have all the fun. Let me do it this once." Lee said with a smile.

"Thanks Dad." Andrew said and snuggled again.

Wesley began a long complicated ritual as everyone watched.

After about five minutes Icheb walked out of the kitchen and asked, "What is he doing?"

"Magic." Andrew said simply, then turned to look at Icheb.

"Would you go to the bedroom and get the spare blanket?" Andrew asked absently.

"Yes Father." Icheb said and walked to the bedroom.

"You cold Andy?" Alan asked with worry.

"No. But I think Spike might be if he manifests buck naked in our living room in front of twenty people." Andrew said with a smile.

"Good thinking love." Alan said and kissed Andrew on the top of the head.

\* \* \* \* \*

"God this is boring. I thought magic would be all sparkly and exciting." Alex whined.

"Oh yeah. And this is a fairly simple spell. There are some that go on for days like this." Andrew said as he watched from Alan's embrace.

"So all his gibbering is going to cause this Spike person to appear?" Vada asked curiously.

"Yeah. That's as good an explanation as anything I can come up with." Andrew said with a fond smile.

"And this Spike person... What is he going to do when he gets here?" Vada asked curiously.

"I don't know. We'll ask him what he wants to do." Andrew said without concern.

"Will he be my brother?" Chris asked from the kitchen doorway.

Angel saw Chris standing and motioned for him to come and sit.

Chris sat on Angel's lap and snuggled close.

Angel held him loosely and said, "We'll just have to see how things go when he gets here."

Wesley finally raised his voice and said some words in a demon language before drawing a blade across Lee's hand.

"Shit! Ow! I just thought you were going to stick me a little, not slice." Lee said as Wesley firmly held Lee's hand in the circle.

William watched as a mist formed around him and waited breathlessly as something began to form.

"Icheb, get the blanket ready." Andrew said as he continued to watch.

Icheb picked up the blanket and waited for it to be needed.

The mist resolved into the form of Spike laying at William's feet, curled into a fetal ball... naked as a babe.

Icheb walked casually to Spike and threw a blanket over him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dad, come with me and I'll take care of your hand. Kids, go downstairs and give Spike a few minutes to wake up." Andrew said as Wesley examined Spike.

"Wow, it worked." Xander said in an impressed tone.

"How is he?" Angel asked with concern and noticed that Chris had fallen asleep.

"He seems fine but..." Wesley trailed off with a furrowed brow.

"But?" Angel asked cautiously.

"He seems to be fully human. He has a pulse and his skin is warm." Wesley said in confusion.

"So is he William?" Angel asked with a hint of concern.

"Let's find out... does anyone have a cross?" Wesley asked and looked around the room.

Everyone looked to Kurt who squirmed under the stares and finally shook his head shyly.

"Here, but I want it back." Vada said and took a silver cross from around her neck.

"Yes, this will just take a moment." Wesley said as he walked to Aunt Vada to take the necklace.

Carefully, Wesley pressed the cross against the back of Spike's hand.

The skin began to smoke and Spike suddenly awoke.

"What the bloody hell are you doing you stupid git?" Spike screamed and knocked the cross from Wesley's hand.

"I guess that means that he's not William." Scott said in a considering voice.

"But if he has a pulse... what is he?" Xander asked carefully.

"A daywalker." Angel said darkly.

Spike looked around the room in confusion and noticed that he had thrown his blanket off.

"Someone's not a natural blond." Faith said with a smile.

"Spike, come over here and I'll explain things to you." Xander said in a friendly tone.

Spike gathered the blanket around him and sat on the couch beside Xander.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Xander asked carefully.

"I was in Sunnyhell. The evil bloke was about to kill everyone and I put on the ugly necklace and gave it up to save all the people." Spike said slowly.

"Yeah, well that was a couple months ago. Sunnydale blew up, we thought you were dead until Wesley found a way to bring you back." Xander said, then asked the room. "Am I leaving something out? That seems too simple."

"Well, we're in a different dimension. You're married. Andrew is married and has six kids. Willow was a vengeance demon. And all the Scoobies were infected with malignant evil. Besides that, no, I think you got it all." Faith said with a smile.

Spike looked around the room and said, "Peaches, what's that you've got? A snack?"

Angel let his game face flash on for a second, then said, "This is my son, Chris." Then Angel got a mischievous smile and said, "Your brother."

Spike sat stunned by that statement as Andrew and Lee came back into the living room.

Andrew walked back into the living room with Lee and noticed Icheb in the basement stairway.

"Icheb, who's clothes do you think would fit Spike best?" Andrew asked as he took his seat beside Alan.

Icheb thought for a second, then said, "Uncle Alex."

"Do you have something Spike can borrow Alex?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yeah, sure. You wanna come with me Spike? I'll get you something to wear." Alex said as he got off the couch.

"One thing first, mate. Who the bloody hell are you? Where the bloody hell am I? And why the bloody hell am I naked in your bloody living room?" Spike asked from the couch.

"That's three things. But to answer your questions. Alex Summers, Westchester, New York, in an alternate universe, and because Wesley only resurrected your body, not your clothes." Alex said with an impish grin.

Spike thought about the answer and looked at the smile.

"Fair enough." Spike said and hoisted himself off the couch.

Alex led the way upstairs.

"Spike's going to be a little upset when he sees..."

"Bloody hell!"

...Alex's wardrobe." Xander finished with a chuckle.

"Spike's not into Hawaiian?" Scott asked.

"He never seemed to be when he borrowed my clothes." Xander said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The right side of the closet is my stuff, help yourself." Alex said as he took a seat on his bed.

"Bloody hell!" Spike screamed and staggered back from the Hawaiian shirts glowing out from the closet.

"They're not that bad... and if you look in the back, you'll find some darker ones." Alex said quietly.

"So who's got the other side of the wardrobe? Your lover?" Spike asked and waggled his eyebrows.

"My older brother." Alex said weakly.

"So what do you do for a good shag around this place?" Spike asked as he looked through clothes.

"If you find out, you tell me. I'm not getting any." Alex said honestly.

"Since when?" Spike asked curiously as he pulled a shirt out of the back of the closet, then returned it.

"Since ever." Alex said shyly.

"Virgin?" Spike asked in wonder as he looked at Alex.

"Yeah." Alex said, wilting under Spike's incredulous gaze.

Spike looked into the closet again and spotted a pair of black jeans. He grabbed onto them quickly and lost the grip on his blanket.

Alex looked with appreciation as Spike hurriedly put on the black jeans.

"Fit like a bloody glove." Spike said happily.

Alex looked at Spike's half dressed body and walked to the dresser.

"Here, try this on." Alex said and threw Spike a black pocket T-shirt.

"Ta mate." Spike said and pulled on the shirt.

"It looks good." Alex said with a smile.

"Well, I'm in a new place, with a bunch of new people. The only ones I know are the Puppy boy and Peaches, oh and that squirley little Andrew bloke." Spike said and took a seat beside Alex.

"They're all okay. A lot of people live here, but not everyone who's downstairs." Alex said honestly.

"I got me a sense 'bout people. You're a good one. Prolly too good for the likes of me. I'm not good at getting to know new folks... I used to not care, I'd just kill'em... but anyway, can you help a poor sod out and help me along?" Spike asked hopefully.

"What do you need help with?" Alex asked uncertainly.

"Something's different. It's like my demon's been... neutered or something. I don't feel the rage, I don't crave the blood... I'm not me anymore. I don't know how to be like this." Spike said helplessly.

"How do you want to be?" Alex asked quietly.

"Dunno. I guess I been dead and since I did a good thing, I got a second chance. So I guess I'd better take advantage of that and be one of the good guys, like what made me like this." Spike said unsurely.

"Before you start putting on an act for everyone to see, why don't you just try being yourself, without any act?" Alex asked carefully.

"I can't be like that. I can't get no bloody respect being a wuss poet from the west end of London." Spike said sadly.

"You're a poet? I'd love to hear some of your work." Alex said with a gentle smile.

Spike looked into Alex's face and smiled in return.

"Not yet. I need to get settled in somewhere... but then I will." Spike said with the slightest hint of affection.

"Good. And for now, just try being yourself. If you don't like it, you can go back to your world and be your badass self again." Alex said with a chuckle.

"What have you heard?" Spike asked cautiously.

"Not much, I promise Spike." Alex said with a gentle laugh.

Spike nodded and said, "I think I'd like it if you called me Wil. The name 'Spike' just sounds wrong coming from you."

"Thanks, I think... Wil"

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what are we going to do with him?" Scott asked the room.

"Let's ask him." Andrew said simply.

"What if he wants to stay here?" Scott asked with concern.

"Well, he could sleep in the bathtub..." Alan said hesitantly.

"I wouldn't suggest that to him. Last time he slept in a bathtub, he was chained there." Xander said quietly.

"Kinky." Faith said with a smile.

"Giles didn't want to have an unrestrained vampire in his house." Xander said frankly.

"We have two couches, he can sleep on one of them if he wants. Now on to the next topic, the safety of our children." Alan said firmly.

"Icheb, come up here for a minute." Andrew called down the basement stairs.

In just a moment, Icheb was standing before his father expectantly.

"Icheb, can you think of anything that would prevent a vampire from draining you in your alcoves while you regenerate?" Andrew asked bluntly.

"Besides the preemptive destruction of the vampire?" Icheb asked in confirmation.

Andrew nodded.

"A proximity alarm can be easily installed on our alcoves. If anyone moves within two meters of one of our alcoves, regeneration will cease immediately." Icheb said in a considering tone.

"Good, do it. And see if you can install some kind of comm device or panic button so you can call for help if you need it from every alcove." Andrew said firmly.

"Isn't that a bit much love?" Alan asked with concern.

"No. It's not just Spike that I'm worried about. While we were on Voyager, we didn't have to be on guard every minute. Here there are mutant-hating fanatics, demons, vampires and just your run of the mill sickos who might like the chance to hurt the kids." Andrew said with worry.

Alan nodded in acceptance.

"We will begin immediately." Icheb said and went to the basement, after noticing Chris who was still asleep on Angel's lap.

"What's taking them so long?" Scott asked as he looked in the general direction of Alex's room.

"They're probably trying to find something non-Hawaiian for Spike to wear." Xander said with a smile.

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"Wil, are you ready to meet everyone?" Alex asked carefully.

"Yeah, but don't be put off if I seem a little gruff, I've got me a reputation to maintain." Spike said softly.

"I promise that you don't have to keep the reputation here. If you wanted, you could be yourself in this house, and if you asked, no one would tell anyone outside that you aren't an evil fiend." Alex said with assurance.

"How bout this, I'll try to keep me a civil tongue and see what happens. That way I can give it a try if I want to, but won't be committed to anything either way if I don't." Spike said carefully.

"That sounds good. And no matter what you decide, I won't tell anyone that you were decent to me. If you decide to be an evil bastard, I'll let them think you were that way to me too." Alex said as a vow.

"Ta mate." Spike said with a smile, then let the expression fall from his face to be replaced by a bored snarl.

Alex giggled at the transformation.

"You're going to have to act more scared of me than that." Spike said and let his smile return.

"I'll look appalled by you when it counts." Alex said and followed Spike out the door.

## ***[Chapter 27: Preemptive Strike]***

Alex and Spike walked downstairs to the living room and everyone fell silent.

"So Spike, how are you doing?" Xander asked carefully.

"This bloke seems to have an unhealthy fascination with Hawaii." Spike said with a smirk.

"You didn't tell him?" Scott asked Alex with mild surprise.

"He didn't ask." Alex said with a shrug as he took a seat on the floor.

"Didn't tell me what?" Spike asked with irritation.

"That Alex lived in Hawaii until a few weeks ago." Scott said with a smile.

"That's alright then. The white knight here doesn't have that excuse." Spike said with a cheeky look at Xander.

"You don't have to worry about that anymore Spike. My husband declared that I'm not allowed to wear the Hawaiian stuff anymore... unless we go to Hawaii." Xander said and snuggled Remy.

"Husband? Does this mean you finally let go of the demon chit?" Spike asked with interest.

"Anya died in the fight at the hellmouth... protecting me." Andrew said sadly.

"What happened to you? You used to be a nerdy little bloke who was chasing after everyone for attention." Spike asked in wonder at the transformation of Andrew.

"Um... Okay... This is my husband. That is my father. And my six kids are in the basement. When you've got all that, you change." Andrew said firmly.

"Looks like the little squirrely guy grew a pair. Good for you mate." Spike said with genuine appreciation.

"So how's about you introduce me around Peaches?" Spike asked as he looked at all the unfamiliar faces.

"Andrew should do the introductions, we're in his house." Angel said with certainty.

Andrew nodded and said, "Spike, this is my husband, Alan Summers."

"Any relation to the slayer?" Spike asked seriously.

"Yeah, sort of. We're in a different dimension, but he has a second cousin who's named Buffy Summers. Let's see. Alan and Remy are from another dimension. Scott, Alex and most of the other people you don't know here are from this one. And the people you do know are from our dimension." Andrew said haltingly.

"Did red start tossing people through dimensions now?" Spike asked curiously.

"No. I did. Willow isn't a witch anymore." Andrew said quietly.

"I bet there's a story behind that. Once you're a witch, you don't turn back. Even after Dru died, she still had her witchcraft." Spike said in thought.

"It took a vengeance demon's spell." Xander said simply.

"That could do it. That's some powerful mojo." Spike said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll tell you the whole story later if you want. Let's see, you know Xander, beside him is his husband Remy, over here we have Aunt Vada who is the grandmother of the baby that Xander and Remy are going to adopt, and this is Mr. Howlett, the attorney who is working on the adoption. You know Wesley... but this isn't the Wesley from our universe. This one's still a watcher. Here is Kurt Wagner and Warren Worthington the third, and my brothers-in-law Scott and Alex." Andrew said in thought.

"So are you a demon too mate?" Spike asked Kurt curiously.

"No, just a mutant." Kurt said pleasantly.

"Mutant?" Spike questioned.

"Yeah, um, quite a few of us are mutants. Including me." Andrew said carefully.

Spike looked around and finally said, "I don't know just what that is mate, but as long as mutants don't eat vampires..."

"...We're just people." Warren interjected.

"Fair enough." Spike said with a nod.

Icheb and William walked up from the basement and to Janine's room.

"More mutants?" Spike asked as he saw them pass.

"No. They're not human. They're from other planets." Andrew said shyly.

"Bet there's a long story to go with that one too." Spike said off-handedly.

"Oh yeah." Alan said with a smile.

"William, are you ready to meet Spike?" Andrew called out.

William ran into the room with excitement.

"Spike, this is my son William Alan Spike Summers." Andrew said proudly.

"You named a kid after me?" Spike said in wonder.

"Yeah, I told the kids about you and William chose to honor you by taking your name." Andrew said with a smile.

"Are you a mean little bloke?" Spike asked with a teasing look.

William raised his arm in a flash and his tubules were at Spike's throat. With a playful smile he said, "I can be."

"William. It is impolite to assimilate our guests." Alan said firmly.

William retracted the tubules and, without looking away from Spike said, "Yes dad."

"You got you a pair of brass knackers alright. Maybe I can show you a few moves later." Spike said with genuine affection.

"William, your assistance is required." Icheb called from Janine's room.

"I must go now." William said and ran to help Icheb.

"What are they doing?" Spike asked curiously.

"Putting in a security system." Andrew said honestly.

"Because of me?" Spike asked with a smile.

"We needed to do it anyway, we're doing it *now* because of you." Andrew said simply.

"You know how to make a bloke feel welcomed." Spike said as he tried to put on a wounded expression.

"If you don't like it, we can go with plan B." Andrew said with a smile.

"And what would that involve?" Spike asked cautiously.

"Not much, your heart, a wooden stake and the application of some pressure." Andrew said solidly.

"You think you could do it?" Spike asked in challenge.

Andrew's eyes flashed and Spike was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew's eyes flashed golden and Spike saw that he was standing on the top of a mountain. Below him he could see what looked like a sea of writhing bodies. The sounds of howls and screams of pain rose up around him like a choir of agony.

The fetid stench in the air was choking him. The smell of putrid rotting overrode the rest of his senses as the overwhelming smell and taste of death in the air insinuated itself into him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where'd you port him?" Alan asked casually.

"A hell dimension... Just to make a point." Andrew said seriously.

"A show of strength?" Scott asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. That should be enough." Andrew said and pulled Spike back.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bloody hell! That was bloody awful." Spike said as he gasped for breath.

Alex walked beside Spike and said, "You didn't have to do that Andrew, that wasn't cool."

"He needed to know." Scott said with certainty.

"You could have told him. You could have waited for him to threaten you before you attacked him. That was wrong." Alex said angrily and his clenched fists began to glow.

"Alex, your losing it, pull it back." Scott said with worry.

"Or what? You'll port me to a hell dimension because I *might* threaten you?" Alex asked as his anger increased and the red glow became brighter.

"I'm alright mate. This bloke just wanted me to know that he won't take any shit from me... And if he'd told me, I'd think he was all talk." Spike said soothingly to Alex.

"They were wrong." Alex said, keeping his gaze fixed on Andrew.

"Don't do this mate, I'm not worth it." Spike said quietly.

That snapped Alex out of his fury and he let his hands relax.

Andrew let out a breath and said, "I'm sorry Alex. I just thought it was the best way for Spike to understand."

"It's not me you should apologize to. You could have ported him anywhere, then he would have understood. You didn't have to do that." Alex said and walked out of the room.

"Cover up Angel." Alex said from the front door.

Angel hopped out of the chair, and carried Chris to the basement stairway. Once he was safely concealed, Alex opened the front door and walked outside.

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"He would choose outside... I can't follow him." Spike said with his worried gaze fixed on the door.

"You might be able to go out in the sunlight. Be careful and go slowly." Wesley said in a considering voice.

"I'm a vampire mate, if I go out there, I'll end up a pile of ashes." Spike said, still watching the door.

"Spike... William, you have a pulse. I think you've been resurrected as a daywalker." Angel said quietly, still standing, still holding Chris.

"Bloody hell. The double damned? What did I do that was so bloody wrong to deserve that?" Spike asked with a slight whine.

"I don't know. But if you want to go after Alex, you probably can. Just be careful, we could be wrong." Angel said carefully.

Spike nodded and moved cautiously to the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spike carefully opened the door and held one hand out experimentally. When nothing happened but a warm sensation on his skin, he moved fully into the light.

Everyone watched as Spike walked out into the sunlight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex was sitting on the edge of the lake, picking little pieces of grass and throwing them angrily at the water.

"Mind if I join you mate?" Spike asked quietly.

"Wil? I thought you couldn't go out in the light." Alex said with confusion.

"I couldn't before. When they brought me back, they made me different. Now I can." Spike said darkly.

"I'm sorry about that back there. I should've let you handle it your own way." Alex said quietly.

"Nothing to be sorry for mate. You stood up for me. That doesn't happen much for someone like me and I won't forget it." Spike said with a smile.

Alex nodded shyly.

"Can you tell me why you did it? We only just met." Spike asked as he took a seat beside Alex.

"I finally met someone I could talk to... connect with... and they started treating you like crap. It wasn't even that Andrew ported you to a hell dimension that pissed me off so bad. It's that he did it so casually, like it was nothing to him. If someone had ported one of his kids to that dimension, he'd have a whole different opinion about it." Alex said, feeling the anger rising again.

"It ain't worth the fight Alex. It's part of the game we all play. We have our flag waving, pissing contests and the occasional show of force so we can prove that we're serious." Spike said as he leaned back and enjoyed the feel of the sun on his skin.

"If that's the game, I hate it. You were being good. You didn't insult or attack anyone, there was no reason for him to do that." Alex said in frustration.

"I think I understand. You're angry for me, but you're also angry because someone you respected disappointed you." Spike said in a considering voice.

A long moment of silence fell between the men. The sound of the water lapping at the side of the lake was all that could be heard.

"Yeah." Alex finally said.

"That's the thing with humans, sometimes they'll do that. Don't hold it against him. He did what he thought was right... And I understood it. From your point of view, it's wrong." Spike said quietly.

"I guess..." Alex said quietly, then fell silent.

The lapping sound of the water marked the time as Alex sat silently in thought.

"Wil, I'm tired of being the 'other one'." Alex said as he laid back on the grass.

"How do you mean?" Spike asked as he laid down beside Alex.

"Scott is the team leader, Alan is Andrew's husband, the dad of all those kids, I'm... nothing. I'm introduced as the brother or the brother-in-law... sometimes the uncle. I just want to have something that's mine... I want to be special." Alex said as he watched the clouds drift by.

Spike thought about the words and quietly said:

"The pools of midnight call to me,  
ever saying 'speak my name',  
The fields of wheat, thrash and flow,  
summoning for me to touch,  
The velvet path invites me in,  
daring me to be so bold,  
The breeze does sing with silent songs,  
proving words to be replete,  
The silken snow of such expanse,  
never trodden, never known,  
All these things could I attain,  
had I courage, had I worth."

Silence fell again until Alex finally said, "That was beautiful... and sad. Having all that desire but being afraid to act on it."

Spike smiled and said, "I wrote that for someone special."

"She must really be something for you to feel that strongly for her." Alex said with his eyes closed.

"I wrote that when we only just met. That was the first moment of attraction." Spike said quietly.

"How did it turn out? Did you work up the courage to tell her or did she leave and you never saw her again?" Alex asked carefully.

Spike rolled on his side and looked at Alex for a moment before saying, "I found the courage."

"So what happened next?" Alex asked and turned to look into Spike's waning gaze.

"You'll have to tell me." Spike said and reached to comb his fingers through Alex's hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you think I should go to check on Alex?" Andrew asked with concern.

"No, give him some time to cool down. I didn't even know he had a temper." Scott said in an impressed voice.

"There's more to this than you're seeing." Vada said sagely.

"How do you mean?" Andrew asked with interest.

"The young man blew up too easily. Something's been festering, this incident just ignited it." Vada said in thought.

"I agree. You need to figure out what's bothering him or you're going to see more of this." Ken said speculatively.

"He's been feeling like he's cramping Scott by sharing his room." Andrew said quietly.

"Why would you think that?" Scott asked in disbelief.

"Because he told me." Andrew said with apology in his voice.

"He told me that he feels like he's not taken seriously because he's only a few years older than the kids." Scott said in thought.

"An he needs to get laid." Remy said simply.

"Remy, that's not the solution to all life's problems." Xander said in a teasing tone.

"Non, not all life's problems, but it be de solution to some of Alex's problems." Remy said with certainty.

"He did say that he can't find anyone his own age." Warren said in a considering voice.

"And remember when we were talking about being in high school, what he said?" Andrew asked.

"That he was invisible." Alan said darkly.

"So he's alone, feels that his presence is causing his brother distress, that he isn't respected due to his age... I think that's enough reason to have a short fuse." Vada said to the room.

"God, how do I miss this stuff? John basically said that he left the school because he was lonely, and I never saw it. Now the same thing is happening to Alex and I didn't have a clue." Scott said in despair.

"Well you know now. Let's fix it." Vada said with strength.

"How?" Andrew asked curiously.

"He feels alone, then maybe he needs to feel needed. He feels he doesn't have respect, then maybe he needs to be trusted. What can we do to make him feel needed and trusted?" Vada asked in a leading tone.

"Have him watch the kids. He knows that nothing is more precious to us than the kids, and if we leave him to watch them alone, he'll know that we trust him." Andrew said with excitement.

"That will work for today, but it's just a Band-Aid on the very large wound that he's carrying around. He needs to be needed every day for some reason that isn't made up. He needs to be trusted for real, in a situation that requires trust. If you can't prove to him that you depend on him, then you're likely to lose him." Vada said forcefully.

"Lose him? How?" Scott asked with panic.

"What would you do if you lived somewhere where you weren't needed and weren't trusted?" Vada asked in return.

"Leave." Andrew said simply.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The fields of wheat, that's the color of your hair." Spike said as he gently combed his fingers through Alex's hair.

"Wil, I've never..." Alex began, then closed his eyes at the gentle whisper of a touch that glided through his hair.

Alex opened his eyes and Spike said, "The pools of midnight are your eyes. They draw me in demanding nothing, wanting only for me to call your name... Alex."

"Wil..." Alex whispered.

"The breeze that sings with silent songs is your breath, carrying a melody into my soul." Spike said and let his hand drift down to caress Alex's cheek tenderly.

Alex opened his mouth to speak and Spike gently moved in for a gentle, tender kiss.

When the kiss broke, Spike gently said, "The velvet path invites me in."

Alex hesitantly reached out and trailed one finger down Spike's cheekbone.

"Why me?" Alex asked with a tremble in his voice.

"Because you're special."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What does everyone have to do today? I mean really, not just busy work." Andrew asked carefully.

"I have to meet with the Professor, I've been putting it off for a couple days." Scott said frankly.

"I was hoping that after we get our paperwork done, we could go to the hospital and visit Marguerite." Xander said honestly.

"Oh, I would like that." Vada said happily.

"And I have to work on some things that were emailed to me. Otherwise Monday is going to be hell." Warren said without enthusiasm.

"I've got to see if I can help Matt, Hank should be ready for me soon. Wesley, could you help me, I could really use some backup." Andrew said and looked to Wesley with hope.

"Certainly. I'll meet you in the medical facility." Wesley said calmly.

"I'd like for Hank to take a look at the babies after all that went on last night." Alan said seriously.

"I need to get Chris to bed, he's exhausted." Angel said as he looked tenderly at Chris.

"And I need to get back to Robin." Faith said seriously.

"Do we have any of the food from lunch left over?" Andrew asked Remy.

"Oui, dere be a few tings left." Remy said happily.

"Would you mind fixing up some food for Faith and Robin?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Be jus a minute." Remy said and hurried to the kitchen.

"Well, it looks like we honestly need Alex's help without having to make up anything." Andrew said to the group.

"Yes. Maybe we've avoided depending on him up to now." Alan said speculatively.

"Let's just see if he'll even watch the kids before we decide that we've got this all figured out." Xander said seriously.

"Who wants the honors? I probably shouldn't be the one to ask him." Andrew said sheepishly.

"If someone will get him, I'll ask him." Alan said.

"Why you?" Xander asked carefully.

"Because anyone else asking him to watch the kids would seem wrong. Andrew or I would have to be the one to do it." Alan said with certainty.

"Yes, very good thinking. And don't think for a minute I'm not going to talk to you about how you got so pregnant. I'll just save that for my next visit." Vada said with a smile.

"You're always welcomed Aunt Vada, but I've had such a good time today, I'd like to invite you back next Saturday so we can do this again." Alan said warmly.

"That would be lovely." Vada said happily.

"Great, and that goes for everyone. You're all invited back next Saturday for a family lunch." Alan said to the group.

"I'll take you up on that." Ken said with a smile.

"I will be here." Kurt said with certainty.

"I'll be gone all week, but I'll come back for that." Warren said with a smile.

"Would it be alright if we visit Marguerite, then do the paperwork? I really want to see her." Xander asked hopefully.

"Yes, that would be fine with me. Aunt Vada?" Ken asked warmly.

"Yes, I'd like to visit with her first too." Vada said and stood.

"Kids, come up here so you can say goodbye to Aunt Vada and Ken." Andrew called out.

All the children came up the stairs and swarmed around Aunt Vada and Ken.

"Line up by age, Janine first and you can hug them goodbye." Andrew said and watched as the children lined up for their hugs.

Ronny and John stepped aside.

"You really going to hug them?" Ronny asked Bobby who was in line.

"Sure, I don't get enough hugs, I'll take'em where I can get'em." Bobby said with a smile.

John and Ronny thought about it, shrugged and got into line.

\* \* \* \* \*

As William released his hug from Aunt Vada, Andrew said, "William, would you go outside and see if you can find your Uncle Alex? Your Dad needs to ask him a favor."

William nodded and ran to the door. He looked back to see Angel move into the stairway before opening it and running outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spike moved in for another kiss, this one only slightly deeper and more forceful.

Alex hesitantly put an arm around Spike and pulled him close as the kiss intensified.

After a long minute, Spike finally pulled out of the kiss.

"That's all for today mate." Spike said quietly.

"Why?" Alex asked in confusion.

"Because if we jump into this, someone's going to get hurt. I've got me some calluses built up, but you could get hurt real bad." Spike said honestly.

"Thanks Wil. Thanks for going slow and thanks for thinking of what's the right thing to do while I'm just enjoying the feeling... You aren't just doing this because of what I said are you?" Alex asked hesitantly.

"Let me put you straight on something. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I told you I was a poet, you asked to hear my poetry. When someone threatened me, you stood to defend me. I did do this now because of what you said. If you hadn't said anything, it prolly woulda been months before I got up the balls to do anything. But I would have got to it. Got that?" Spike asked with force.

"I got it Wil. Can I get one more kiss?" Alex asked hopefully.

"Maybe just one." Spike said with a smile.

They moved in for a deep passionate kiss as William walked over the rise to see them kissing in the grass.

"Uncle Alex! Dad want's to ask you a favor." William called out with a big grin.

Spike and Alex broke the kiss with their simultaneous smiles and Alex finally said, "I'll be there in a minute William. And don't tell anyone we were kissing, okay?"

"Why not? It is wonderful that you have found someone." William said with excitement.

Alex thought for a second, then said, "Yeah, you're right. Tell anyone you want."

"You sure luv? Havin the big bad as a boyfriend can ruin your reputation." Spike said cautiously.

"I'm an eighteen year old virgin, sharing a room with my older brother. What do you think there is about my reputation that shouldn't be ruined?" Alex asked with a smile and led Spike back toward the boathouse.

\* \* \* \* \*

William reached the door first and knocked.

"Come in." Andrew called as he watched Angel move to safety again.

William, Alex and Spike walked into the room to find everyone standing.

"What's up?" Alex asked shyly.

"We got to talking and found out we all have things to do this afternoon. I was wondering if you'd watch the kids for us." Alan asked hopefully.

"Where are you going to be?" Alex asked curiously.

"I need to get Hank to check me out, I want to be sure that thing last night didn't hurt the babies. Andrew needs to help Matt. Everyone else has their own stuff to do." Alan said quietly.

"Yeah, no problem." Alex said, looking at the kids.

"Father, may I come with you to the mansion? I told Marie that I would spend some time with her this afternoon." Icheb said hopefully.

"Sure." Andrew said with a smile.

"Okay then, I'm going to make a portal to the mansion for anyone who's heading that way, then I'll drive Alan over." Andrew said and formed the portal.

"Thanks for having us over Andrew. We had a great time." Angel said, carrying Chris.

"Come back anytime Angel, you're always welcomed." Andrew said before Angel walked through the portal.

"I guess I'm ready, it was fun. You gonna port me back next Saturday?" Faith asked hopefully.

"Sure, and if Robin's available, bring him along." Andrew said with a smile as he opened a portal for Faith.

Ronny walked to Andrew and asked, "You mind if I go with you? I want to be there to help Logan."

"I thought you would. You can ride over with us. What about you Bobby? John?" Andrew asked.

"I'll stick with Ronny if you don't mind." Bobby said with a glance at his brother.

"Me too." John said.

"Fine... Dad? What are you going to do?" Andrew asked.

"I worked an overnight shift before I came here. I could really use a nap." Lee said shyly.

"Use our bedroom. When do you want to be woke up?" Andrew asked quietly.

"In two or three hours. I don't want to sleep the rest of the day or I'll be up all night." Lee said with a smile.

"Okay, someone will wake you in a few hours." Andrew said and looked to Alex, who nodded.

"Thank you for a wonderful day guys. I'll be here next Saturday." Warren said with an appreciative smile.

"I will be here as well. Thank you for your hospitality." Kurt said with gratitude.

"Kurt, when we get set into a routine we're going to start having some family time every night. You'll have an open invitation to that when we get it started." Andrew said happily.

"Thank you. I will look forward to zat." Kurt said before walking through the portal.

"So Peter, are you going to stick with the guys or go to the mansion?" Andrew asked.

"I have some reading I would like to do. Thank you for inviting me... I have been away from my own family for three years and miss them greatly. For the first time since I have been in this country, I have felt at home." Peter said gently.

Andrew pulled Pete close for a hug and said, "Come by anytime Peter. You're always welcomed here."

Peter pulled out of the hug and nodded before he walked through the portal.

"Alex... are we okay?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Not yet. Come into the kitchen for a minute." Alex said forcefully as he walked to the kitchen.

Andrew followed silently as Alan, Spike and the kids watched.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked into the kitchen to find Alex leaning against the countertop casually.

"What can I do to make it right?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Lay off Spike." Alex said sharply.

"I'm not doing anything. I showed him what I can do, we understand each other, we're done." Andrew said carefully.

"Yeah, the game, he told me. Let me spell it out. I don't like what you did. If someone did that to one of your kids... just as a show of strength... how would you feel about it?" Alex asked coldly.

"I'd be just as pissed off as you are... but Spike's not your kid. He's a master vampire." Andrew said steadily.

"No, he's not my kid, but think about it. He sacrificed himself to save a bunch of lives... including yours. Then the next thing he knows he's naked in our living room. Fifteen minutes later you're porting him into a hell dimension so you can prove... something... to him. It was wrong." Alex said firmly.

"Okay Alex. When you put it that way, I can see what you mean. Come on." Andrew said and walked out of the kitchen with purpose.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked into the living room at a deliberate pace and stopped before Spike.

"Spike, I'm sorry. I was wrong to port you to a hell dimension. Alex made me see that I was wrong for attacking you. Will you forgive me?" Andrew asked sincerely.

Spike looked at Andrew with wide eyes and felt the snarky comment forming on his tongue when he noticed Alex standing behind Andrew with a hopeful expression.

"Yeah, it's forgiven." Spike said quietly.

"Thank you. You *are* welcomed here. I'm sorry I didn't say that before... I respect and admire you, otherwise I wouldn't have named one of my kids after you." Andrew finished with a smile.

"Yeah, thanks for that mate. No one ever thought enough of me to do that before. I can't promise that I'll be able to behave myself, but if I get a taste for mayhem or violence, I'll be sure to keep it away from the house." Spike said with a smile.

"I appreciate that. Treat us with respect and we'll do the same for you... now I need to get to the mansion. Do you need any blood or anything while I'm out?" Andrew asked genuinely.

"No, I could use some food though. I don't know what you did to me, but I'm not a real vampire anymore." Spike said with concern.

"We'll figure it out. For now, just relax and get caught up. Alex can fill you in on some of the highlights of the last few months." Andrew said and helped Alan to stand.

Janine ran to her father and put her arms up.

"You be good for your Uncle Alex." Andrew said as he hugged her and gave her a kiss.

"Father, we will complete the proximity alarms and iso-chip decoder while you are gone. We will be able to view the vid chips when you return." Trey said seriously.

"You can go ahead and start them when you're ready. If you find any really good ones, just set them aside so we can watch them later." Andrew said and began to hug his way up the line of children, followed by Alan.

Andrew, Alan, Ronny, Bobby and John left for the mansion.

## **[Chapter 28: Babysitting with Hazard Pay]**

All the children went downstairs and Alex shrugged.

"Do they always get so sappy about it?" Spike asked as Alex led him to the kitchen.

"Yeah. It's their way." Alex said as he pulled out some of the leftover food from lunch.

"What'd you tell that Andrew bloke that got him to apologize to me?" Spike asked curiously.

"I reminded him that he'd be dead right now if you hadn't done your good deed and that he has a really messed up sense of gratitude." Alex said as he placed a plate of food in the microwave.

"Ta mate. I never had me a white knight of my own. Never needed one. But I gotta admit that it's nice, havin someone that cares for me." Spike said shyly.

"Wil, I know you don't need me to fight your battles. That's not what just happened. Someone hurt my friend, that made it my battle. If he'd pissed you off, I know you'd fight for yourself." Alex said as he pulled the heated food out of the microwave and handed it to Spike.

"Ta mate. This smells bloody wonderful." Spike said and sat at the kitchen table.

"Yeah, Remy is a great cook." Alex said with a smile.

"I can't believe I'm hungry for human food. I'd eat it every now and again, but I haven't been hungry for it for over a century." Spike said as he began to eat.

Alex chuckled, then stopped at Spikes look of question.

"I've been looking for someone my own age to hook up with and when I finally find someone... he's over a hundred years old." Alex said and began to laugh.

"Yeah, well I guess I don't have to worry bout that no more. If I'm a daywalker, I'm going to age and die like a human." Spike said darkly.

"What's a daywalker?" Alex asked with interest.

"A half vampire. The only way I knew one could be made is to turn a woman who's pregnant, right before birth. Even then, it's just as likely to kill the baby as half turn it." Spike said as he ate.

"You don't seem happy about it." Alex said seriously.

"Daywalkers are double damned. They're despised by the demon community because they're more human than demon. They're hated by the humans because they're still part demon. Daywalkers can go out in daylight. That way they can hunt while other vampires are hiding from the sun... and they sometimes hunt vampires." Spike said between bites of food.

"Why? I mean, for food? Revenge? Why do they hunt vampires?" Alex asked in fascination.

"Not food. Human food is good enough, I think I'll probably need blood too, but just every so often. If vampires find a daywalker, they kill it. So sometimes it's self defense, other times it's revenge or a quest." Spike said as Alex got up from the table, obviously still listening.

"So if vampires hate daywalkers so much, why do they create them?" Alex asked as he pulled the cobbler from the refrigerator and put some on a plate.

"Now and then a master decides that he needs one for a job. He'll breed it and get the job done, then call a bloodhunt on it." Spike said as he continued to eat.

Alex put the cobbler in the microwave and turned it on before saying, "That's horrible. So the daywalkers have no home? Nowhere that they can be accepted?"

"No, and they're sterile... in the sense that humans can create their own kind and vampires can create their own kind, daywalkers have to be made from a vampire and a human... at least that's what I was told." Spike said and pushed away his empty plate.

Alex silently pulled the cobbler from the microwave and put a scoop of ice cream on the plate.

"What are you going to do?" Alex asked as he put the plate between himself and Spike, then handed Spike a spoon.

"I don't know. I guess I need to talk to Peaches and find out if he has any advice." Spike said as he took a spoon of the ice cream.

Alex took a spoon of cobbler and said, "Think about staying here. Angel is a full vampire and he's welcomed. The Professor gave him a job as a teacher. If you wanted to, you could stay too."

"And do what? I don't think they need anyone to teach classes in bloody mayhem... and that's about all I know." Spike said quietly.

"No, Logan is our bloody mayhem instructor. What about English? Alan is the head of the language department, you could do literature, poetry... stuff like that." Alex said as he enjoyed a spoon of cobbler and ice cream.

"No mate, I can't live like that. I've got to have me some violence now and again or I'll go bloody loony." Spike said with apology in his voice.

"Then join the X-men. They're a team that fights... whatever threatens us. Scott's the leader and just about all the adults at the mansion are on the team." Alex said carefully.

"Team, like codenames, uniforms, stuff like that?" Spike asked carefully.

"Yeah, we've been off schedule the past few weeks, but starting Monday, we'll be back to combat training, mutant power training, drills... it keeps us sharp." Alex said as he scraped the last of the ice cream off the plate.

"Mutant powers?" Spike asked curiously.

"Yeah." Alex said and held up his hand which was glowing a bright red.

"I guess that means you could blast something with that." Spike said looking at the hand.

"Yeah. Scott and Alan have the same thing in their eyes. I guess one of Alan's babies has it too." Alex said as he pulled his power back.

"I got nothing like that. What use would I be to a bunch of supermen." Spike said doubtfully.

"Xander's on the team, so's Angel. You don't have to be a mutant to be on the team. You just have to be willing to follow orders and work as a team." Alex said as he put the plates in the sink.

"That would be a new one for me." Spike said in thought.

"If you wanted, you could give it a try. Wil, this sounds perfect for you. You're a talented poet, this way you could teach kids to love poetry. You're a trained fighter, this way you get the chance to fight. You're a daywalker, this way you get to live in a place where that doesn't matter." Alex said seriously.

"You ever thought about a career in politics? You're good at convincing." Spike said with a smile.

"I'm done now. That's all the convincing I'm going to do. I just wanted you to know that there is someplace for you if you want." Alex said tenderly.

"And we get to be together." Spike said in thought.

"Yeah, that's the bonus." Alex said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"They were kissing?" Robert asked in wonder.

"But they only just met." Trey said with a hint of disapproval.

"They are bonded. I do not know how it happened, but I am certain of it." William said to the other children as they worked.

"Then we must make Spike feel welcomed." Janine said with certainty.

"What do we know of Spike?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Many things. Angel told me his history of the past hundred twenty years. When he was human he was a poet. When he became a demon, he was a psychopath. When he began to interact with Buffy and Uncle Xander, his violent tendencies subsided and he regained his soul. In the end he sacrificed himself to save his friends." William said to the group.

"I will ask for his help with poetry." Robert said immediately.

"Uncle Dave taught me to defend myself, I will ask for his help to learn to fight more effectively." Trey said seriously.

"Hugs." Janine said with equal seriousness.

"If he is interested in poetry, perhaps I could seek his help in editing one of my early stories, to modify them for a human audience." Jimmy said in a considering voice.

"When should we begin?" William asked Trey carefully.

"Not yet. We will also need to attend to Uncle Alex's needs. I believe his earlier outburst confirms that we need to make him feel included as well." William said speculatively.

"I will ask him for a story." Janine said firmly.

"Yes, and I will ask for him to use his mutant ability to help us complete the case for the iso-decoder." Jimmy said seriously.

"I will seek his advice about my relationship with Bobby." Robert said with a dreamy smile.

"And I will ask his advice about how to get to know my namesake." William said in thought.

"I will seek his advice regarding the supervision of all of you." Trey said seriously.

"Are you going to lead him to believe that we are misbehaving?" Janine asked with worry.

"No. I will simply ask what activities he would suggest to keep us occupied when we have finished our outstanding tasks." Trey said in consideration.

Janine nodded.

"Who want's to start?" William asked the group.

"I believe I will talk to Uncle Alex first, he might suggest that I talk to Spike about poetry." Robert said seriously.

"Yes, and I will ask Spike for assistance in self-defense training." Trey said assertively.

"We will continue work on the iso-chip decoder." Jimmy said as he etched a path onto a thin plastic-like card.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex and Spike walked into the living room as Robert and Trey walked up the stairs.

"Uncle Alex, could you speak with me for a moment?" Robert asked quietly.

"Sure Robert, come in the kitchen and we'll talk." Alex said with a smile.

"Spike, Uncle Xander has remarked that you are an accomplished fighter. Would you mind showing me some defensive moves?" Trey asked hopefully.

"Sure mate. Let's us go outside so if one of us gets pasted, we'll land on the grass." Spike said and walked toward the door.

"Just a moment." Trey said and walked to the kitchen.

"Uncle Alex, Spike and I are going outside so he can show me some defensive combat moves." Trey said through the kitchen door.

"Okay, don't get too rough. Your parents will tear me to pieces if you get hurt." Alex said through the door.

"We will be careful." Trey said and walked to Spike at the front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's up Robert?" Alex asked with concern.

"I am in love." Robert said with a great, glorious smile.

"That's great, who is it?" Alex asked, trying to think of who Robert knew.

"Bobby." Robert said in a dreamy whisper.

Alex's eyes went wide and he was shocked into silence.

"I need to know how I may express my love to him in an appropriate manner for my age." Robert said with hopeful eyes directed at Alex.

Alex saw the look and his heart melted.

"Robert, that's a tough one. You're awfully young. Does Bobby know?" Alex asked carefully.

"Yes. We have discussed this with my father and agreed that we will not pursue a physical relationship until I am older. But I need a way to express my love to him that is appropriate, otherwise he may believe that I have lost interest." Robert said with concern showing in his eyes.

"Okay, I get that. Why don't you try some poetry?" Alex asked and a goofy smile fell over his face.

Robert noticed the look and said, "I have never written poetry, I could use some instruction and feedback to know that I am doing it appropriately."

"Spike would be good to help you with that. He's an excellent poet." Alex said in a dreamy tone.

Robert's eyes went wide as he recognized his own dreamy expression on Alex's face.

"He's outside with Trey right now. Why don't you wait till he comes back in and ask him?" Alex asked carefully.

"I don't know him. I would feel uncomfortable asking for his assistance." Robert said shyly.

"Then I'll ask him for you." Alex said gently.

"Thank you Uncle Alex. I'm glad you're here with us." Robert said as he hugged Alex close.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trey and Spike walked out into the yard at the North side of the house and began to move around each other, waiting for an opening.

Trey made a complicated move that culminated with him sweeping his leg, trying to knock Spike off his feet.

Spike saw the move coming and easily avoided the attack.

Spike noticed that Trey had thrown himself off balance and had his back turned as he got back to his feet.

Spike decided to exploit the vulnerability and grabbed Trey from behind. Trey smiled as Spike fell into his trap and grabbed Spike's wrist firmly with

both hands. Trey then ducked under Spike's arm and stomped the instep of his foot. After a quick kick to Spike's midsection, Trey quickly twisted and pulled Spike's arm that he was still holding and in one swift move, flipped Spike onto his back.

"Yield." Trey said as he held his tubules at Spike's throat.

"You won that one mate. Sucked me right into it, you did." Spike said with a chuckle.

"Perhaps now you'll fight me for real." Trey said and looked into Spike's eyes to find comprehension.

"Yeah, I was going to hold back since you're just a tyke." Spike said with a laugh as Trey helped him to his feet.

"I have been told that among the Maquis, it is common for those my age to fight along side the adults in defense of their homes." Trey said and stepped back into a defensive posture.

Spike took a swing at Trey, more a test of his own speed than an attempt to strike.

"I was assaulted by an adult who believed that because I am Borg that I should be made to suffer. After that experience, I learned to defend myself so I would never be so vulnerable again." Trey said as he watched Spike's every move.

"Borg? Is that what you are mate?" Spike asked, then lunged to attack.

Trey defended against the strike and countered with a jab to Spike's side, which only made a glancing connection.

"Yes, I am not sure of my species, but regardless of who I was before, after the Borg captured me, erased my mind and altered my body, I became a part of them... And they will remain a part of me forever." Trey said then moved in to try a direct assault against Spike.

After a moment of scuffling, the two separated, none the worse for wear and Spike said, "Sounds like what happened when I was turned. When the demon was put in, most of William got lost. Now I've got most of him back, but the demon's still a part of me."

Trey smiled and said, "It is good to know that we share this. Most others would not understand the sensation of losing one's self and the struggle to reclaim some of what was taken."

"Yeah." Spike said and launched an attack.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee awoke to the sound of fighting outside the bedroom window.

He got up from the bed and looked outside to see Spike and Trey fist-fighting in the yard.

He was about to run out and break them up when he saw them separate and start laughing. Then he realized that they were fighting for fun.

Lee settled by the window to watch the fight and the display of camaraderie.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked into the BioLab to find Wesley talking with Hank.

"Is Tara around? I was hoping she could help me." Andrew said with a furrow of worry creasing his brow.

"Yes, Dawn just arrived home and she went to speak with her for a few minutes, she'll be right back." Hank said, then noticed John and said, "And I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting you before."

"Pyro." John said with a dark look.

Andrew heard the unspoken menace in John's voice and said, "Dr. Hank McCoy, this is John Allerdyce, he used to be a student here."

"Oh, well I'm please to meet you John. You may call me Hank if you like." Hank said pleasantly.

"I'll see if Dawn can help too. I can use all the magical backup I can get." Andrew said honestly.

"Since I don't know what you plan to do, I'll take your word for that." Hank said with a note of gruffness.

"All I can say is that I'm going to give Matt a fever." Andrew said quietly.

"Very well. Mr. Wyndom-Price is helping Logan carry the last of the things to make the accommodations livable." Hank said seriously.

"Then you're ready?" Andrew asked with hope.

"As soon as the last items are placed in the containment room, then we will be ready for Matt." Hank said with certainty.

"Okay, I'll get the things I need set up." Andrew said and opened a tiny portal into his bedroom closet.

Logan and Wesley walked in as Andrew began to set candles around the room.

"I'm curious to know which spell you plan to use to induce a fever." Wesley said as he passed.

Andrew continued to prepare for his spell until Wesley came out of the containment room.

"I'm going to use 'The Healing Fire of the Ancients'. Since Matt has the healing factor, he should be able to deal with the side effects... I hope." Andrew said with worry.

"That spell can only be used by a master fire mage. That is very dangerous." Wesley said with caution.

"I know. That's why I asked for your help. You did so well with the resurrection spell, I was hoping that you could help to maintain Matt through the fever... you do know how to do basic healing don't you?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yes, and to do this properly, I should weave my healing spell into your fever spell. That will allow both magics to work in harmony, thereby eliminating the possibility of our magics counteracting each other." Wesley said in a considering voice.

"Yes. Do you need any supplies? We need to get to this as soon as possible." Andrew said with resolve.

"Just a few things. Finish your preparation and I will return shortly. It will only take me a moment to gather the necessary items." Wesley said before leaving the BioLab with purpose.

Dawn and Tara walked into the BioLab a moment later.

"Tara, Dawn, I was hoping you could help me with a spell." Andrew said quickly.

"Sure, what kind of spell?" Dawn asked with a smile.

"I'm going to induce a healing fever in Matt... Logan's counterpart from Alan's universe. I was hoping you could give him a little magical support so he can get through this with as little pain as possible." Andrew said seriously.

"Yeah, give us a minute to get our stuff and we'll help." Dawn said with excitement and lead Tara out of the BioLab.

"I guess I'm nearly ready. Hank, are you ready for Matt yet?" Andrew asked as he looked around at his work.

"Yes, whenever you are." Hank said as he looked over the seals to the containment room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Professor, I'm sorry I put off this meeting. What did you need to discuss with me?" Scott asked with apology.

"Originally I wanted to discuss some new training ideas involving the most recent members of the team and starting evacuation drills for the students, but now... Scott, I need a break. Eric and I will be leaving soon and I wanted to let you know that you'll be in charge until I get back." Charles said seriously.

"Okay, that's no problem, when are you going to be back?" Scott asked curiously.

"That's the difficult part Scott. I don't know." Professor Xavier said vaguely.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Scott said with the beginnings of worry.

"I had an attack today... a seizure. Dr. McCoy says it's directly related to stress. I don't know how long it will take for me to recover from this exhaustion so I'm going to relax and enjoy my time away. When I am back to myself, then I'll return." Charles said and let the exhaustion be seen in his face.

"I understand Professor. Don't worry, you've trained me well, I can handle it." Scott said with assurance.

"And if you do, you'll need a vacation by the time I return. Scott, don't make my mistake. Take help when it's offered. Allow yourself to delegate some of the tasks. If you try to do it all, this job will consume your life. Don't let it." Professor Xavier said in warning.

"Any suggestions of how I can prevent it from happening?" Scott asked carefully.

"Get Alan to help you. He offered to be my administrative assistant and I refused his help. I believe that if I had accepted, I would not be leaving now." Charles said with a note of shame.

"I'll do that Professor. And I've been thinking of breaking up some of my own duties and delegating them. Now would be the best time to do that." Scott said in a considering voice.

"What did you have in mind?" Charles asked curiously.

"After a short training, I'm going to give the responsibility for the maintenance of the blackbird to Trey. He has an incredible grasp of electronics and mechanics. I think he'll do a fine job. And I was thinking of having Alex attend the combat training in the mornings. I'd like to put him in charge of the junior X-men's training regimen." Scott said seriously.

"Won't that make for some hard feelings from the others?" Charles asked with concern.

"Maybe in the beginning. But I will make it clear that Alex is in charge and back him up if he needs it. He's not going to be a team leader or anything, he'll just conduct their morning training sessions. He needs something like this and by separating the training into junior and senior sessions, I believe the training will be more effective." Scott said with assurance.

"I'll trust your judgment Scott. I've called Mr. Howlett and he's going to take care of getting you all the necessary authorizations and accesses that you'll

need to perform the job for an indefinite amount of time." Charles said in thought.

"Thank you Professor. I'll call Ken if I have any questions about that side of things." Scott said with a smile.

"Yes, he's a good man. He'll take care of you." Charles said fondly.

"I offered the same deal to Ronny that we put in place for Bobby." Scott said quietly.

"Why would you do that? He's actively worked against us in the past and threatened us just yesterday." Charles said with disapproval.

"I know, but he's lost everything. He needs a chance. Besides all that, he's a minor. He's entitled to a basic education. With the help of a few grants and a modest discount in tuition, it's really not a hardship on us. If he follows the guidelines, scholarships and grants will cover what his education voucher doesn't. The only thing we'll have to do is file his paperwork and everything will be taken care of." Scott said with assurance.

"I don't like it, but you're in charge so I'll abide by your decision in this matter." Charles said shortly.

"I'll watch out for him Professor. If he isn't working out, I'll deal with it." Scott said seriously.

Charles nodded and remained silent.

"I also needed to ask you about John Allerdyce. What would happen if he wanted to come back here?" Scott asked seriously.

"As I understand his situation, he's effectively removed any possibility of that happening. He petitioned the court and was emancipated, thereby removing any guardianship arrangement we might have worked out. His grades weren't sufficient to warrant any type of scholarship that I'm aware of. I don't see anything we could do to help him." Professor Xavier said sadly.

"Could you give him... a discounted rate? Anything to help him be able to come back?" Scott asked with hope.

Professor Xavier looked at Scott with question and got a glimpse of what Scott was planning.

"You're going to pay for him yourself?" Professor Xavier asked in puzzlement.

"If I have to. Professor... Charles, he's been living on the streets. He didn't admit to it, but I think he's been eating out of dumpsters. He was careful not to say how he got the money to buy food but... a sixteen year old boy who doesn't have a job? I can only think of a few ways he could make money and I don't want to imagine John being forced to resort to any of them." Scott said with concern.

"I never imagined..." Charles said in a whisper.

"Can you help me? I know you can't give him free tuition, but can you do something?" Scott begged.

"Yes." Charles said and pulled a folder from his desk drawer. He looked in it and pulled a sheet of paper from the back, then handed it to Scott.

"I don't understand." Scott said honestly, looking at the paper.

"It's a special grant that was set up a few years ago. It is specifically for mutants and I hesitate to use it because of the strict standards that it imposes." Charles said with a furrowed brow.

"A 3.0 average? 20 hours of community service each month? Wait... this has to be a misprint. He has to take a drug test every week? He's trying to go to school, not get paroled from prison." Scott asked incredulously.

"You see what I mean? And it only covers tuition... No books, no housing, no food, no clothes." Charles said darkly.

"Do you mind if I offer it to him? Charles... he's losing hope." Scott said sadly.

"You're in charge now. Do what you think best." Charles said quietly.

Scott nodded, then thought to ask, "Is there anything else going on that I need to know about before you leave?"

"Orroro, Artie and Clarissa are visiting the President today." Charles said in thought.

"The President of what?" Scott asked curiously.

"Of the United States." Charles said, as if it were obvious.

"Really? And I'm just hearing about it now?" Scott asked with surprise.

"The President asked that we not make a big deal of this. Mystique told him about Artie being shot while protecting Clarissa so the President wanted to meet the children." Charles said with a smile.

"That's great. I hope the meeting goes well. They're going to remember this for the rest of their lives." Scott said happily.

"Yes. And you are aware of the situation with Logan's counterpart, correct?" Charles asked carefully.

"I know the basics. I think they're about to try a treatment on him." Scott said, back to his more serious mood.

"Anytime now. The only other situation that you need to be aware of is just in it's beginning. Kitty has a crush, you need to be aware of it and be available if she needs your help." Professor Xavier said seriously.

"A crush? On who?" Scott asked with surprise.

"He calls himself Avalanche."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Warren was working his way through his email, his phone rang and interrupted his thoughts.

"What have you got?" Warren said sharply, knowing that it had to be his assistant.

"Really? I can't get away at the moment. Can we have the meeting here?" Warren asked with surprise.

"Good. I'll talk to the Professor and have it ready. Thanks for the good work Rome. What you've sent me so far is exactly right." Warren said with a smile as he continued to work on his laptop.

"As soon as possible. I was serious, if we can do it, I'd like to have this a done deal before Thanksgiving." Warren said with strength.

"Yes, I know that's this Thursday. Pull out all the stops, we need to get this done. It looks like all the major pieces are here, we just have to put them together." Warren said as he looked up from his computer.

"I'll tell you after the meeting. I tell you what, you get this done by Thanksgiving and I'll see to it that you have the last two weeks of the year off, with pay." Warren said with a smile.

After a long pause Warren laughed and said, "Yes, you'll get your bonus too. Rome, you've earned that bonus already. Even if this doesn't go through, you'll get it. Consider it done."

"Good. I've got to go now and get this meeting set up. And thanks again Rome. You're really earning it this week." Warren finished with a smile before he hung up the phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spike and Trey laid back in the grass and relaxed after both had fought themselves to exhaustion.

"Thank you for the training Spike. I have not practiced in far too long." Trey said through his heavy breathing.

"You've got some good moves. You nearly had me a couple times." Spike said with a smile.

"Yes, and you are quite skilled. Perhaps we can do this again soon. It is difficult for me to train unless I can find someone who is near my own level." Trey said hopefully.

"That sounds like a fine idea... what's your name again?" Spike asked curiously.

"Trey O'Seofon Summers." Trey said happily.

"Trey... Three... of Seven?" Spike asked curiously.

"Yes. That is my Borg designation." Trey said and looked at Spike.

"Let's us get back into the house and relax after that workout."

Trey nodded and stood, then extended a hand to help Spike to stand.

"Ta mate."

Lee watched with a smile as the two walked into the house.

## [Chapter 29: In a Perfect World]

Wesley, Dawn and Tara walked into the room and immediately began to set up the components for their own spell.

"This is going to be something with four of us." Tara said with excitement.

"Care to make it five?"

"Jean!" Dawn said with excitement and bounced to take Jean into a hearty hug.

"Hi Dawn. How is everyone doing?" Jean asked gently.

"We're good. Andrew is about to help Logan from the other dimension. He's in pretty bad shape." Dawn said honestly.

"Actually, that's why I'm here. I noticed that you were going to try something like this and thought you might like to complete your circle." Jean said with a smile.

"How did you know?" Andrew asked curiously.

"You know how your inner sight works? It's like that, but all at once." Jean said with a timid smile.

"Omniscience?" Andrew asked in wonder.

"Not completely, but for the purposes of our conversation, it's close enough." Jean said simply.

"I'd go crazy if I had that." Andrew said, trying to imagine the sensation.

"If I tried to focus on everything at once I *would* go crazy. But I just peek in on what catches my interest and ignore the rest." Jean said gently.

"So you're here to help us? If I may be so bold, what do you have to bring in offering to the spell?" Wesley asked properly.

"While you are trying to cure his body, I can protect his spirit." Jean said honestly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Professor, may I ask you a favor?" Warren asked from the doorway of the Professor's office.

"He's gone. What can I do to help you Warren?" Scott asked from behind the Professor's desk.

"I needed to ask the Professor if I could use the library for a meeting in about half an hour." Warren said impatiently.

"Go ahead and use the library. It will be fine." Scott said with assurance.

"But what about the Professor?" Warren asked hesitantly.

"Close the door." Scott said quietly.

Warren walked in, closed the door and waited apprehensively for Scott's next words.

"The Professor had a seizure today. Dr. McCoy said it was from stress. He and Magneto left a few minutes ago and they don't know when they're coming back." Scott said quietly.

"So he left you in charge?" Warren asked carefully.

"Yes. Don't worry Warren, everything is going to be fine. I just don't want to worry the students with this before I have to." Scott said seriously.

"Okay. If you need anything, just ask." Warren said firmly.

"I'll be fine. The Professor warned me to not try and do it all myself, so if anything comes up that you can help with, I'll let you know. After all... you're family." Scott finished with a smile.

Warren smiled and nodded in return before leaving the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

John, Ronny and Bobby walked into the room to find Andrew, Jean, Dawn, Tara and Wesley all working on their spell components.

"Are you going to get Logan soon?" Ronny asked, a little timidly.

"Yes, I'm ready to go get Matt now. Who wants to go with me?" Andrew asked the room.

"I'll go." Ronny said immediately.

Bobby and John looked at each other and nodded.

"We'll go to." Bobby said.

Andrew thought for a second then asked, "Would you mind if I just take Ronny? I just realized that since Matt isn't feeling well, he might not want a bunch of visitors right away."

"We can wait here. You'll just be gone a minute right?" Bobby asked carefully.

"That's the plan." Andrew said and looked to see if Ronny was ready.

Andrew and Ronny faded from view as everyone else in the room watched.

"Jeanie? Is that you?" Logan asked hopefully.

"Yes Logan, come here." Jean said with a radiant smile.

Logan saw the smile directed at him and immediately walked into Jean's open arms.

"Where've you been Jeanie?" Logan asked from a tight hug.

"Far away. But I came back for a quick visit." Jean said as she enjoyed the hug.

Logan finally pulled out of the hug and looked into Jean's eyes.

"Are you happy?" Logan asked seriously.

"For the most part." Jean said with a serene smile, then continued, "I get lonely."

"Then why don't you stay here? Everyone here loves you... stay." Logan finished in a whisper.

Jean looked at Logan with pain in her eyes and said, "If it were only that easy. Logan, I can't explain everything, but the fact is, I can't stay here. It's just not an option."

Logan saw the pain and held her close again. He whispered, "I still love you Jean. Even if you don't love me, I'll never stop loving you."

Jean leaned her head on his shoulder and thought about the words.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How did your fighting go guys?" Alex asked as Trey and Spike walked into the living room.

"Very well. Uncle Xander did not exaggerate Spike's fighting ability." Trey said happily.

"The whelp has some good moves." Spike said and made his way to the couch beside alex.

"Robert needed to ask for your help with some poetry Spike, would you mind helping him?" Alex asked with hope.

"Did Alex put you up to this mate?" Spike asked while looking Robert in the eyes.

"No. I asked for his advice on how I might express my love and he suggested poetry. When I said that I had not written poetry before he suggested that you might be able to help me." Robert said with big eyes.

"We'll need us a bit of privacy for this. Where can we go so we won't be disturbed?" Spike asked.

"The dining room is unoccupied. No one goes in there except at meal time." Robert said timidly.

"Get what you need to do your writing and I'll be there in just a moe. I need to tell Alex something just now." Spike said and led Alex into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew and Ronny appeared in the common room to the same scene that they had left. Logan was vomiting blood into a waste basket.

"Are you ready?" Andrew asked carefully.

"Yeah. Do it. It's never been this bad." Logan said through hitching breaths.

Andrew flared his power and Logan was gone.

"Where is he?" Ronny asked in immediate concern.

"In the BioLab's containment room. Let's go, I want to get this done as soon as possible." Andrew said and ported Ronny and himself back to the biolab to begin the ritual.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What is it?" Alex asked with concern.

"Just this." Spike said and pulled Alex into a deep kiss.

Alex melted into Spike's embrace as desire washed through his body.

Spike pulled Alex tighter and tighter as he felt a dozen different emotions coursing through his warm, almost human blood.

Alex felt the embrace tighten and understood that Spike was feeling more than his love in this hug.

After the kiss finally broke, Alex asked, "Is it all starting to sink in?"

"Yeah luv, it just hit me. I was dead. Not walking around dead but feedin the worms dead. Now I've got me a second chance, a real one, and I mean to make a go of it." Spike said, still holding Alex tightly.

"And us?" Alex asked bravely.

"That's what I mean luv. You and me, we're my second chance. If I've got a mortal lifespan now, I mean to spend every minute of it feeling like this with you." Spike said with love.

"But this happened so fast, what if you change your mind?" Alex asked timidly.

"No worries there luv. Whether I was a human or a demon, I've always loved only one person. When I loved Cecily, no one else existed to me. But she didn't love me in return. When I loved Dru, I loved her completely. But she fell for a chaos demon in South America and left me. Then I loved Buffy, but she never loved me in return. I think she almost did for a bit, but deep down, she's still hung up on Peaches. I don't think she even knew it." Spike said quietly.

"That's all? In over a hundred years you've been in love three times?" Alex asked in wonder.

"Well I've had me a few flings over the decades, but love? Yeah, there have been three up to now." Spike said in a whisper.

"Are you saying you love me?" Alex asked bravely.

"Yes luv. I'm saying it... I love you." Spike said, then moved in for another kiss. This one held only one emotion.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone rang.

After a moment of apprehension, Trey answered it.

"Hello? May I speak to Alex please?" Warren asked carefully.

"I believe he is busy at the moment. You can wait or I can give him a message if you like." Trey said into the phone.

"Please ask him to call Warren at the mansion. Extension 237." Warren said in thought.

"Just a moment, he is coming into the room now." Trey said hurriedly.

"Uncle Alex, Uncle Warren is on the phone for you." Trey said quickly.

"Thank you Trey." Alex said and smiled as Spike went into the dining room and closed the double doors.

"Alex, something's come up and I could really use Jimmy's help at the mansion. Do you think it would be okay if he came over to help me out for an hour or so?" Warren asked hopefully.

"I don't see why not. Hold on for a second." Alex said before putting his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Trey, would you mind walking Jimmy to the mansion? I don't want him walking so far from the house alone." Alex asked hopefully.

"It would be my pleasure." Trey said with a smile.

Alex took his hand from the mouthpiece and said, "Trey will walk Jimmy over right away. Do you want to ask Jimmy yourself?"

"Yes, I need to be sure that he wants to help me with this." Warren said with a smile in his voice.

"Would you get Jimmy?" Alex asked Trey in a whisper.

Trey nodded and went to the basement.

"So what's going on?" Alex asked while he waited.

"The Dean of the college is coming for a meeting. I was hoping Jimmy could serve as my office assistant during the meeting so we could focus on business." Warren said honestly.

"A nine year old office assistant?" Alex asked incredulously.

"He's smart, articulate, enthusiastic and has a pleasant personality. That's better than most of the office assistants I've had." Warren said honestly.

"I'm sure he'll have a great time doing it... here he is." Alex said and handed the phone to Jimmy.

After a long minute of listening Jimmy said into the phone, "Yes, thank you Uncle Warren. I would enjoy helping you. I will be there momentarily."

Jimmy then hung up the phone and ran to the basement.

Alex thought for a moment then went to the basement stairs to see what the other children were working on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew and Ronny appeared in the BioLab.

"Are we ready to begin?" Andrew asked.

Everyone nodded.

"What are you going to do to him?" Ronny asked firmly.

"I'm going to give him a fever so he can destroy the virus in his body." Andrew said carefully.

"What about them?" Ronny asked and looked at the others.

Andrew looked at Tara and raised an eyebrow in question.

"I am going to do a spell that purifies his blood." Tara said with uncharacteristic confidence.

"I'm going to aid his breathing." Dawn said seriously.

"I'm going to reinforce his body's healing ability." Wesley said in a no nonsense tone.

"And I'm going to protect his spirit, so whatever happens in the next few minutes won't cause him any lasting injury." Jean said with a gentle smile.

Andrew looked around the room at his candles and with a wave of his hand they all lit simultaneously.

John looked in wonder at Andrew's mastery of the element that was core to his being.

Andrew began a slow chant and fixed his gaze on Matt.

Wesley began to walk around the room and started sprinkling something on the ground as he began his own chant.

Dawn and Tara began their chants and focused on Matt who was beginning to sweat.

Jean remained silent and held her gaze on Matt. She seemed to glow with energy.

John, Bobby, Ronny, Logan and Hank all watched as the effect of the magic could be seen in Matt.

Hank looked at his condition and said, "I'm going to get into a biosuit and get in there. I need to monitor his condition."

Andrew stopped his chanting and looked with worry at Matt. Finally he said, "It's not enough." and created a fireball and cast it to float above him in the BioLab.

John couldn't resist the lure of the unrestrained fire before him and let his power merge with the fire.

A shiver went through Andrew and he looked instantly at John.

"Do it. Feed me your power. That's just what we need to save Matt."  
Andrew said with excitement.

John let his power loose for the first time in months and felt the incredible rush as his power flowed freely as it was meant to do.

From inside the containment room Hank screamed, "Stop the fever, you're killing him!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Right then, first of all, what's your name?" Spike asked Robert carefully.

"Robert David Summers." Robert said proudly.

"And who are you wanting to write this poetry for?" Spike asked as he took a seat beside Robert.

"Bobby Drake. I love him." Robert said with a dreamy smile.

"Oy, I know that look. You've got it bad alright. Never thought I'd see the day when a lil tyke like you would be bent. But I guess with modern times, MTV an all that... Do you have anything written yet?" Spike asked and looked at the padd before Robert.

"Not as yet. Uncle Alex suggested poetry while you were outside with Trey. I have not had time to write anything." Robert said clearly.

"Well you need to write down what you mean to say." Spike said simply.

"How? Do I have to do it in rhyme or verse?" Robert asked in confusion.

"No, for now, just write down what you want to say in clear, simple words. You don't have to do it this way, but if you start off writing in rhyme and verse, sometimes you get lost in poetic nonsense and end up not saying anything. Doing it this way, you write down what you want to say, then you write your rhyme and verse around it." Spike said instructively.

"Thank you Spike. That makes sense to me. I will begin." Robert said and started to write.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So what did you want to do today?" Marie asked with anticipation.

"I would like to take a walk to the boathouse and around the lake. Is that sufficient?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I've been cooped up in this house all day. A walk would be good." Marie said happily.

Icheb smiled, then realized how her acceptance and approval had made him feel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spike looked over Robert's shoulder and said, "What you've got there is good enough for now. You can always write another when you want to say more. But for now let's us keep it simple so's you can get to the good bit. Take what you've got and put it into some sort of order."

"I do not understand." Robert said and looked at Spike.

"If you were writing about his body, I'd say to start at the feet and work up so you finish with the eyes and the hair. It makes the poem flow more smoothly if it has a direction." Spike said with thought.

"Would chronological order be sufficient?" Robert asked as he looked at what he had written.

"Yeah, but I'll tell you now, you don't have to do it like I say. This is yours, you do it your way. I'm only offering suggestions. Just because I tell you something doesn't mean you have to do it that way." Spike said seriously.

"I understand. And I agree that an underlying direction would be desirable..." Robert said and began to rearrange the words.

"That looks good, now try to put it to some sort of rhythm." Spike said slowly.

"How do I begin?" Robert asked in thought.

"You can get the rhythm into your head of how you want the verse to flow, then find the words to fit the rhythm. Like, dah dah dah dah, dah dah dah. Dah dee dah dah, dah. Dah dah dah dah, dah dah dah. Dah dee dah dah, dah. Once you've got the rhythm, then work on the rhyme... but only if you want it to rhyme, it doesn't have to." Spike finished hurriedly.

"I believe I am ready to try." Robert said with a look of concentration.

Spike stood silently and watched him work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott walked into the BioLab and saw Hank furiously trying to revive Matt.

"What happened?" Scott asked in panic.

"I went too far. I thought he could handle it." Andrew said as he went pale and began shaking.

John ran to Andrew and caught him as his knees gave way.

"Get him to a chair. I think he's in shock." Scott said and moved fully into the room.

Before he could reach Andrew, he saw Jean standing, staring at Matt through the glass of the containment room.

"Jean?" Scott asked in wonder and joy.

"She's concentrating. Give her a minute." Dawn said in a whisper.

"He's still alive." Hank called out to the room.

"Was it enough?" Logan asked gruffly.

"There's no way to know at this point, but let's behave as if it were. Logan, key in the decontamination sequence on the keypad while I put the oxygen mask on Matt. If we've killed the virus in his body, we need to be sure and get rid of any trace of it that he might have carried in with him." Hank said as he began to undress Matt.

Jean finally released her concentration and smiled at Scott. "Hi Scott, how are you?"

"I'm good Jean. I'm glad to see you. You left without a word to anyone." Scott said and pulled her into a hug.

"I had to. I can't stay long. I just wanted to do two things and then I'll have to go again." Jean said seriously as she pulled out of the hug.

"Anything I can help you with?" Scott asked with a gentle smile.

"I just did one of them. And I suppose there's no use waiting to do the other." Jean said and walked to Logan.

"Logan, you said you love me... and I can feel the truth of it. I've had some time to sort through my feelings and realized that I didn't give you a chance before. My sense of duty to Scott prevented me from really considering what it would be like to love you." Jean said with difficulty.

"What are you trying to say Jean?" Logan asked quietly.

"I'm saying that I have to leave, and I would like it if you'd come with me." Jean said with hope shining in her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert sat the padd down on the table and said, "Would you look at this and tell me what you think?"

Spike picked up the padd, then hesitated.

He sat the padd back down on the table and said, "Before I read it, I just want you to know that I'm going to look at this critically. If I say something about it, it doesn't mean I don't like your writing or that you did something wrong. I'm only offering suggestions on how I would improve it if it were my own work... understand?"

Robert nodded.

Spike picked up the padd again and read carefully.

After a long minute of reading, he said, "The meter is a bit shaky and I think it could stand to be fleshed out a bit more. Let me ask you, is the bloke you're writing this for a nancy boy?"

"I don't understand." Robert said in question.

"Is he... Flouney? A boy in name only? Feminine?" Spike asked with difficulty.

"Oh, no. He has stated that he is not a gay man, but a man who is gay. He is very male." Robert said happily.

"Then this might be best. The dainty sort like to have airy, fluffy poetry. Men usually like it a bit more compact and functional, like this." Spike said and held up the padd.

Robert nodded happily.

"I have a suggestion about this bit, the word 'opelescent'." Spike said in thought.

"I felt that it conveyed the multidimensional aspect of my feelings." Robert said seriously.

"And that's fine, I just think you'd do better to use something a bit simpler. Can you picture something that says about the same thing that doesn't sound like it came from a thesaurus?" Spike asked carefully.

"Uncle Alex has a very bright shirt, I do not know the name for the style but it convey's the meaning as well." Robert said in thought.

"Bright don't narrow it down much when you're talking about your Uncle's wardrobe." Spike said with a smile.

"Perhaps I could bring it to you." Robert asked hopefully.

"Yeah, ask your Uncle before you go digging through his clothes." Spike said in warning.

Robert nodded and ran out of the room.

Spike looked back at the padd and a tender smile formed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come with you where?" Logan asked curiously.

"I can't explain. Logan, I'm asking you to trust me. I have to leave in a few minutes and we probably won't be able to come back for a long time. I need an answer now. Will you come with me?" Jean asked with hope.

Logan looked into her hopeful eyes and smiled.

"I'm with you Jean. I'm guessing I don't have time to pack?" Logan asked without concern.

"You won't need anything where we're going." Jean said with joy.

"Guys, let Matt know that my stuff is his now. He can be Logan now if he wants to." Logan said with a smile.

"That's right, from now on you're Q." Jean said with a great smile before both she and Logan vanished in a blinding flash of light.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert ran into the room carrying an eye burning bright shirt.

"Oy, I think the words your looking for are awful or deadly." Spike said as he squinted at the shirt.

"No, this style of pattern, the sense of... exploding outward. This is what I am trying to convey." Robert said in thought.

"Tie dyed?" Spike asked carefully.

"Is that what it is called? Yes, it would fit with the meter of the verse." Robert said with excitement.

"Go ahead and put it in. And I made one or two little changes, just to smooth it out a bit." Spike said as he handed Robert the padd.

Robert made the change and read the poem again.

Finally Robert said, "I believe it is complete."

"Let's have a look then." Spike said and took the padd back again.

After a long minute of watching Spike read, Robert asked tensly, "Do you believe it is acceptable?"

"What I believe don't matter a bit. It's what you believe that matters. Does this say what you want to say? Does this show him your heart?" Spike asked carefully.

Robert thought about the question and held out his hand for the padd.

After reading it again he said in a considering voice, "Yes, I believe it speaks my heart. There is much more I wish to say, but that will be the subject of other poems."

"Let me have another look at that, I've got me an idea." Spike said and took the padd back from Robert.

After a moment of reading, Spike asked, "Would you mind if your Uncle Alex read this?"

"No, I would not mind at all." Robert said happily.

"C'mon, if this works, you'll like it." Spike said with a smile as he led Robert into the living room.

### **[Chapter 30: Musical Interlude]**

Spike hurried into the living room to find Alex watching Janine and William hooking a box to the television.

"Do you know how to play that guitar I saw in your closet?" Spike asked hopefully.

"It's Scott's, but I know how to play. Why?" Alex asked in confusion.

"Go get it. I'd like to try something." Spike said with enthusiasm.

Alex hopped off the couch and ran upstairs.

Robert watched William and Janine hooking up the box as Alex quickly came back down the stairs with the guitar.

"Can you give me something folksy, or upbeat country?" Spike asked hopefully.

Alex began to strum the guitar. The children watched in wonder as he produced the music.

"A little slower, and can you do a G chord?" Spike asked carefully.

Alex nodded and switched to G.

"Robert, be ready to jump in and sing when I point to you." Spike said happily.

Robert nodded in confusion.

Spike cleared his throat and began to tap his toe in time with the beat of the music.

"Space is only emptiness, from there I came to you,  
Searching for completeness, like I never knew,  
I was damaged deep inside, very long ago,  
The pain was eating me alive, I didn't even know."

Janine, William and Robert stared in amazement. Spike noticed that Robert was in no condition to sing, so he held out the padd and pointed to the next verse so Alex could sing it.

"The world is an empty place, from here you came to me,  
Searching for completeness, longing to be free,  
You were damaged deep inside, very long ago,  
The pain was eating you alive, you didn't even know."

Spike moved beside Alex, careful not to interfere with his playing and continued to hold the padd. He and Alex began to sing in unison.

"Now we're here together, with emptiness no more,  
Battle scarred companions, bloodied from the war,  
We healed our common pain, we cleansed it with our tears,  
We built united confidence, enough to last for years."

Spike motioned to the children to come over and pointed to the next verse. He held up his fingers to do a countdown, and when it was complete, all five of them started to sing with varying degrees of ability.

"Understand this moment,  
Understand this time,  
Love is not a mystery,  
Love is not a crime.

Please know that I love you,  
As I know that you love me,  
When it's right to do so,  
We'll let the world see."

Spike and Alex laughed as everyone finished the last line at a different time. Spike calmed and pointed to himself to indicate that he would sing the next verse alone.

"Until that bright and glorious day, I'll reverently prepare,  
I'll remain a step behind, and know that you're aware,  
I'm asking you to wait for me, until the time is right,  
I'll prove my love that wondrous day, and again that wondrous night."

Alex nearly choked with laughter but continued the melody. Spike pointed at Robert and made a shushing motion to Alex. The music became almost nonexistent as Robert sang in a clear voice.

"And in the distant twilight, that I can now foresee,  
The two of us continue on, forever to be free,  
The world below us rises up, to meet the space above,  
To form the tie-dyed sunset, that signifies our love."

Alex and Spike laughed and clapped at the wonderful tone of Robert's voice.

"That was... amazing." William said with wide eyes.

Janine went to Robert and hugged him.

"This music, these words were written by Robert?" William asked in shock.

"That's right. The lil bloke wrote 'im a song without knowin it. Bloody good one at that." Spike said with a great smile.

"What do you think Robert?" Alex asked, unable to determine Robert's emotions by his expression.

"My words, I just heard them come alive. I can't describe what I am feeling." Robert said in wonder.

"Is it a good feeling?" Alex asked carefully.

"Oh yes. I just never imagined... The music I listened to before. I didn't understand that the words were poetry put to music. It's like discovering a new color." Robert said in amazement.

"Spoken like a true poet." Spike said with a proud smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Scott, get Alan." Bobby said with worry as he held Andrew's shaking body.

Scott stood silently, staring at the spot where Jean and Logan had been standing.

"SCOTT!" Bobby barked.

"Um, yeah... Alan. I'll get him." Scott said absently and left the BioLab.

"Tara, would you get Andrew some water?" Bobby asked with concern.

Tara nodded and ran to the sink.

"Can I do anything?" Dawn asked helplessly.

"No, just stand back and give him some air." Bobby said as he saw Andrew begin to come back to himself.

"What happened to him?" John asked with concern.

"Backlash. He tried to cut off the flow of power too abruptly." Wesley said quietly.

"What can we do for him?" Bobby asked and noticed Alan and Scott hurrying into the room.

"Nothing. Just give him some time to recover. He may be overly sensitive to magics for a few days. It would be best if he weren't around any charms or enchantments." Wesley said seriously.

"We don't have any of those things." Alan said as he took Bobby's place at Andrew's side.

Bobby looked on with worry and caught the look of gratitude from Alan.

"He'll be fine in a few minutes." Wesley said with assurance.

"Andy love. You'd better get up before Hank sees you, or you'll be confined to a week of bedrest." Alan said with a teasing smile.

Andrew got a smile at that and moved to give Alan a gentle kiss.

Everyone watched the tender scene of caring unfold... almost everyone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Matt opened his eyes and blinked at the harsh lights.

Hank was picking up Matt's clothes and stuffing them into biohazard bags.

Matt turned and saw a single person watching through the window from the lab.

Ronny's tears glistened in the light and the worry could be clearly seen, etched into his youthful face.

"Doc, is there any way I can talk to tha kid?" Matt asked weakly.

Hank thought for a moment and finally said, "No, not easily. The biosuit has a microphone that is connected to the lab, but there isn't a microphone in here for you to talk to him."

"Then how about you stuff him into one of those yellow suits and get him in here? I need to talk to him." Matt asked as gruffly as he could manage.

Hank looked at Matt, then at Ronny. Finally he said, "Very well. But you have been through a traumatic experience, he cannot visit for long."

Matt turned himself with effort to look at Hank and said, "You get him in here or you're going to have a traumatic experience. And if you try to throw him out before he's ready to leave, you'll answer to me."

"There is no need to become hostile. I was simply saying..." Hank began.

Matt extended the claws on his right hand and asked, "He's not here yet?"

Hank turned and left the containment room.

Matt turned and saw that Ronny hadn't moved an inch. He was still staring through the glass.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny carefully walked into the containment room in the ill-fitting biosuit and made his way to the chair beside Matt's bed.

"How ya doin kid?" Matt asked weakly.

"Better than you." Ronny said with a forced smile.

"Don't worry bout me. I heal fast." Matt said assuringly.

"I heard that about you." Ronny said quietly.

"Why don't you tell me what you been up to." Matt asked as he turned to look at Ronny.

"Just trying to figure out what I'm going to do with my life." Ronny said airily.

"Oh, that's all." Matt said with a smile.

"Yeah. Mr. Summers offered to pay my way through school... as far as I want to go. But I don't know... I'd be like, on my own. Doing it all myself. I'd live in a dorm. I'd have to get myself up every day, keep myself going, make all the decisions... it's too much." Ronny said in a helpless voice.

"How old are you kid?" Matt asked carefully.

"I just turned fourteen." Ronny said quietly.

"And you don't think you're ready to face it all alone?" Matt asked in confirmation.

Ronny shook his head.

"Then don't." Matt said in thought.

"But what choice do I have? If I try to go back to mom and she finds out I'm a mutant, she'll either throw me out or turn me over to the 'Friends of Humanity'. The only other thing I can do is move in with John and eat out of dumpsters till I'm old enough to work in a fast food joint." Ronny said in a defeated tone.

"Ain't gonna happen kid." Matt said with certainty.

At Ronny's questioning look Matt said, "I been alone for four months, sick as hell. That's given me time to think about what I want out of life. This being all alone crap ain't working. You an me, we can make this work. You need someone to give a damn about you and I need someone to give a damn about. Instead of you figuring out what you want to do, let's figure out what we want to do. Maybe that'll be easier."

Ronny thought about the words, then asked in a small voice, "So you want to be my dad?"

Matt remembered what Ronny had said about his dad earlier and said, "I'll never be anything like your dad, kid. I don't know what we'll call it, but we'll be two guys who watch out for each other. I don't know if that makes us friends, brothers or what. It don't matter what we call it. We'll make it work."

"So I'd live with you?" Ronny asked curiously.

"We'd live together. It'll be your house too, and you'll have a say in the decisions." Matt said seriously.

"So I'd still be making decisions, but you'd be there to help me make good ones." Ronny said in thought.

"Yeah, and it goes both ways. I don't always make the best decisions either. Maybe having someone to talk it out with will keep me from making some stupid mistakes." Matt said with a smile.

Ronny thought about what Matt was suggesting and finally nodded.

"Does that mean you wanna give it a try?" Matt asked hopefully.

"Yeah. We'll get you out of here and then we'll work on getting us a place of our own." Ronny said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hank, is Matt doing well enough that you can take a look at the babies?" Alan asked hopefully.

"Yes, since he is recovered enough to threaten me, I believe I have time." Hank said and motioned toward the door.

Alan and Andrew walked through the door, followed by Hank, Wesley, Tara and Dawn.

\* \* \* \* \*

"John, would you mind talking with me for a minute?" Scott asked gently.

John looked at Bobby, then through the window at Ronny before saying, "Sure, let's talk."

Bobby walked to the window and watched Ronny in the biosuit talking to Matt. He wondered what they could possibly have to talk about.

Scott led John out of the BioLab and down the hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Will you sing my song to Bobby?" Robert asked shyly.

"You want us to sing the song? Why?" Alex asked curiously.

"Because your voices compliment each other. My own is inadequate to the task." Robert said quietly.

"You have a fine voice mate. That last bit you sang was perfect." Spike said honestly.

"Then perhaps I can sing the last verse of the song, as before." Robert said in thought.

"Oy, if he don't know that you wrote it, that'll make him take notice." Spike said with a chuckle.

"What should we do next?" Robert asked with increasing excitement.

"Let's us practice singing the song a few more times, so's we can get the timing just right." Spike suggested.

Robert nodded and listened as Alex began to play again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy walked into the library and went to Warren.

"I am ready to work Mr. Worthington. Would you instruct me in my duties?" Jimmy asked professionally.

"Of course Mr. Summers. As my office assistant you will be expected to run errands, see to the basic comforts of the people in the meeting by providing coffee and observe the meeting in case I need to ask you about something later." Warren said as he finished binding his wings tight against his body.

"I can do that. Where will you want me to sit?" Jimmy asked, looking around the room.

"We're going to have our meeting at this table, I will have the center position and Dr. Hoffman will sit opposite me. Kurt will sit to my right and you will sit to my left." Warren said as he pulled on his suit jacket.

Jimmy moved to his seat and sat down his padd.

"Do you know where the kitchen is?" Warren asked to be sure.

"Yes, if you do not need me, I will go and make some coffee now so that it will be ready when we need it." Jimmy said in thought.

"Good idea. I'll finish setting up for the meeting while you do that." Warren said and went back to work.

"Thank you." Jimmy said quietly and walked out of the library.

Warren stopped and smiled for a moment before continuing to prepare.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny was dreaming about the future when Matt forced himself to a sitting position.

"Are you feeling better?" Ronny asked hopefully.

"Yeah, better than I felt in months." Matt said honestly.

"I'm glad." Ronny said with a smile, then got up suddenly.

"What'cha doin kid?" Matt asked as he watched Ronny looking through crates.

After a minute of silence, Ronny came back to Matt with a beer in his hand and a triumphant look on his face.

"Thanks kid, but I don't want you doin that no more." Logan said as he opened the beer.

"Why not?" Ronny asked as he took his seat again.

"Cause I don't ever want you thinkin that you've gotta do anything like that for me. If you ain't gettin one for yourself, then don't get one for me." Matt said, then quickly continued before Ronny could say it, "And you ain't gettin one for yourself."

Ronny thought about that and asked, "So if I'm making dinner, and I think you might like some too, that's fine. But if I make dinner for you, you'll be angry?"

"Something like that. I just want you to know that you don't gotta do stuff for me. That's all. It'd be too much like me taking you in to be my house-boy, and it ain't gonna be like that. If I make a mess, I don't expect you to

clean it up. And if you make the mess, you'd best clean it yourself." Matt said gruffly.

"Yeah. That sounds fair." Ronny said as he nodded his head.

"Good. That's all I'm goin for. Fair." Matt said, then took another drink of beer.

"So where are we going to live?" Ronny asked hopefully.

"Dunno. I guess we need to talk to someone about that." Matt said in thought.

"Do you want me to get someone?" Ronny asked enthusiastically.

"Naw, we got time for that. Right now, I wanna hear about what happened at lunch.

Ronny smiled and said, "You're not going to believe some of the people I met today."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's wrong Hank?" Alan asked with worry.

Hank saw the expression and said, "Nothing to worry about, the babies are just slightly larger than I expected."

"What do you mean? Are they aging abnormally?" Alan asked in panic.

"Not that I can tell, maybe it's just a side effect of the incident last night. For whatever reason, you could give birth at any time. I would estimate three to five days at the minimum, but wouldn't be surprised if they arrived sooner." Hank said professionally.

"I was supposed to have six and a half months to get ready for this. It's too fast." Alan said with a crease of worry in his brow.

"Don't worry love, you'll be fine. When the babies are ready, they'll come and everything will be fine." Andrew said with assurance.

"And what if they're full grown by Thanksgiving? They're supposed to be three and a half months along, they're nine months along. What if our

babies don't get to have a childhood? What if they age and die before the end of the year?" Alan asked with tears beginning to flow.

"We'll deal with whatever comes. We have future technology, Borg technology, mutant powers, magic, and a huge family. With all that, we'll find a way." Andrew said with assurance.

"I know just what you need. A baby shower." Dawn said happily.

Alan looked at her with tearful, questioning eyes.

"Okay, then how about we just go upstairs and look at all the baby stuff I got?" Dawn asked with a small smile.

Alan nodded and looked at Andrew, who helped him off the table.

\* \* \* \* \*

Icheb and Marie walked by the boathouse and heard music.

"What do you think is going on?" Marie asked curiously.

"Lets find out." Icheb said and opened the door.

"Icheb, Marie, come in and sit down. I need for you to hear something... be honest." Alex said with excitement.

Icheb and Marie walked to the nearest couch and sat as Alex began to play the guitar.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott and John walked in silence. Rather than lead John to the hanger bay, Scott decided to take him into the MedLab's conference room.

"Have a seat John." Scott said seriously.

"What's this about Mr. Summers?" John asked curiously.

"John, you can call me Scott." Scott said with a warm smile.

"Okay... Scott." John said hesitantly.

"I overheard you talking to Ronny at lunch and I have a few questions for you." Scott said quietly.

"Shoot." John said and put on an unconcerned expression.

"I thought Magneto was taking care of you. What happened?" Scott asked, letting his concern show.

"He does sort of take care of us. He got a house for us to live in. And he'll pay us good when he's got jobs for us... but the money runs out between jobs sometimes..." John trailed off.

"Did you mean what you said to Ronny about wanting to come back?" Scott asked seriously.

"Yeah. I didn't have a clue what it was like in the world." John said with a serious look at Scott.

"I've found a way that you can come back to this school, or go to the new school if you want to... but it's not going to be easy." Scott said darkly.

"What do I have to do?" John asked, the desperation showing in his eyes.

"3.0 average, 20 hours a month of community service, weekly UA tests." Scott said sharply.

"You think I'm on drugs?" John asked with offense.

"No John, these aren't my conditions. There is a scholarship set up specifically for mutants who need a second chance, but those are the conditions to get your tuition paid."

John thought about that, then nodded.

"But that still leaves the matter of books, housing, food, clothes... stuff like that." Scott said and waited for John to say something.

"Is there something we can do for that? I mean like, second hand books, room me in with someone else, maybe give me a kitchen job so I can get a meal?" John asked with hope.

"We won't have to go that far. But I'm glad to know that you're serious enough about this to consider it. I can make the Scholarship deal with you

if you're willing to. As far as the rest... We can make a deal, just between us." Scott said shakily.

John got a frightened and lost expression on his face and said with as strong a voice as he could muster, "If this deal involves any part of your body entering any part of my body, then no deal."

Scott didn't betray any emotion and, after a moment said, "No John. Not that kind of deal. Let me spell it out for you. I've looked into everything that I can think of and I can't find any way to get you more money, not enough to do any good. If you got a 'paper hat' job, you wouldn't earn enough to pay for everything and you'd probably have problems with your grades because you'd be working all the time."

John nodded cautiously.

"So I'll pay for it." Scott said quietly.

"Why?" John asked suspiciously.

"John, before I came here... I was on the streets for a while... Just a month, it seemed like forever... I had to do things I never thought I'd ever do, just to survive. I ended up in jail and child protective services placed me with a family. A few months later I met Professor Xavier." Scott said in distant memory.

John had an expression half-way between fear and fascination.

"So I've been there. I've seen it. I've done it. If you'll let me do this for you, then all I'll ask is that someday, you find someone who needs help and do the same... that's the deal." Scott finished quietly.

"Scott, you seem so... I imagined that you had the perfect life. Two perfect parents that loved you, a perfect brother that adored you, you went to the perfect school and dated the homecoming queen." John said in thought.

Scott looked off into the distance and said, "My perfect life? My perfect family couldn't stand the sight of each other. It finally got so bad that I left... ran away... and left Alex there to face them alone. A week later I was in an alley, feeling my stomach gnawing on my backbone, and a guy offered me money to... I was so hungry..."

John had tears in his eyes and he nodded, letting Scott know that he didn't have to say it.

"After that, it got easier to not care. Fortunately I got picked up by the police and a child protection worker named Cheryl took the time to ask the right questions and give a damn about the answers. I didn't know that we were abused because our parents didn't hit us. Now I know that neglect is a form of abuse and hardly anyone gets help because there aren't any bruises or scars to tell people that you're hurting... but Cheryl saw them. I was placed in a foster home and Alex was taken away from our parents... it took me three years to find him..." Scott said as he relived his pain.

John sat silently, listening to the confession.

Scott finally smiled and said, "But after I settled into my new life, I did end up with the homecoming queen... that was Jean."

John smiled and said, "I love a happy ending."

"Good, then let's make one for you."

## **[Chapter 31: Strictly Business]**

After the last notes of the music died away, silence filled the room as everyone awaited Marie and Icheb's reaction.

"That's wonderful." Marie said with a dreamy smile.

"Do you think Bobby will like it?" Robert asked with hope.

"Sure. I guess. Why?" Marie asked in confusion.

"Because I wrote it for him." Robert said simply.

"Oh, that is soooooooooo sweet." Marie said with a tender smile.

"You wrote this music for Bobby?" Icheb asked in stunned fascination.

"I wrote the poem, Uncle Spike recognized that the poem could serve as song lyrics and Uncle Alex provided the music." Robert said happily.

"Uncle Spike?" Marie asked, looking at the unfamiliar man.

"Yes. Marie, may I introduce you to William the Bloody, also known as Spike." Icheb said formally.

"Uncle Spike." Robert said with force.

"What's the difference?" Spike asked Alex.

"It means that they like and respect you enough to make you part of their family." Alex said with pride.

"I've been adopted?" Spike asked with wide eyes.

"Yes Uncle Spike." Robert said happily.

"Back up to the 'William the Bloody' thing. I'm thinking there's got to be a story to go with that name." Marie said carefully.

"There are books of storys. But I'd best not tell them to you in front of the little ones, might give'em nightmares." Spike said with an evil grin that sent a chill up Marie's spine.

"We do not sleep, therefore we do not have nightmares; I want a story." Janine said from beside Spike.

"Tell you what lil bit, later tonight, after it's dark, remind me and I'll tell you a whopper of a story." Spike said gently.

Janine nodded enthusiastically.

\* \* \* \* \*

The doorbell rang and Jimmy quickly opened it.

Standing in the doorway was an early middle-aged woman with red hair, wearing a modest coat.

"Dr. Hoffman?" Jimmy asked with a smile.

"Yes." She said, surprised by the young boy.

"Please let me take your coat." Jimmy said and moved to help her take it off.

After putting the coat into the closet, Jimmy returned to Dr. Hoffman who was noticing the opulent luxury of the entry hall.

"I will take you to Mr. Worthington, please follow me." Jimmy said with an air of professionalism.

Dr. Hoffman looked curiously at Jimmy then followed him down the hallway.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So you mean you got to see the Andrew guy who you thought killed you get bawled out by his dad?" Matt asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah. After him acting so fatherly and know-it-all I got to see his dad rip into him, and that's when I realized that he's just a guy like me. He ain't perfect and he don't know it all. He's just trying to figure it out as he goes along." Ronny said happily.

"That's a good thing to learn kid. I'll tell you a trick. If you ever meet up with someone who's trying to make you think they're better than you. Just picture them taking a dump. I mean a real, Texas chili cook-off dump. If

you can get that picture in your head, you won't be able to think of them as anything but human, just like you." Matt said seriously.

Ronny started laughing and nearly fell off his chair.

"Who you picturing kid?" Matt asked with a smile.

"That... guy with the wings, from lunch. He's... he's all starched and pressed... I just... just got the picture of him... with his face all scrunched up... trying to pinch one off..." Ronny said before breaking down into full laughter.

"Warren's a good guy. He dresses like that for his job, but there's a real decent person inside." Matt said seriously.

Ronny stopped laughing immediately and said, "I'm sorry if I was talking bad about one of your friends."

"Naw, you weren't talking bad. I just wanted you to know that there's more to him than the way he looks. If I thought he was an asshole, then that's what I'd tell you." Matt said simply.

"Okay. I just don't want to say the wrong thing and screw this up." Ronny said with worry.

"Don't worry bout that kid. If you say something I don't like, I'll let you know. Then it's done. Got it?" Matt asked as he looked into Ronny's eyes.

"Yeah." Ronny said quietly.

"And it goes both ways. I say something that pisses you off, you gotta tell me. I don't always notice stuff like that." Matt said, looking for understanding.

"Got it." Ronny said seriously.

"What you thinkin bout all this so far? You think we can make it work?" Matt asked curiously.

"Yeah. I mean, we want to make it work. I think we'll be fine." Ronny said with a happy smile.

Silence fell between the two.

"Logan?" Ronny asked quietly.

"Yeah?" Matt responded, noticing the change in Ronny's attitude.

"Why me?" Ronny asked and looked into Matt's eyes.

"Why'd I pick you to live with?" Matt asked to be sure.

"Yeah. I just need to know." Ronny asked and looked away.

"You know I almost died just then, right?" Matt asked carefully.

"Yeah." Ronny whispered.

"You know what the first thing I saw was when I came back?" Matt asked seriously.

"No, what?" Ronny asked and met Matt's eyes again.

"Someone who gave a damn that I'd almost died." Matt said, looking to see if Ronny understood.

"But the others..." Ronny began to say.

"The others had their own reasons for helping me. Mostly cause they're good guys, and they would've done the exact same thing no matter who was in here. There was one person who cared that *I* almost died today... you." Matt said, holding Ronny's gaze.

"So you're taking me in because I was nice to you?" Ronny asked in confusion.

"Naw, it ain't like that. I want you to move in with me cause I care bout you too. If you was in here, I would've been on the other side of that glass, watching out for you." Matt said seriously.

"Yeah... I think I knew that." Ronny said in thought.

"That's good. I'm gonna get me some sleep. Why don't you take a break for a while and get out of that plastic bag?" Matt asked tiredly.

"Yeah. But I'll probably be back before you wake up." Ronny said seriously.

"That's good. I had enough of being alone." Matt said as he drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

After going through the decontamination sequence the way Dr. McCoy had told him, Ronny took off the biosuit and stepped out into the lab to find Bobby waiting for him.

"How you doing Bro?" Bobby asked with concern.

"I'm good. How about you?" Ronny asked as he thought about Logan.

"I'm fine, just a little worried about you. What were you two talking about in there?" Bobby asked curiously.

"That guy's had it rough. He's been sick and alone for months. We talked about what we're going to do when he can leave that room." Ronny said vaguely.

"We?" Bobby asked, picking up on Ronny's evasive answer.

"Yeah. Bobby, you got your own life here. You're used to it, you've got friends, a family... even an itty bitty boyfriend." Ronny finished with a teasing smile.

"There's room for you too." Bobby said with assurance.

"I know, but what you got, it works for you. I need to get my own, not part of yours. Does that make any sense?" Ronny asked carefully.

"Yeah. I guess it does. So what are you going to do?" Bobby asked and began walking for the door.

"We'll figure that out when he get's out." Ronny said as he followed.

"What's with the 'We'?" Bobby asked, still trying to figure out what Ronny was getting into.

"He's new here. He's alone. He's lost everything... Sound like anyone you know?" Ronny asked as he stopped, waiting for an answer.

"I get it. And good. I don't know Matt, but if he's like our Logan, he's a good guy. He saved my life once when the school was attacked." Bobby said as he began to walk again.

They noticed John and Scott sitting in the conference room, talking as they passed by.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So where am I going to live?" John asked carefully.

"I guess we'll figure that out after you've chosen which school you'll attend. Do you know which one you want?" Scott asked quietly.

"I don't know. I mean, if I start over at the new school, it'll make it a little easier in some ways. But now that me and Bobby are getting along... I guess it doesn't matter. What's the difference?" John asked with genuine curiosity.

"Well, the main difference is the student population. Here, most of the students are mutants and are fairly high level ones. The college will probably have lower level mutants and be open to non-mutants as well. Plus there might be as many as two thousand students there, if the place fills up. We just have a few dozen." Scott said in a considering voice.

"So it's more like a regular school." John said in thought.

"John. You don't have to decide now. Take some time to think it out. Talk to some people, teachers and other students. Get their ideas and decide what's going to be best for you." Scott said quietly.

"Yeah, thanks Scott. I'll do that." John said in thought.

"And our deal, it's just between us. No one will know that you aren't just another student." Scott said and looked away.

"Thanks for that. It'll be tough for me to think of myself as good as everyone else after..." John trailed off.

"I know. And if you ever need help dealing with that, just come and talk to me. Remember, I've been there. I won't judge you." Scott said, looking out the window.

"I'll remember. If I have a problem with it, I'll let you know." John said quietly.

John noticed movement and saw Ronny and Bobby walking by the window of the conference room.

"Go ahead, we'll talk later." Scott said with a smile.

John nodded and got up to join his friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy led Dr. Hoffman into the library and closed the door behind them.

"Dr. Hoffman, may I introduce Mr. Warren Worthington the Third." Jimmy said professionally.

Warren walked to meet Dr. Hoffman halfway across the room, shook her hand gently and said, "A pleasure to meet you Dr. Hoffman. Please have a seat."

"Dr. Hoffman, would you care for coffee or tea?" Jimmy asked politely.

"No, thank you. Perhaps later." Dr. Hoffman said and took another curious look at Jimmy, noticing his small ocular implant.

"Mr. Worthington?" Jimmy asked professionally.

"Not just yet. Please take your seat so we may begin." Warren said and sat back down at the table.

Dr. Hoffman was surprised that Jimmy was being invited to sit in on their meeting.

"Let me start by saying that our lawyers have worked out the majority of this already. Your people wrote down a number, my people wrote down a number, and they've basically agreed on something we can all live with." Warren said and saw acknowledgement in Dr. Hoffman's expression.

"So this meeting is to discuss our plans for the college and your role in our plans... if any." Warren said matter-of-factly.

Dr. Hoffman fought to maintain a neutral expression at the statement.

Warren pushed a piece of paper to Dr. Hoffman and waited for her to read it.

"I haven't heard about this." She said as she finished reading the law that confirmed the status of mutants.

"Most people haven't, the President signed it at around two this morning and we have an opportunity to use this law to our advantage." Warren said carefully.

"How so?" Dr. Hoffman asked curiously.

"By opening the Wagner Institute for Mutant Education." Warren said, watching for her reaction.

Dr. Hoffman was stunned by the statement and quickly thought about what this meant to her.

"From the financial records my people have been able to secure, we've estimated that your college will have to close its doors before the end of the year." Warren said simply.

Dr. Hoffman nodded in confirmation.

"What I am proposing is closing the Forestgrove College for Thanksgiving and opening the Wagner Institute in its place the following Monday." Warren said calmly.

"Monday! You want to open a new college in one week?!" Dr. Hoffman asked in shock.

"Yes. Now I need to know your feelings about mutants. If you have any objection to working with, or for, a mutant, I need to know it now." Warren said steadily.

"Is that why you have this young man in the meeting?" Dr. Hoffman asked, looking at Jimmy.

"Mr. Summers is not a mutant. He is here to serve as my assistant, nothing more." Warren said simply and waited for her to answer the question.

Dr. Hoffman thought for a long minute before saying, "I've been interested in the subject of mutancy for many years, from a purely scientific standpoint. I've read some fascinating work on the subject. The

Preeminent Treatise on Mutancy by Dr. Hank McCoy made me consider leaving my position to pursue a career in science full time. But as far as working with or for a mutant... I have to admit that I haven't known any and haven't considered the possibility before."

"Mr. Summers, would you ask Dr. McCoy if he would be available to meet Dr. Hoffman later?" Warren asked Jimmy quietly.

"Right away Mr. Worthington." Jimmy said and left the room at a deliberate pace.

"You know Dr. McCoy? He's here?" Dr. Hoffman asked in wonder.

"Yes. If he's available, you can speak to him after the meeting. For now, do you think that you could work with a mutant?" Warren pressed.

"Yes. I don't see why not." Dr. Hoffman said in a considering tone.

"Good. Then the next thing I need to know is if you would be willing to share your position as Dean of the college." Warren asked firmly.

"How do you mean share?" Dr. Hoffman asked suspiciously.

"Dr. Hoffman, mutants with obvious physical differences are limited in their opportunities. For the college to function most effectively, we need an obvious mutant to have a position of authority, but we also need a non-mutant to hold an equal position to convey the message that we are not holding mutant interests above those of non-mutants. Hopefully in time, there will be sufficient mutants with adequate education that we will be able to hire for the position strictly on the merit of their qualifications. But in this beginning time, the first person to hold this position will be qualified only by the fact that he is a mutant and that he has a desire to see that every person who seeks an education has the opportunity to get it." Warren said seriously.

"So it's a token position." Dr. Hoffman said speculatively.

"That will be up to you if you take the job." Warren said frankly.

"How so?" Dr. Hoffman asked curiously.

"Mr. Wagner is a good, decent, hard-working man. If you take the time to show him what is expected of him, he will be capable of doing a fine job and will grow into the position he is being given. If you would rather, you

can do all the work yourself and let him be the token mutant." Warren said simply.

Jimmy returned to the room and quietly took his seat. At Warren's look of question, Jimmy nodded.

"I see. So if I remain, my job will be to train him to replace me." Dr. Hoffman said with a note of resignation.

"No Dr. Hoffman. Take a look at this contract and tell me what you think." Warren said with a smile as he pushed a piece of paper to Dr. Hoffman.

She looked over the contract carefully and finally said, "This is unprecedented. This basically guarantees me the job for life."

"Yes. Assuming that the college remains open, that is correct." Warren said with a smile.

"Why? I mean, why would you offer me a lifetime position?" Dr. Hoffman asked suspiciously.

"My staff did some research. You have a history of effective and sound decision making. The current crisis at Forestgrove has little to do with your administration and much to do with the glut of colleges and the poor economy. That alone qualifies you for the position, add to that the fact that you won't need to be familiarized with the operation of this college and that you are already familiar with the staff... The job is yours if you want it." Warren said simply.

"I would like to meet the person that would be sharing my position." Dr. Hoffman said seriously.

"Of course." Warren said, then turned to Jimmy, "Would you ask Mr. Wagner to join us?"

"Right away." Jimmy said and hurried out of the room.

"And Dr. McCoy will meet with you after we conclude our meeting." Warren said kindly.

"Thank you Mr. Worthington. I never expected to meet him... or you for that matter." Dr. Hoffman said honestly.

"I'm only responsible for half the funding going into this venture. Unfortunately, Mr. Wainwright is unavailable just now or you could meet with him too." Warren said conversationally.

"Wainwright? As in Robert Wainwright?" Dr. Hoffman asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, Robert and Felicity were his parents." Warren said calmly.

"I didn't know they had any children... but that's not a surprise, they kept their personal life so private that I'm surprised I knew Robert had a wife." Dr. Hoffman chuckled.

When the door opened, Warren stood and said, "Dr. Hoffman, I'd like to present Mr. Kurt Wagner."

Dr. Hoffman was stunned as she looked at the blue man with a pointy tail walking toward her.

"A pleasure to meet you Herr Doktor." Kurt said as he gently took her hand.

"Yes... good to meet you." Dr. Hoffman said in shock.

"Would anyone like some coffee?" Jimmy asked, sensing that Dr. Hoffman needed to be distracted.

"Yes, please." Dr. Hoffman said quickly.

"Mr. Wagner?" Jimmy asked politely.

"Yes, thank you." Kurt said with a smile.

Jimmy looked to Warren who nodded.

Jimmy quickly left the room and Warren began to speak again, "Do you still think you'll be able to share your Dean's position?"

Dr. Hoffman paused for a moment, then said, "Yes, yes of course. I'm sorry, I just wasn't prepared."

"No need to be sorry Herr Doktor, I haf seen much worse reactions from many who were much more prepared." Kurt said gently.

Dr. Hoffman smiled at the kind words and looked to Warren for the next topic of conversation.

"Good, now that that's out of the way, we can get down to the conversion plan." Warren said and took his seat again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guys, wait." John said as he hurried out of the conference room.

"Hey John, what's up?" Ronny asked happily.

"Scott just hooked me up with funding. I can go back to school." John said with a radiant smile.

"That's great! Man, he hooked me up too. We get to start together. This is going to be cool." Ronny said with enthusiasm.

"Yeah, except I still gotta figure out which school I'm going to, where I'm going to live, junk like that." John said irritably.

"Yeah, me too." Ronny said and got onto the elevator with the others.

"Bobby, what do you think we should do?" John asked casually.

"I don't know. Do either of you have any reason that you'd like one school over the other?" Bobby asked the pair as they stepped off the elevator.

"Not really. All that junk you said at lunch about forgiving. I bought it. That was my only reason for not wanting to come here. Cause I was such a shit when I got here." Ronny said honestly.

"Yeah, and since I'm not hung up on Bobby anymore, there's no reason that I can't come back." John said and led the way into the kitchen.

"So what are you going to do?" Bobby asked as he pulled some lunchmeat from the refrigerator.

"Why don't we talk to the blue guy about his school and to Mr. Summers about this one. They can each give us their pitch and then we'll decide." Ronny said as he assembled a sandwich.

"Yeah. Good idea. Then, once I know which school I'll be at, I'll get set up for a place to live... Is there any way I can stay here tonight? I don't want to go back there." John finished quietly.

"How would you guys feel about a little campout tonight?" Bobby asked with a smile.

"You know we have to get an adult to supervise something like that." John said seriously.

"I don't have a problem with that. I figured out the wierdest thing this week. They're people like us, just older." Bobby said and took a big bite of his sandwich.

"So who do you want to ask?" John asked before taking a bite of his own sandwich.

"Guys, I'm gonna stay with Logan. I can't leave him alone." Ronny said grimly.

"Then you'll come next time, promise." Bobby said with sympathy.

"As far as who to ask, what about that Xander dude? He seemed pretty cool." Ronny suggested.

"Yeah, we can ask him. Who do we want if he can't do it?" Bobby asked, then went to pour some milk.

"Scott." John said in thought.

"Yeah, he's pretty cool, let's ask Scott first since he's here. I think Xander's in New Jersey right now anyway. Plus Xander's married, so he probably won't want to be away from his husband." Bobby said, then drank half his glass of milk at once.

"Yeah, alright. Do you have all the camping stuff you'll need?" Ronny asked as he finished his sandwich.

"There's enough camping stuff for thirty people in the store room. C'mon, let's ask Scott so we can get started, this'll be cool." Bobby said with excitement.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott walked into the BioLab and into the containment foyer to put on a biosuit.

He walked to Matt's side and was surprised to find his eyes open.

"Hey one-eye, you look worried." Matt said and sat up on the table.

"Yeah, I've got some problems. But right now, I want to talk to you about your situation." Scott said seriously.

"Make you a deal, we'll talk bout my stuff, but then you tell me bout yours. I may not be able to help, but sometimes it helps just to put it into words." Matt said with concern.

Scott was surprised by Matt's friendly attitude. He and Logan had never really gotten fully past their rivalry over Jean, and had never been able to talk as friends.

"Okay. Our Logan is gone. He left with Jean and as near as I can tell, they don't plan to come back anytime soon. Before he left he said that all his stuff is yours now and you're welcomed to the names Logan and Wolverine." Scott said seriously.

"Then he means it. Okay, go on." Matt said in thought.

"He was our combat instructor, I need to know if you want to take his position when you're recovered." Scott said seriously.

"Um, yeah, why not." Matt said with a nod.

"Good. That's all the big stuff. The Professor is taking a break, so I'm in charge for a while. We're opening a new school a few miles from here, one that is open to the public." Scott said as he went down his mental list.

"You act like we ain't friends Cyke. What's the story?" Matt asked gruffly.

Scott smiled sadly at Matt and said, "Logan and I were both interested in Jean. That kind of messed up any possibility of us becoming friends."

"Well I never got the hots for him, so you don't have that with me. You're not goin after Orroro are you?" Matt asked carefully.

Scott chuckled and said, "No Matt, I'm not going after anyone at the moment. Okay, you win... friends."

"Good. Now, what's making you all gruff. I mean, I can make it work, but it don't look good on you." Matt said with a teasing smile.

"It's a former student, well a potential student, John. He's been through a lot and I want to help him so bad but there's only so much I can do." Scott said in frustration.

"John, like pyro?" Matt asked carefully.

Scott nodded.

"What's he need?" Mat asked and sat up on the bed.

"I've just barely been able to scrape enough money together to get him enrolled when he's ready, but... I can't see him fitting in with the other kids in the dorms. He's a good kid, he's got potential, but I'm afraid that his time on the streets and him being openly gay are going to cause him problems. It could isolate him, and that's the last thing he needs. If I could do it, I would take him in and let him live with me, but as it stands I'm sharing a room with my brother and there's going to be about sixteen... maybe seventeen people living in the house by the end of the year." Scott said in a ramble.

"Scott, help me out here. Logan said all his stuff is mine, do you know if that includes his money?" Matt asked calmly.

"Yes. I'm sure it does." Scott answered carefully.

"Okay, Do you know of a house nearby that I could buy, lease or rent?" Matt asked quietly.

"Um, yeah, there's a few." Scott said in confusion.

"Okay, then here's what I've got. Me an Ronny are going to be getting a house nearby. If Pyro wants to, he can move in with us. That way it'll be us three, no dorms and no one has to be alone." Matt said seriously.

Scott nodded.

"The other thing is, you need to move into the mansion, at least till the Prof get's back from her break. It ain't just bout you needing the space for yourself. If you're in charge, you need to be here." Matt said and waited for Scott to acknowledge his statement.

Scott nodded in thought, then said, "Just so you know, Jean Grey is female in this universe and our Professor is Professor Xavier. Emma is at the GenX school."

"Oh yeah. Em told me bout that. It's going to be hard to get used to." Logan said seriously.

"Yeah. Well if you have any problems with being homesick or trying to understand the wierdness of this place, Alan and Remy are here." Scott said warmly.

"Thanks Cyke, it helps. I can't wait to get out of here. After being alone for months, all I want to do is be around people. Maybe go out and shoot some pool." Mat said, looking into the distance.

"Why don't we do that when you get out of here? Maybe Remy and Xander could come with us." Scott said with a smile.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Matt said and noticed Ronny, Bobby and John standing outside the containment room, looking in.

"You got enough of those garbage bag suits for everyone? I wanna talk to Ronny, and if he says it's okay, then we'll ask John to move in with us." Matt said with a look of question.

"Yeah, there are plenty of biosuits for everyone." Scott said with a smile.

Scott pushed the microphone control on the suit and said, "Why don't you guys suit up and come in for a visit with Matt?"

All three of them nodded and moved to the foyer.

"Thank's Cyke. If that blue dustmop of a doctor was here, he would'a said they couldn't come in. That they're too young or I'm too tired, or some shit. That guy's really starting to piss me off." Matt said honestly.

"Just get better, then you won't have to deal with Hank anymore." Scott said as he watched the three boys suiting up through the window. Ronny and Bobby were helping John with his suit.

## **[Chapter 32: The One Sided War]**

"They'll strike." Dr. Hoffman said firmly.

"We'll replace them." Warren said in return.

"The school will lose accreditation without qualified teachers." Dr. Hoffman countered.

"The school will lose students with teachers who openly despise them." Warren said icily.

"You can't have it both ways. If you want the staff that keeps the college going to come with the purchase of the college, then you take us all. Otherwise, you'll have to fire everyone and interview for each and every position." Dr. Hoffman said firmly.

Warren thought about that and finally said, "You know you've got me over a barrel, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I do." Dr. Hoffman said with a friendly smile.

"Meet me half way, please. I don't want to subject the students to mutant hating fanatics. That's the whole reason for opening the new college." Warren said in a pleading voice.

"And how are you serving your students by sequestering them away from people with differing viewpoints? I agree that there should be standards of conduct that should be strictly enforced, but I will not agree to suppression of the freedom of speech or the termination of qualified individuals only for their personal beliefs." Dr. Hoffman said, ending in nearly a scream.

Warren got up and began to pace. Finally he asked, "Kurt, what do you think?"

Shyly Kurt said, "I'm afraid I must agree with Dr. Hoffman. We cannot prepare our students for the world if we do not expose them to it."

Warren nodded and thought for a moment, then said, "Jimmy, do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

"Yes. I agree with Dr. Hoffman. I also believe that public debates should be scheduled, allowing anti-mutant sentiments to be expressed openly and opposing viewpoints to be presented in an orderly manner. If the students

are educated properly, they will understand their opposition's viewpoint and be able to articulate a reasonable response." Jimmy said in a considering voice.

Dr. Hoffman was stunned by the young boy's statement, but quickly recovered and said, "An excellent idea. It cuts to the core of what I'm trying to say."

Warren nodded as Jimmy smiled at the praise.

"Okay. I still have my reservations, but that doesn't matter. If Dr. Hoffman and Mr. Wagner are in agreement, then that's all I need to know. The entire staff are welcomed to retain their previous positions at a... I can't believe you could get them to work for this. How does a four percent pay increase across the board sound? Subsequent raises in pay will come through the standard evaluation process." Warren said as he looked at some paperwork.

Dr. Hoffman was stunned by his willingness to increase the entire staff's salaries without any prodding from her.

"Now to the pre-college accommodations. Since the manifestation of mutant attributes is normally at puberty, we will need to provide for students of younger ages. What are your thoughts on the matter Dr. Hoffman?" Warren asked and sat down, still looking at his paperwork.

"I believe that to begin with we should tailor the classes to the number of students enrolled. If we were to have twelve pre-college students enroll, then we would put them in one class and provide additional teachers to deal with the varying grade levels. As enrollment increases, we could adjust the classes accordingly." Dr. Hoffman said in thought.

"I like that. Mr. Wagner? Mr. Summers? Any comments?" Warren asked as he stood again.

Both Warren and Jimmy shook their heads.

"The rest of these points are minor and don't need my attention. I'll let the two of you hash them out." Warren said and handed his paperwork to Kurt.

Dr. Hoffman was stunned by Warren's brash manner.

"Do you have any questions before we conclude the meeting Dr. Hoffman?" Warren asked casually.

"Yes, yes. Why are you doing this? What is your stake in it?" She asked with a note of suspicion.

"I have many reasons. The primary one is that I am a businessman and if this is done properly, I should be able to make a significant return on my investment. My other reasons are outside the scope of this meeting." Warren said pleasantly.

"Are you a mutant?" Dr. Hoffman asked boldly.

"Dr. Hoffman, there are places where admitting to being a mutant will put a person's life in danger. For that reason, I believe it is inappropriate to ask such a question, not because of what the answer might be, but because by asking it, you are asking someone to reveal a personal fact that they may have been hiding for years. The truth is, for all practical purposes, it doesn't matter if I'm a mutant or not. That being said, I will tell you what you want to know. I am a mutant, of course Mr. Wagner is, Mr. Summers is not, and Mr. Wainwright is not." Warren said calmly.

"I'm sorry if I offended you by asking. I understand your objection to the question. And thank you for telling me anyway. It helps me to know that Mr. Wainwright is not a mutant." Dr. Hoffman said quietly.

"Because he'll be more likely to see your point of view?" Warren asked curiously.

"Perhaps. It's difficult for me to put into words, I just know that I feel better knowing that one of you is a non-mutant." Dr. Hoffman admitted shyly.

"And that is why I wanted Mr. Wagner to share the position of Dean with you. That feeling of relief that you can't name is the same one I hope the students, both mutant and non-mutant will have when they see the two of you." Warren said peacefully.

"Yes. I see your point." Dr. Hoffman said in a considering tone.

"Does anyone have any other questions or anything to add before we adjourn?" Warren asked everyone.

"Just one thing." Dr. Hoffman said in thought.

"Yes?" Warren asked.

"I have decided to accept your generous offer and agree to the terms we've discussed. Now that we're all on the same team, perhaps we could dispense with the honorifics and use first names, I'm Julia." Dr. Hoffman said with a gentle smile.

"Very well, welcome aboard, you may call me Warren." Warren said professionally.

"I am Kurt. When you are done meeting with Doktor McCoy perhaps we could meet to discuss some of this." Kurt said as he looked up from the paperwork that Warren had given him.

"Yes, I'm interested to see what you've got there." Julia said then looked at Jimmy.

"I'm Jimmy." He said with a friendly smile.

"If there's nothing else, why don't you take Julia down to meet Hank?" Warren said casually.

"Yes, right this way Dr. Hoffman." Jimmy said as he walked to the door.

"You can call me Julia." Dr. Hoffman said with a pleasant smile as she followed him.

"Thank you but it would not be appropriate to do so while I am on duty." Jimmy said as he led the way out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott stood by the door to the foyer and when it opened he said, "Matt wants to talk with Ronny for a minute. We'll wait here for them."

John and Bobby nodded and withdrew back into the foyer, followed by Scott.

"Why don't you ask him while I'm talking to Logan?" Ronny asked Bobby and John

Bobby and John both nodded and watched Ronny walk away.

"Ask me what?" Scott asked carefully.

"We wondered if you'd like to camp out with us tonight?" Bobby asked with a smile.

"Where?" Scott asked, surprised by the question.

"It doesn't matter, in one of the wooded areas around the property. It's just something different we can do." Bobby said with a smile.

Scott saw the look of hope in John's eyes and said, "Yeah, but I'll need you guys to help me move some stuff from the boathouse to the mansion before we go. You okay with that?"

"No problem... do you think Robert could join us?" Bobby asked suddenly.

"I don't see why not. I think Andrew and Alan are in the examination room, you can ask them." Scott said in a considering voice.

"This is gonna be great. How experienced are you at camping Scott?" John asked curiously.

"I had survival training. I know how to use all the equipment, but as far as actually going out and camping for fun... this will be my first time." Scott said with a smile.

"Well if you've got the equipment side covered, I'll be in charge of the camping for fun part." Bobby said happily.

"What am I in charge of?" John asked curiously.

Bobby thought for a minute and said, "Sticks for toasting marshmallows and hot dogs... and of course you'll be in charge of the fire."

"So who gets firewood?" Scott asked with a smile.

"I think we all can. That way no one gets worn out before we get to have fun." John said in thought.

"Good idea. Let's see if we can get everything done before we lose daylight. I'd rather not try to set up camp in the dark." Scott said.

"We'll bring lanterns and stuff. We're not on a survival drill, just camping out in the backyard for something to do." Bobby said simply.

"Yeah, and thanks for agreeing to do this with us Scott. We're going to have fun tonight." John said with a smile.

"Sure, anytime guys." Scott said as he basked in the feeling of being wanted.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Logan, that wasn't much of a nap." Ronny said as he took his seat.

"I slept for a few minutes, then I was wide awake. Sometimes that happens." Matt said and sat up on the bed.

"When I was getting your beer, I saw some clothes in that crate over there." Ronny said, pointing.

"Thanks kid. Whoever thought up backless nightgowns for sick people needs killin." Logan said and walked to the indicated crate.

As Logan was pulling on some sweat pants, Ronny nodded and said, "Mr. Summers said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yeah. Cyke was sayin that John is gonna start school too. I was just thinking that if you wanted, we could invite him to live with us. I don't know him that well, but he always seemed like a decent guy." Logan said and got back onto his bed.

"That'd be great. He talked with me about starting school here. The guy's really had it rough." Ronny said honestly.

"Then let's get him over here and ask him." Matt said with a smile.

Ronny motioned to the others who were watching from the containment foyer.

Scott, John and Bobby walked into the containment room.

"Can I ask him?" Ronny asked with excitement.

"Go ahead kid." Matt said peacefully.

"John, would you like to move in with me and Logan?" Ronny asked hopefully.

"What?" John asked with wide eyes.

"We're gonna get a place, and you could move in with us if you wanted." Ronny said, begging with his eyes.

"Um, yeah. That sounds great." John said with a smile.

"Good. Now that that's done, all I need is to get released from this fishtank." Matt said with a growl.

"If you need anything done while you're in here, just let me know and we'll take care of it." Scott said simply.

"You think you could look at some houses for me? And find out about my money. I don't know if the other guy had the same bank accounts." Logan asked hopefully.

"Sure. How about I sit down with you tomorrow and get all the details. I've been invited on a camping trip tonight." Scott said with a big smile.

"A camping trip?" Matt asked with surprise.

"We're going to pitch a tent and sleep in the back yard." Bobby said simply.

"Why?" Matt asked curiously.

"Why not?" Scott asked happily.

"You're really gettin into this Cyke, you're a lot more fun than the Scott I remember." Matt said honestly.

"Alan's loosened up a lot too." Bobby said seriously.

Scott nodded in agreement.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dr. Hoffman, this is Dr. Hank McCoy and his niece Tara McCoy. This is Dr. Julia Hoffman, the current Dean of Forestgrove and future Dean of the Wagner Institute for Mutant Education." Jimmy said formally.

There were handshakes all around and Jimmy withdrew to stand beside the doorway.

"You don't look like your pictures." Julia said honestly, remembering his very human picture on the dust cover of his last book.

"They say the camera adds ten pounds." Hank said off-handily.

Julia smiled at the comment, then asked, "So what are you working on now, if I may ask."

"Of course, come with me to the BioLab and I'll show you something extraordinary." Hank said and led the way.

"Are you waiting for her?" Tara asked quietly.

"Yes. I will conduct her back to the library when she has finished talking with Dr. McCoy." Jimmy said professionally.

"I can do that. I'm going to be here anyway." Tara said kindly.

"Thank you Aunt Tara. If you need for me to return, I will be in the library with Uncle Warren." Jimmy said happily before he left.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So you goin on the camping trip too?" Matt asked Ronny.

"No. I'm gonna stay here with you." Ronny said quietly.

"No you ain't." Matt said with finality.

At Ronny's timid look of question, Matt continued, "Just cause I can't get out of this box don't mean you can't either. You go and have fun with your friends, then you can tell me all about it when you get back. Hearin about it'll be almost as good as gettin to go and do it myself." Matt said, holding Ronny's gaze.

"You really want me to go?" Ronny asked, sounding hurt.

"Yeah, I want you to go, have fun, and come back... can you do that?" Matt asked seriously.

Ronny nodded.

"Cyke, make sure the kid has a good time." Matt said, sparing Scott a glance.

"Bobby's in charge of good times, I'm in charge of equipment." Scott said with a teasing smile.

"Knowing you, that's probably best." Matt said with a chuckle.

Scott nodded and said, "Well guys, we're losing daylight. Are you ready to get to it?"

"Would you like to visit with Matt while we're hauling Scott's stuff from the boathouse?" Bobby asked Ronny quietly.

"Yeah, thanks bro." Ronny said with a smile.

"Then we'll come get you when we're done." Scott said with assurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of a cell phone could be heard.

"It's mine." Marie said.

As she turned away from the others she said, "Hello?"

"Yeah... Really? Yeah... I'll be right there." Marie said happily and hung up the phone.

"That was Rachel. Dawn is about to show your dads the baby stuff." Marie said happily.

"Would you like for me to accompany you back to the mansion?" Icheb asked carefully.

"No, not unless you want to sit around for a few hours talking about baby things." Marie said with a chuckle.

"I can't say that I've ever noticed the desire to do that." Icheb said seriously.

"Maybe we can get together and do something tomorrow." Marie said as she walked for the door.

"Yes, I would like that." Icheb said hurriedly as she left.

"Naughty bit of fluff, that one." Spike said as he watched her leave.

Icheb turned quickly to Robert and said, "You must help me to write some poetry for Marie."

Robert looked at Icheb curiously as Alex said, "That was Robert's first poem. It would be better if you asked Spike for advice. He's the one who helped Robert."

Icheb turned and said in a voice filled with panic, "Please Uncle Spike, please help me to write something suitable for Marie."

"I've landed in a house full of bloody poets... I love it." Spike said and extended his arm to indicate the dining room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hank and Julia walked into the BioLab in time to see Scott, Bobby and John removing their biosuits.

When they stepped out of the containment room's foyer, Hank immediately said, "He's been very ill, he needs his rest. You should have come to me and asked me before entering the containment room."

Scott looked at Hank seriously and said, "He's been alone for four months. The man wants company... He needs company."

"It is my opinion as his physician that he needs rest while he is in isolation." Hank said definitely.

"Hank, you're not listening. Matt has been without human contact for four months. Whatever medical reason you have for keeping him isolated can't compare with his need for people. If you can't see that, then maybe I need to find another doctor to look at him." Scott said with anger creeping into his voice.

"Are you threatening to fire me?" Hank asked with surprise.

"No. I'm just going to seek a second opinion in Matt's case. I don't know why you can't be reasonable with him, but you are hurting him by isolating him." Scott said with concern.

"That's preposterous. I am being completely objective." Hank said with a growl.

"Perhaps I can help resolve this." Julia said hesitantly.

"Oh, excuse me. I'm Scott Summers, and you are?..." Scott asked carefully.

"Dr. Julia Hoffman. Summers? Are you by chance related to Jimmy Summers?" Julia asked curiously.

"Yes, Jimmy is my nephew." Scott said with a proud smile.

"He seems to be a fine young man, incredibly intelligent." Julia said in a considering voice.

"Yes, you should read some of his writing. He has an amazing talent." Scott said, warming to the woman.

Julia snapped herself back to the point and said, "As I was saying, I may be able to help with your disagreement with Dr. McCoy. Though I haven't been in practice for a few years, I am a qualified medical doctor. If you would like, I could examine your patient and give my own opinion."

"That sounds like a good idea to me Dr. Hoffman. Do you have any objection Hank?" Scott asked with raised eyebrows.

"I hardly see the point, but since you seem to have your mind set on this course of action, who am I to stand in your way?" Hank said in a tone of long suffering.

"I'll take that as a yes." Julia said and moved to the containment foyer.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'll go in with you to introduce you." Scott said as he walked behind her.

"Thank you. Matt must be a good friend of yours for you to look after his interests like this." Julia said and opened the door.

"Guys, why don't you go get the camping supplies while Dr. Hoffman looks at Matt? I'll meet you in the garage when I'm done here... Let's take the four by four." Scott said and waited for a response.

"Yeah, we'll get it loaded. Take care of Matt." John said and cast a disapproving glance at Hank.

Scott nodded and went to change into the 'garbage bag' suit.

"Let's see what you've got mate." Spike said and moved to Icheb's side.

Hesitantly, Icheb handed the padd to Spike.

A long minute passed as Spike read, occasionally looking at Icheb's expectant, worried gaze.

Finally Spike said, "We may need to do a bit of work with this one."

"Is there a problem? I did exactly as you said. I thought about Marie and wrote about the attributes that I found most attractive." Icheb said with tension.

"When I said that, I was meaning for you to talk about her eyes, her hair, maybe her smile. Seven of your paragraphs talk about her breasts. And I'm with you mate, the chit has a nice rack, but women get a little touchy when that's all you notice about them. You didn't even mention her eyes." Spike said, trying to be gentle.

"I have eyes. I thought I would focus on the attributes that are unique to her." Icheb said honestly.

"Yeah, bout that mate. You might not want to use the phrase 'broad child-bearing hips'. I can't say for sure, but it might get you hurt." Spike said hesitantly.

"But the bone structure of her pelvis would make her ideal for birthing children. She should be able to bear at least a dozen before her menstrual cycles cease." Icheb said reasonably.

"I'm surprised you didn't put that in here." Spike said sarcastically.

"You must press that button to advance to the next page." Icheb said helpfully.

"Oy, there it is..." Spike said in wonder.

Icheb sat quietly with a worried expression, waiting for more.

Finally Spike said, "Maybe poetry isn't the best way for you to express your affection toward her. There are a lot of ways a bloke can chat up a nice girl like Marie."

"But her reaction to Robert's poem was so favorable, I know she would like poetry. If I were to try something else, it might be an art form that does not interest her." Icheb said in a pleading voice.

"Listen Mate, the chit is into you. If she wasn't interested, she wouldn't be going on walks with you. So whatever you do, she'll either like it, or try to like it... but this... and what's this bit about her kiss being the superior one?" Spike asked as he reread the passage.

"After I kissed Marie, I kissed her ex-boyfriend to compare the sensations. I processed and compared the information about the two kisses, and have concluded that hers was superior." Icheb said clinically.

Spike was stunned.

"Uncle Spike?" Icheb asked in worry as Spike stared off into space.

"Right mate..." Spike said, snapping back to reality. Then he continued, "So you're telling me that you kissed Marie, then kissed her ex... did she find out?"

"Yes, I told her. She seemed upset." Icheb said unsurely.

Spike shook his head, then thought to ask, "This bloke you kissed, he ain't off somewhere pining for you, is he?"

"No, I don't think Bobby has any emotional attachment to me. I did not consider that possibility." Icheb said with the beginnings of worry.

"Bobby Drake?" Spike asked quietly.

Icheb nodded in confirmation.

"Passions has nothing on you lot." Spike said, then looked at Icheb's writing again.

"Does this mean I'm an awful poet?" Icheb said with a crestfallen look.

Spike froze at the words and relived a moment of pain from his distant past. Finally he came back to himself and said, "No mate, it means you need someone to help you till you get it right."

Icheb nodded with a hesitant, but hopeful expression.

"How's about this? You write down whatever you like about her, but limit yourself to one paragraph per part. And you can write about things like her sense of humor or laughter too. It doesn't just have to be body parts." Spike said and handed the padd back to Icheb.

"Then you're not giving up?" Icheb said in a small voice.

"No mate. I've had me a bad review or two in my days, you can't let it keep you down. If you want to write, you write and I'll help you... just whatever you do, don't send Marie anything till after I've had a chance to read it." Spike said firmly.

Icheb nodded and went back to work.

### **[Chapter 33: Cartoon Revelation]**

Scott led Dr. Hoffman into the containment room and said, "Matt, I'd like for you to meet Dr. Julia Hoffman. If you don't mind, she is going to examine you."

Logan looked at Dr. Hoffman, then said, "I ain't crazy bout doctors, but if it'll help get me outta here sooner, you can go ahead."

"It won't get you out sooner, but it might get Hank off your back about visitors." Scott said encouragingly.

"Good enough." Logan said simply.

"Ronny, why don't you come over here with me so we can let Dr. Hoffman do her exam." Scott suggested quietly.

Ronny nodded and followed Scott.

"Mr. Logan, Dr. McCoy didn't fill me in on your history. Do you think you might tell me what has been wrong with you?" Julia asked as she measured his blood pressure with the finger-cuff.

"Yeah, some 'friends of humanity' cooked up a virus to kill mutants. I got it." Logan said gruffly.

Julia was stunned.

Scott noticed her expression and explained, "Logan's healing factor kept him alive this long. No one else who was infected survived."

"I never imagined... I knew there were anti-mutant forces gathering, but to engineer a virus would take incredible resources." Julia said as she shined a light into Logan's eyes.

"Like the resources of the United States, Chinese and South African governments?" Scott asked, reliving the nightmare.

Julia froze and thought about that statement.

"The sudden disappearance of the scientists... it wasn't a terrorist group?" Julia asked as she looked at Scott.

"It depends on your definition of terrorism. We like to think of it as defending humanity from the actions of a few short-sighted fools." Scott said.

"Who didn't even make the thing right. It killed non-mutants too." Logan added.

"What a nightmare." Julia said and moved to a supply drawer for a hypodermic.

"I'm afraid I'll need a small sample of your blood to look for the virus." Julia said in a tone of apology.

"That's fine Doc, you do what you need to do. Just don't let big blue lock me in here alone." Matt said with a hint of desperation in his voice.

"I promise that I'll only recommend complete isolation if I am absolutely sure that it's in your best interest." Julia said softly.

"Thanks Doc. You're a good one, I can tell." Matt said with a smile.

After putting the blood sample away, Dr. Hoffman picked up a swab on a long stick and said, "You may not think so after this. I need a throat swab."

"Throat? As long as that's where you're planning on putting it, that's fine. You had me worried." Matt said with a smile before opening wide for Dr. Hoffman.

"I will need a stool sample, but it won't be necessary for some time. When nature calls, you'll need to save a little something for me." Dr. Hoffman said and handed Matt a cup with a lid.

"Okay, you're the Doc. But I usually give flower's on the first date." Matt said as he accepted the cup.

"Mr. Logan, I'm old enough to be your mother." Julia said in a playfully offended voice.

"Actually, I'm probably old enough to be your grandfather. The thing that kept the virus from killin me, don't let me age. Some doctors... evil scientist types... did something to me about fifteen years ago that wiped out my memory, so I don't know how old I really am. Professor Frost found a picture of me in eighteen sixty four, so I'm at least a hundred and forty." Matt said as Julia examined his ears.

"Remarkable." Julia said as she stood back in thought. Then she shook her head and picked up a device and started attaching sticky pads with wires to Logan's chest.

"You're starting to worry me Doc. These ain't gonna shock me are they?" Matt asked carefully.

"No, no. These are small microphones so that I can hear your heartrate and breathing. I can't use a stethoscope in this suit." Dr. Hoffman said with assurance as she connected the wires to a small hand-held device.

After a moment of listening to what seemed like incomprehensible sounds to everyone else in the room, Julia said, "Very good."

"So how do I check out Doc?" Matt asked hopefully.

"How are you feeling?" Julia asked bluntly.

"Better than I have in four months. Except for being hungry, I'm feeling great." Logan said honestly.

"When did you last eat?" Julia asked with concern.

"Yesterday morning, but I threw up for about twenty straight hours after that, so I'm thinkin I'm ready for dinner." Logan said as he looked into Julia's eyes.

Julia looked out the window where Hank was looking in with a gruff expression.

She pressed her microphone switch and said, "Dr. McCoy, your patient is hungry."

"I'll get to it as soon as everyone has finished agitating my patient." Hank said in a put-off tone.

Ronny looked angrily at Hank and pressed his own microphone.

"Don't bother. I'll get something for him myself." Ronny said gruffly and moved toward the containment room door.

"Kid, you don't have to do stuff for me." Matt said with strength.

"I'll make you a deal Logan. When you get out and can do stuff like this for yourself, I won't lift a finger to help you. Till then, I'll do the stuff for you that you can't." Ronny said, then went into the foyer to begin decontamination.

Matt sat speechless.

"That boy has some fire. Is he yours?" Julia asked casually.

"Naw. The kid belongs to nobody but himself. We just look out for each other." Matt said as he watched Ronny removing his suit.

"Well I've done everything I can in here. I need to take these samples to the lab and see if I can find any traces of the virus in your system... Are you really feeling up to having visitors?" Julia asked with a soul searching gaze.

"Yeah Doc. I really am. If I wasn't feeling like having visitors, I'd tell you." Matt said, allowing his honesty to show.

"Right. I'll be back to let you know what I've found." Julia said and went to the decontamination room.

"Do you want me to stay with you Matt?" Scott asked carefully.

"Naw. You go and take the kids camping... And watch out for the kid... He ain't as tough as he acts." Matt said with concern.

"Don't worry. We're just going to have a good time. You take care of yourself." Scott said, not wanting to leave Matt alone.

"Go on one-eye. The kid's been through a lot. Help him to make some good memories. He needs 'em." Matt said seriously.

Scott nodded and walked into the containment foyer where Julia was waiting for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Icheb! There is a Bruhnalli animation with your name on it." William said with excitement.

"Let's us take a break and see what the whelp's found for you." Spike said to Icheb, who was still writing.

"Will you help me again later Uncle Spike?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Just let me know when you're ready for me. I don't plan on leaving anytime soon." Spike said happily.

Icheb finished what he was writing and took the padd as he left the table.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jimmy returned to the library and said, "Aunt Tara will conduct Dr. Hoffman back to the library when she is finished."

"That's fine Jimmy. What do you think of what you've seen so far?" Warren asked as he gathered some papers into his briefcase.

"It has been very interesting. The process of negotiation was fascinating." Jimmy said with excitement.

"I've always thought so... What did you think about the deal?" Warren asked curiously.

"I believe the proposed agreement will be beneficial for all involved." Jimmy said seriously.

"It has that potential. There are quite a few things that could go wrong too." Warren said in thought.

"I believe the nature of business is to take risks. If there were no risk, everyone would do it." Jimmy said knowingly.

"That's right Jimmy. If you ever decide to go into business, let me know. You've got the right mindset for it." Warren said proudly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alan and Andrew were looking at bags upon bags of baby things piled before them.

"There must be forty bags here. Did you buy out the store?" Andrew asked with a furrowed brow.

All the girls laughed as Dawn said, "This is just the stuff we carried home. They'll be delivering the rest tomorrow."

"The rest?" Alan asked with wide eyes.

"Of course the rest. We had to get six cribs, three car seats, two changing tables... you'll just have to wait till it all comes. But there was no way we could have carried half the stuff home to take care of three babies in two different places." Dawn said as she looked through bags, trying to decide what to show off first.

"Father, if you will take Jimmy back to the boathouse when he is done, I will leave now." Trey said quietly.

"Okay. It looks like we'll be here for a while. Go ahead." Andrew said in a whisper as Dawn pulled out a large T shirt.

"That's kinda big for a baby." Alan said hesitantly.

"Maybe, but it's not for them. We got you a few maternity shirts so you won't have to wear that red and black thing all the time." Dawn said happily.

Alan smiled and held out his hand for the shirt before saying, "Thanks Dawn, I really appreciate that."

"I thought you'd like it." Dawn said proudly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"William, before you start the cartoon, why don't you wake up your grandfather?" Alex said as he took his seat on the couch.

"Right away." William said and hurried to the bedroom.

Icheb walked into the room and Alex said, "William says that this cartoon is from your people."

Icheb took his seat and said, "I am curious to see this video."

William came back into the room followed by a sleepy Lee.

"Are we ready to begin?" William asked with excitement.

"Yes. Go ahead." Alex said as Spike sat next to him.

The video began to play and Icheb said, "This is a kroosch-tali, an educational film."

Alex nodded as he watched the scene of a primitive village on the screen.

"The Lowelltie clan were a peaceful people who settled a colony on the Southern tip of the Arugai continent. After a non-productive growing season and outbreaks of Gurutan and Quatamarin, the Lowelltie were feeling discouraged and many were considering returning to Drashu." The commentator said as the scene reflected people harvesting puny vegetables and some falling down sick.

"Do you need me to pause the video so Icheb can translate?" William asked helpfully.

"No, I think I'm getting the gist of it." Alex said as he continued to watch.

"Then the Marisch-ka settled a colony less than a days walk from the Lowelltie. This caused much concern among the peaceful Lowelltie, since the Marisch-ka were known to practice varischi-chu." The commentator continued.

"Hold it, I need to know what that one is." Alex said.

William hurried to the iso-decoder and pressed a button to freeze the action on the screen.

"Varischi-chu is the practice of harvesting without replenishing the soil and gathering resources such as wood without replanting." Icheb said carefully.

"Oh, I thought it was something a little more horrible from the sound of it." Alex said in thought.

"To an agrarian society, it is quite serious." Icheb said firmly.

"Okay, go ahead William." Alex said and watched the cartoon continue.

"Scouts for the Lowelltie reported that the Marisch-ka had superior numbers of people and had brought offensive weapons." The commentator said with a voice of disapproval.

"The elders of the Lowelltie looked at the resources available to them and could not find a way to defend against an attack if it should come." The

commentator said as the video showed the animated forms of many worried old men talking.

"Finally, the eldest called the group to order and said that they were not seeing all the resources at their disposal. The eldest said that the only way they could prevent the Marisch-ka from taking over their colony was to use everything that nature had provided them to its fullest advantage." The commentator said as the video showed an old Bruhnalli man talking.

"Nature has given us resources to use against the Marisch-ka. We must gather the infecting agents from all those in the isolation wards of the hospital and create a weapon." The eldest said in a shaky voice.

The animation showed the other elders agreeing and leaving the council chambers.

"So the elders went to the healer and told him that they needed the most infectious substances that he could gather, so they could use this force of nature against their enemy." The commentator said as the animation showed the doctor listening and agreeing.

"The vomitus, blood and feces of the most severely ill of the patients in the medical ward were gathered into a tightly woven cloth bag, and the icheb was created." The commentator said as the video showed things being scooped, spooned and poured into a bag.

"Two of the bravest of the town's men carried the icheb to the Marisch-ka and put it in a secluded area of the spring that supplied the town's water." The commentator said with a voice of excitement as the video showed the men hiding the cloth bag in a heavily reeded area of the small pond.

"For three long days the Lowelltie scouts watched before the first signs of disease could be seen." The voice said as the picture showed a man walking through the town square, then falling to his knees and vomiting.

"Within two weeks, no movement could be seen in the town at all. A brave scout named Kenaschu walked into the Marisch-ka town. He returned to the Lowelltie village and told the elders that all their enemies had been defeated. The entire colony was dead." The commentator said happily.

"And thus the icheb saved the Lowelltie clan who eventually came to inhabit the entire Arugai continent." The commentator said in a grand voice before the video stopped.

Ronny returned to the BioLab with a plate of meatloaf and potatoes and a bowl of fruit salad.

"That food is too spicy for him. He must have bland food until he is more recovered." Hank said irritably.

"Why don't you let him decide what he feels like eating? You had your chance to fix him food but it was too much trouble for you." Ronny said as he continued to the BioLab's foyer.

"You can't talk to me like that! I'm the doctor here and if I say my patient can't have that food then he can't have it." Hank said with increasing volume as he moved toward Ronny.

A bubble of fear arose within Ronny as he saw the large blue beast coming toward him. Deep inside he felt his power awaken. He remembered the feeling and tried to focus it, not so much to suppress it as to guide it to do what he wanted.

Hank stopped in surprise as he felt himself becoming heavy.

Ronny concentrated his power and watched as Hank fell to his knees.

"Logan didn't do nothing to you. I don't know why you're trying to hurt him, but I'm not going to let you do it." Ronny said fiercely as Hank fought to remain upright.

"I could squash you like a bug. I would have before I met Logan. Think about that, if it wasn't for Logan, I'd kill you. You owe him your life." Ronny said and held his power constant, not wanting to really hurt Hank.

All Hank could manage was a disgusted growl.

"Tell me you're going to lay off Logan and I'll let you up." Ronny demanded.

"I'm... not...." Hank began with difficulty.

"Wrong answer." Ronny said and increased the pressure slightly.

Hank groaned at the increased weight and forced himself to say, "Give."

Ronny reduced the force on Hank and said, "I'm going to take Logan his food now. As far as I'm concerned, this is done. But if you want to go again, I'll be ready."

After a moment to see that Hank wasn't injured, Ronny walked to the containment foyer where Julia and Scott were standing and watching him.

"I'm sorry. He was trying to take away Logan's food." Ronny said shyly.

"Quite alright. If I had the ability to do so, I would do the same thing in your circumstance." Julia said softly.

Ronny smiled at her as Scott said, "We can talk about using your ability responsibly later. But just so you know, I'm proud of your self control. I would rather not let a disagreement degenerate into a confrontation like this, but I'm glad to see that you were able to make your point without doing any damage."

"Thank you Mr. Summers." Ronny said in an embarrassed voice.

"Now why don't you get that food in to Matt before it gets cold." Scott said with a gentle smile.

Ronny nodded and rushed into the containment room.

"Hank. We need to talk." Scott said in his most commanding voice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Icheb had a look of horror and humiliation on his face as he raced out of the room and upstairs.

Everyone looked at each other as they heard the door slam.

"His parents named him shitbag?" Spike asked in stunned disbelief.

"That's really messed up." Alex said in shock.

Alex got up and started toward the stairs when Lee said, "Wait a minute Alex."

"He needs someone to calm him down." Alex said as he walked up the first steps.

"Yes, but this is too big. No offense to you, but this cuts to the core of his being, his personal identity. He needs his father." Lee said seriously.

Alex stopped and thought for a second before he moved to the phone.

"Thanks Lee, you're right." Alex said and dialed the phone.

"Can I speak to Andrew please?" Alex asked carefully.

"Yeah, I'll wait." Alex said and got an impatient expression.

"Andrew? I need you to come home. Icheb needs you." Alex said firmly.

"I'll tell you when you get here. Port over, he needs you now." Alex said with a tone of menace.

Before Alex could hang up the phone, Andrew was standing in front of him with a look of panic.

"William, replay the video, your father needs to see it." Alex said in a commanding tone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jimmy, Dr. Hoffman is taking longer than expected. Would you bring a carafe of coffee and some cream? Then you can go." Warren said seriously.

"I do not mind staying." Jimmy said quickly.

"I know, but I'm leaving too. Kurt and Julia will work the rest out between them. I don't see the need for a third party for that type of meeting." Warren said honestly.

"Very well. But if you have need of me, I would be pleased to work for you again." Jimmy said with excitement.

"About that, I'm going to have a check sent to you for the time that you worked. And there will be a little bonus for your suggestion about the debate. That was above and beyond your duties." Warren said with a smile.

"You do not need to pay me. I am happy to help you." Jimmy said simply.

"This is business. You work, you get paid." Warren said firmly.

"Yes Mr. Worthington." Jimmy said, straightening.

"It's okay Jimmy, you're almost off duty, you can call me Uncle Warren again." Warren said gently.

"I will get the coffee now. If I do not see you before I leave, have a good evening Uncle Warren." Jimmy said as he turned to leave.

"You too Jimmy." Warren said with a smile as he closed his briefcase.

\* \* \* \* \*

Silence filled the room but for the sound of the video.

Everyone watched the expression on Andrew's face move from concern to worry and finally to anger.

"Thanks for calling me Alex. I knew we were right to trust you with this job." Andrew said as he walked toward the stairs.

"Is there anything we can do?" Alex asked helplessly.

"Yes, make some very weak chamomile tea and bring it up when it's ready." Andrew said and began to walk up the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott followed Hank to the office and firmly closed the door behind him.

"He was out of line." Hank said quietly but steadily.

"He was defending himself against a perceived threat." Scott said, matching his tone.

"I would never hurt a child." Hank said, obviously hurt that Scott could think otherwise.

"Hank, I didn't think you were capable of hurting anyone before today." Scott said, feeling pain at saying the words.

"I haven't..." Hank began.

"I'm tired of trying to explain to you Hank. Where Logan's concerned, you have a blind spot and no matter what I say you'll think you're acting reasonably." Scott said with resignation.

"I'm simply treating my patient..." Hank began until Scott interrupted.

"BULLSHIT! You've been bullying Matt and doing your best to isolate him." Scott spat.

"You don't understand." Hank said quickly.

"You're right. I don't understand. Matt's lost everything and everyone he ever knew. He's spent four months thinking that he was going to be alone for the rest of his life. Did you know he's over one hundred forty years old? If he survived the virus, he had an eternity of being alone to look forward to. And after all that, do you know what he's done since he's been here? He's offered to take in two boys who need someone to look after them. He's offered me his support and advice. He's making plans for the future. And the only thing that's standing in his way is his doctor who is doing his damndest to make him feel alone and unwanted." Scott said as he paced the room.

"He's trying to take Orroro from me." Hank said quietly.

"What?" Scott asked incredulously.

"I was just beginning to get to know Orroro and he asked her on a date. He's forceful, charming, masculine... he looks human... I can't compete." Hank said in a lost voice.

"So all this is because he wants to date Storm? Hank, you need to get your priorities straight. He's your patient. You have a duty to do what's best for him despite your personal feelings. And what do you think Storm would think about the way you've been acting? I have to tell you, unless she's into petty, vindictive, mean, selfish men, she'd be put off by your recent behavior." Scott said and forced himself to sit.

Hank sat silently and thought about the words.

Scott sat and waited for Hank to speak.

"I can behave professionally. I didn't see what I was doing." Hank said quietly.

"That might have been good enough before, but now Ronny's involved. He hasn't had much in the way of role models from what I can tell, so you need to set an example for him of how a man is supposed to behave when he's messed up as badly as this." Scott said firmly.

Hank nodded.

"Okay. I'll leave this in your hands. You decide what you need to do to make things right and I'll stay out of it." Scott said seriously.

Hank nodded again.

"And a piece of advice. You won't make Orroro like you by attacking Matt. Try being the man that she would want you to be. If anything will get her to notice you, that's it." Scott said as he got up to leave.

"I'm sorry." Hank said with shame.

"Then make it right." Scott said on his way out the office door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Icheb, can I come in?" Andrew asked as he gently knocked on the door.

Silence greeted Andrew as he expected.

"I'm coming in. I have something to tell you." Andrew said and waited a moment before phasing the door and walking through.

Andrew walked into the room and found Icheb curled into the corner with his knees pulled up to his chest.

"You saw it?" Icheb asked as tears ran down his face.

"I saw it." Andrew said quietly.

"Why would they do it? Why would they name me after such a horrible thing?" Icheb asked in a lost voice.

"I don't know if it's going to help you to know this, but I think it will help you to understand why." Andrew said nervously.

Icheb looked at his father with wide hopeful eyes.

"The doctor told Alan and I before we adopted you... You were genetically engineered. He said that there is no way your genetic code could have occurred naturally." Andrew said and took a seat in the floor in front of Icheb.

Icheb's only response was to allow a look of curiosity to come over his face.

"It appears that you were created for the specific purpose of infecting the Borg with a virus which would have the effect of disconnecting all the drones from the collective." Andrew said carefully.

"So I was the cause of the malfunction on the cube?" Icheb asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes. The modified water molecule has no effect on Borg physiology. Otherwise all of you would have been behaving as if you were drunk." Andrew said as he looked into a place of distant memory.

"So I was named Icheb because I was created to infect our enemy. I am a weapon." Icheb said as he tried to compose himself.

"You were created to be a weapon, but you fulfilled your purpose. Now you are yourself, no different from anyone else." Andrew said with assurance.

"But... I am a thing... I was never intended to be a person." Icheb said as his breathing became more shallow.

"Icheb Lee Andrew Malachi Summers, you are a good person who I am proud to call my son. No matter how or why you were created, this is who you are now and we all love you." Andrew said firmly.

"But how can you? I am a container filled with disease, used to attack those who might threaten us." Icheb said as he became pale.

Andrew moved quickly and pulled Icheb close.

"You are my son. No matter what else you are, you are that. Do you have any doubt of that fact?" Andrew asked as he rocked Icheb, trying to bring comfort.

After a long silence, Icheb finally said, "No, no doubt. You are my father, I am your son."

Andrew let a smile of relief come over his face as he said, "Then that makes you the same as all the other children. I have never worried about which species any of you are, so this doesn't make the slightest difference in how I see you."

Icheb hesitantly nodded.

"The family are downstairs and all of them are worried about you. When you're ready, you need to come down and prove to them that you're okay." Andrew said calmly.

"But how can I? They know what I am, I will be so ashamed." Icheb said as his tears began to fall again.

Andrew thought for a minute then quietly asked, "If this were happening to Trey, how would you react?"

"I don't know." Icheb said helplessly.

"Would you make fun of him?" Andrew asked in his fatherly voice.

"No. I would never do that." Icheb said immediately.

"Why not?" Andrew asked in a leading tone.

"Because it would be mean and cruel." Icheb said definitely.

"Do you think Trey is mean and cruel?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No, he is a good person. He would never do such a thing." Icheb said with a note of offense at the suggestion.

"So what about the others? Is there anyone downstairs who is mean and cruel enough to tease you about this?" Andrew asked as he pulled back to look into Icheb's eyes.

After a long moment of thought, Icheb said, "No. They are all my family. No one downstairs would do that."

"Then you can come down when you're ready and let them know that you're okay. You don't want them to be worried do you?" Andrew asked as he held Icheb's gaze.

"No Father, I do not want them to worry." Icheb said slowly.

"Do you want to come downstairs with me now?" Andrew asked gently.

"I should. It is difficult." Icheb said as he wiped his eyes.

"I know son. Sometimes the things you need to do are difficult, but they still need to be done." Andrew said with a note of apology.

Icheb nodded and pulled himself to stand.

Andrew put out a hand and Icheb pulled him to his feet.

"Thank you Father." Icheb said and pulled Andrew into a hug.

"I'm here for you whenever you need me son." Andrew said as he held Icheb tightly.

After long silent minutes of hugging, Icheb said, "I believe I am ready."

Andrew nodded and pulled out of the hug to lead the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny walked into the containment room, carefully carrying the food.

Matt got off the bed, took the food from Ronny and carried it to the table.

"Thank's kid, this looks great." Matt said enthusiastically.

Ronny smiled with pride.

"So anything goin on out in the world?" Matt asked as he began to eat.

"There's a bunch of girls giggling and stuff with that Andrew guy's fat husband." Ronny said as he took a seat.

"He ain't exactly fat. He's having babies... two of 'em." Matt said between bites.

Ronny thought about that and finally asked, "That ain't how it's supposed to be is it?"

Matt laughed and finally said, "Just for him kid. He had a machine put in his stomach so he could have kids."

"Oh. I don't know about all that sex stuff, but I thought that sounded wrong." Ronny said seriously.

"Well, I ain't gonna sit you down and give you the talk till I have to. But whenever you have questions, just ask 'em and I'll answer 'em." Matt said as he enjoyed his first taste of the fruit salad.

"I just need to know about when guys... you know... do it. You can't get like pregnant or nothin from it can you?" Ronny asked timidly.

"Naw, Alan's the only one I know who's been able to manage that. But you can get some pretty nasty diseases if you ain't careful." Logan said seriously.

Ronny nodded with evident worry.

"Go ahead kid. What is it?" Matt asked with concern.

"I'm just... I want to be sure... I mean my... dad... I know he did that to me... and Bobby... and mom... I don't know if there was anyone else. I mean, he could have given me something, couldn't he?" Ronny asked in a whisper.

Matt looked quietly at his plate as he tried to contain his rage. Finally he said in a controlled voice that mostly suppressed his growl, "Yeah, he could."

"How can I know... I need to know." Ronny said with worry.

"When the Doc comes back and tells me how I'm doin, you can ask her if she'll do the tests. She's good people, I think she'll treat you right." Matt said with assurance.

"I don't know how to ask. I mean, I'd have to tell her, and I can't do that." Ronny said in a pained voice.

"Okay kid. Don't expect me to do stuff like this for you every time. You gotta speak for yourself. But I'll talk to her for you this time." Matt finished quietly.

"Thanks Logan." Ronny said with relief.

"Yeah. And thanks for the food. That was just what I needed." Matt said, feeling the rage curled within him, waiting to strike.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked down the stairs as Alex walked into the living room carrying a cup of tea.

"Thanks Alex. Icheb decided to come down." Andrew said with a proud smile.

Everyone was silent, not knowing what to say.

Andrew looked at Icheb's frightened expression and knew that he'd better get the ball rolling.

"What do you want to be called?" Andrew asked Icheb bluntly.

Icheb thought carefully about his answer before saying, "I will continue to use my given name. I will use it to remind me of where I came from."

Andrew smiled and nodded before asking, "Do you want me to tell them the rest of the story?"

Icheb had a look of gratitude as he nodded.

Trey walked in the door as Andrew was about to begin.

"Come in Trey. I have a story to tell you." Andrew said with a smile and began to tell the tale of Icheb's origin.

## *[Chapter 34: The Beginning of Forever]*

Hank walked into the BioLab and went to a supply cabinet.

After grabbing a small device, he walked immediately to the containment room.

He quickly put on his special XXXL biosuit and walked into the room to find Matt and Ronny talking.

"Gentlemen, do you mind if I interrupt for a moment?" Hank asked carefully.

"Would it matter if we did?" Matt asked flatly.

Hank stopped and took a deep breath before saying, "Yes, now it would. I'm sorry I've behaved so badly toward you Matt. My behavior has been inexcusable."

Matt nodded cautiously.

"I just brought this for you. It is a transmitter to the lab's PA system. This way anyone who visits won't have to get into a suit to talk with you." Hank said quietly as he sat the box on the table beside Matt.

"Okay." Matt said, his suspicion rising.

"And Ronny, I'm sorry I frightened you. I never intended for that to happen." Hank said quietly.

"I ain't worried about that. Are you going to treat Logan decent now?" Ronny asked carefully.

"Yes, I'm going to try." Hank said as he looked into Ronny's eyes.

"Good." Ronny said flatly.

"If you really mean it, maybe you can tell me why you've been treating me like shit." Matt said, watching Hank's expression.

"I've never been good at talking to women. Even before I became like this, I was always too shy to get to know them. When I finally start getting to know Orroro, you show up and are all charming and... human looking. I felt like you were going to take her away from me..." Hank trailed off.

"So you been dumping on me cause you thought I was stealin your girl?" Matt asked with surprise.

"Yes. I know it sounds petty. I'm sorry I let my emotions override my common sense." Hank said with embarrassment.

Matt looked at Ronny, then said, "No harm done. But there's something you can do for me right now if you would."

"What's that?" Hank asked quickly, wanting to help.

"You know what happened to Ronny yesterday... about his dad, right?" Matt asked carefully, noticing Ronny's wince at the words.

"Yes." Hank said quietly.

"The kid's smart. He got to thinking about diseases an stuff and wanted to know if you could check him out. Just to be sure." Matt said, watching for Ronny's reaction.

"When we get out of here, I'll just need a blood sample. I should be able to give you the results by tomorrow." Hank said with assurance.

Ronny nodded.

"Good. Now what can you tell me about my condition?" Matt asked carefully.

"Dr. Hoffman has been examining your samples. I haven't spoken to her yet." Hank said quietly.

"There she is, let's ask her." Ronny said, pointing through the window.

Matt picked up the transmitter and said, "So what's the news Doc?"

Julia looked up with a smile and said, "I have a few cultures growing, so I won't know anything definite till tomorrow, but I haven't found anything to concern me yet."

"Very good. This is excellent news." Hank said happily.

Ronny and Matt nodded in unison.

"Then why don't you tell me what type of movies you like so I can get a television and VCR put in here for you." Hank asked warmly.

"You got any John Wayne?" Matt asked hopefully.

Hank thought for a moment before saying, "I think if I look through my personal collection I could probably find just about every movie he ever made."

"You like the Duke?" Matt asked with surprise.

"Yes, my video collection is almost exclusively John Wayne and The Rifleman." Hank said with a smile.

"Bring 'em down. I ain't seen the Rifleman in years. I love that show." Matt said quickly.

Ronny watched and smiled, enjoying Matt's enthusiasm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and John had just finished loading the last of the camping supplies when Bobby stopped suddenly and said, "I forgot Pete."

At John's look of question, Bobby continued, "He's been a good friend to me, I can't believe I didn't think about inviting him sooner."

"It ain't too late. Let's go ask him." John said simply.

Bobby thought, then turned and led the way to Peter's room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dad, have you seen Trey? He was waiting to walk me home." Jimmy said hopefully.

"Since we're here, he decided that you could come home with us. I don't think he wanted to look at baby things for two or three hours." Alan said as Dawn happily revealed yet another pair of identical jumpsuits for the babies.

"I would not mind looking at baby things. I need to know what supplies we have to care for my brothers." Jimmy said with a smile.

"Then climb up here and sit with me squirt. I don't think we're even halfway done." Alan said, then smiled and nodded at another pair of identical jumpers. He actually couldn't see that they were any different than the last five Dawn had enthusiastically displayed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott was walking toward the Professor's office when he saw Orroro, Artie and Clarissa walking into the mansion.

"How was your meeting?" Scott asked with a smile.

"It was amazing. The President is an incredibly kind man." Orroro said with enthusiasm.

"Would you come to the office for a minute, I have something to discuss with you." Scott said gently, not wanting to sound too ominous.

"Of course." Orroro said happily and followed Scott down the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Andrew finished the story, Trey walked to Icheb and pulled him into a hug.

Everyone was surprised to see Trey expressing himself so openly.

"If this causes you difficulty, share your feelings with me and I will try to help." Trey said quietly.

Icheb nodded and whispered, "I will. Thank you."

"It is what brothers do for each other." Trey said simply and pulled out of the hug.

"Well, I guess that's one vid chip down, we still have about fifty more. I hope they all don't have emotional stuff like that." Andrew said to the group.

"Father, there are many vids on each chip." William said quietly.

"Oh, okay. How many cartoons are we looking at?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Approximately one hundred seventeen thousand hours." William said seriously.

Everyone looked at William with surprise.

"That's a lot. Um, how long would it take to watch them all?" Andrew asked carefully.

"How many hours a week would you be watching?" William asked in a considering voice.

"Let's say forty, just to get an idea." Andrew said seriously.

"Then it would take fifty six years and three months before you completed all the cartoons." William said in thought.

"Alex, you'd better get started." Andrew said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby quietly knocked on Peter's door.

"Just a moment." Peter called out.

"We'll need to get some more gear for Peter." John said

"It'll just take a few minutes." Bobby said as the door opened.

Bobby and John both noticed Peter's disheveled appearance and were curious.

"Some of us are camping out tonight and I thought you might like to join us." Bobby said as he automatically walked into Peter's room followed by John.

Peter hurriedly looked around the room, then said, "No thank you. I have some reading that I would like to do, perhaps next time."

Bobby stopped in his tracks and asked with concern, "Is everything okay Pete?"

"Yes, all is well. Have a good time tonight." Peter said hurriedly.

"Yeah, okay. You too." Bobby said absently as he turned to leave.

"Will you go running tomorrow?" Peter asked as Bobby and John walked back out into the hall.

"No, I don't think so. We'll probably sleep in tomorrow." Bobby said in thought.

"Then I will see you when you return. Have a good evening." Peter said and closed the door.

"Yeah, you too." Bobby said with a note of question in his voice.

As Bobby and John walked down the hall, Bobby asked, "Do you think Pete was acting a little weird?"

John began to laugh.

"What?" Bobby asked as he stopped.

"You didn't notice?" John asked through his chuckles.

"Notice what?" Bobby asked, puzzled by John's laughter.

"Peter was trying to hide a chubby and the room smelled like sex." John said through his laughter.

Bobby smiled and said, "Oh, I guess we were interrupting a tender moment."

"Yeah." John said, then got a mischievous smile.

Bobby noticed, and got the same smile.

Both began to laugh as it became apparent that they were thinking the same thing.

"So what excuse can we give to interrupt him again?" Bobby finally asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Professor Xavier had a seizure today. Hank says it's from stress and ordered him to take an immediate vacation." Scott said after they settled into their chairs.

"Will he be alright?" Orroro asked with concern.

"I think so. He just needs to get away for a while." Scott said peacefully.

"So has he left you in charge?" Orroro asked carefully.

"Yes. If you're willing to help, we can keep this place going till he gets back."

"Of course, what can I do?" Orroro asked immediately.

"If you wouldn't mind, you could keep an eye on the mansion tonight while I take a group of students for an overnight campout." Scott said with a gentle smile.

"You're doing survival drills?" Orroro asked curiously.

"No, nothing like that. We're just camping out for fun. I'll have my cell phone with me in case anything comes up." Scott said peacefully.

"I hope you enjoy your time. We should be fine." Orroro said, enjoying Scott's relaxed attitude.

"Thanks Storm. It's been a tense couple days. I think I need this." Scott said in thought.

"Is there anything I should know before you go?" Orroro asked carefully.

"Just that Matt has been brought into our dimension and is recovering from his treatment. He's in the BioLab's containment room now. I think he'd like it if you visited. There are some other things going on, but I don't think they're anything you'll have to worry about tonight." Scott said as he thought about all the situations going on around the mansion.

"Very well. If I need your assistance, I will call. Now you should go and have a good time." Storm said with a tender smile.

"Yeah. I will." Scott said as he got up to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and John walked into the common room, both chuckling because they had been able to interrupt Peter four times before he finally caught on to what they were doing.

"Alan, you got a minute?" Bobby asked as they walked across the room that looked like a nursery had exploded in it.

"Sure, ladies, what do you say we take five?" Alan called to the girls.

The group of chattering girls seemed to agree and moved into a tight circle to talk.

"I was just wondering if Robert could join us on a camping trip tonight." Bobby asked hopefully.

"Where are you going?" Alan asked curiously.

"Just out in the trees behind the mansion. We won't leave the property." Bobby said simply.

"Robert doesn't sleep. I don't know how that's going to work out." Alan said in thought.

"If he gets bored, I can bring him home." Bobby said seriously.

Alan looked at Bobby's hopeful expression and said, "If he wants to go, it's fine with me. Are you going to do the hot-dogs and marshmallows stuff?"

"They're already packed in the car." Bobby said proudly.

"Then when you get to the boathouse, why don't you grab the mini rice cakes from the cabinet over the refrigerator. That way Robert will have something he can eat too." Alan said with a smile.

"Thanks Alan, I'll do that." Bobby said happily.

"When are you going?" Alan asked curiously.

"As soon as we find Scott. He'll be going with us." Bobby said with excitement.

"Then I guess you're going, he's right behind you." Alan said as he saw Scott walk in the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott, Bobby and John walked into the boathouse to the usual room full of people.

"Bobby!" Robert exclaimed and ran to hug him.

"Hi Robert." Bobby said gently as he returned the hug.

"Will you lot take your seats? Alex has a song to try out on you." Spike said with a smile.

Scott and the others took seats and waited as Alex picked up his guitar.

"What's this about?" Scott asked Andrew quietly.

"I have no idea." Andrew said and waited.

Alex started playing, then Spike started to sing.

Scott, Bobby, John and Andrew were all surprised by the beautiful tone of Spike's singing voice.

The second verse came and Alex began to sing.

Everyone else was silent, enthralled by the beautiful song.

Both Alex and Spike sang the third verse together as their emotions began to show in their singing.

Andrew, Lee, Bobby, John and Scott were all surprised when William and Janine joined the next two verses.

Spike sang the next verse alone and everyone laughed at the final line.

Finally the music quieted as Robert began to sing the last verse.

Through the entire verse he was looking into Bobby's eyes. When he finished he whispered to Bobby, "Please wait for me."

Bobby's eyes widened as he realized what had just happened.

"You wrote this?" Bobby asked hesitantly.

"Yes." Robert answered shyly.

Tears began to fill Bobby's eyes and after a moment to think, Bobby said, "I'll wait for you, I promise."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, I guess I'd better get back to the mansion. There's still about twenty bags of baby things to look at." Andrew said in resignation.

"May I accompany you?" William asked hopefully.

"Really?" Andrew asked in wonder.

"Yes, I plan to help care for my brothers. I am interested in knowing what supplies are available." William said with a gentle smile.

"I want to go too." Janine said in typical six year old fashion.

"Okay, anyone else heading to the mansion?" Andrew asked as he formed a portal.

"Hold on Andrew. I need to talk to you for a minute before you go." Scott said quickly.

"Sure. You guys go ahead. I'll be there in a minute." Andrew said, then cast a look of question at Scott.

After looking around the room, Scott said, "Professor Xavier left on a vacation today and left me in charge. Matt pointed out that I should be staying at the mansion to keep an eye on things. So I'll be moving some of my stuff over till he gets back." Scott said to the group.

"For how long?" Alex asked with concern.

"I don't know yet. But I'll be back as soon as he returns." Scott said seriously.

"Okay, would you like me to port some of your stuff over to the mansion for you?" Andrew asked in thought.

Scott thought about the question and said, "Yes, that would save a lot of time. And that way we can get to our camping trip sooner."

"You're going camping?" Andrew asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Oh, we forgot to tell you about that... Bobby, why don't you do the honors?" Scott asked and turned his attention to Bobby who was looking tenderly at Robert.

"Um, yeah. I was wondering if Robert would like to join us for a little camp-out in the back yard tonight." Bobby said, then turned his gaze back to Robert.

"Father, can I go?" Robert asked with excitement.

"Sure little man. Why don't you go get some extra clothes... he doesn't have a coat." Andrew said, thinking outloud.

"He can borrow one of mine. We're not going to be around anyone so it won't have to fit." Scott said with assurance.

"Fine then. You go and have a good time." Andrew said with a smile.

"I'm going to get his rice cakes." John said and went to the kitchen.

"I do not understand the purpose of what you are proposing." Icheb said curiously.

"Maybe we'll bring you next time so you can see for yourself." Bobby said with a smile.

"I will ask Robert of his experiences when he returns. Depending on that, I may wish to accompany you at a later date." Icheb said in thought.

"I think you've started something." Andrew said with a chuckle, then continued, "They're all going to want to camp out now."

"We've got enough adults, I don't see a problem with it." Scott said with a smile as Robert came up the stairs with a bundle of clothes.

Scott walked to the coat closet and pulled out an old coat.

"Here Robert, you can wear this to keep warm." Scott said and handed Robert the coat.

"Thank you Uncle Scott." Robert said shyly.

"Now put your stuff in the truck while we start porting my stuff to the mansion." Scott said and headed for the stairs.

John handed the rice cakes to Robert and went to follow Scott.

Bobby looked at the stairs, but chose to follow Robert outside.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I wonder what happened to make big blue change his tune so quick." Matt said in thought.

Ronny got a timid, slightly guilty expression but remained silent.

Matt noticed and asked, "What did you do kid?"

"I kinda used my mutant thing on him... he scared me." Ronny said hesitantly.

"Your mutant thing? What's that?" Matt asked quietly, noticing that Ronny was upset.

Ronny moved to the wastebasket and retrieved Matt's empty beer can.

After placing the beer can on the table Ronny concentrated his power and increased the gravitational pull on the can.

As Matt watched, the can began to fold in on itself and finally was flattened down to a centimeter thick.

"That's some powerful stuff you got there. And you did that to the dustmop?" Matt asked carefully.

"Yeah. I just squished him a little and made him listen... but I didn't hurt him. I was serious about wanting to be a good guy, so I was real careful." Ronny said in a rush.

"It's okay. He didn't look hurt and whatever you said musta worked cause he's acting decent now." Matt said with assurance.

"Mr. Summers saw me do it. I thought he was gonna yell at me but he said I did good by not hurting him." Ronny said with a smile.

"Then it must be true. One-eye don't lie, and he's in charge of the team. If he says you did good, that means you did perfect. Otherwise he woulda told you how you could have handled it differently. He's like that. I don't

know if it's from him being a teacher or just because he's anal, but if you ever get a straight compliment from him, it's gold." Matt said in thought.

Ronny smiled as he understood what Matt was saying.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Robert, thank you. The song was wonderful. I don't know why you love me so much... I don't deserve it." Bobby said quietly.

"Love is not deserved, it is not a reward... or a punishment. Love just is. You have the choice to accept it and nourish it to make it grow, or to deny it and let it wither and die." Robert said as he closed the door of the truck.

Bobby thought about that, then pulled Robert into a hug.

"And you just nourished it with your song, didn't you?" Bobby asked quietly.

"Yes. I needed for you to know my feelings." Robert said shyly.

"I understand." Bobby said in a whisper and moved in to give Robert a gentle kiss.

Robert felt his ability to reason shut down at the sensation of Bobby's lips pressed to his own.

After a moment of enjoying the sensation, Robert opened his mouth and began to move his tongue carefully across Bobby's mouth which remained closed.

Bobby pulled back, and with a note of regret said, "We're not ready for tongue yet. Just give it time... we'll get there."

Robert nodded before Bobby pulled him into another kiss, only slightly more forceful.

For a full minute they enjoyed the sensation of the kiss before Bobby gently pulled away and said, "Let's get back inside and see if we can help."

Robert nodded, since he was unable to form any words.

Bobby smiled at the dazed response and led Robert back into the boathouse.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott, John and Andrew walked downstairs as Bobby and Robert walked in the front door.

"You guys have a good time, I've got to get back to the baby extravaganza." Andrew said and formed his portal.

"Have fun." Scott said with a knowing smirk as Andrew left.

"I guess we're ready to go. Let's go get Ronny and get the camping started. It's almost dark." Scott said with enthusiasm.

The boys nodded and headed for the door.

"Scott, do you mind if Spike uses your bed?" Alex asked carefully.

"No problem. Spike, you're welcomed to it. And if you need closet space, just pack my stuff away." Scott said to Spike with a genuine smile.

"Ta mate, that's right decent of you." Spike said with a little surprise in his voice.

Scott made a dismissive gesture as he walked out the door.

"What do you guys want to do now that everyone's left?" Alex asked those that remained.

"I could use some food." Lee said honestly.

"Is there any Jell-O left?" Icheb asked hopefully, garnering a hopeful look from Trey.

"No. But I can show you how to make some for yourself. That way you can have it whenever you want." Alex said happily.

Icheb and Trey nodded enthusiastically.

Alex got up from the couch and the group followed him into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny and Logan looked up as Hank walked into the containment room carrying a large box.

He sat it down and went to the containment foyer for more.

Hank came back with a small television/VCR combination.

"Gentlemen, would you mind if I join you for a Rifleman marathon tonight?" Hank asked hopefully as he hooked up the television.

"I'm going camping." Ronny said quietly.

"Sure Blue, pull up a chair. We can watch the movie and drink a few cold ones." Matt said as he relaxed on his bed.

"That would be most difficult for me in this suit. I believe I will just enjoy the movie." Hank said carefully.

"Just leaves more for me." Matt said and waited for the movie to begin.

Ronny noticed as Bobby, Robert and John walked into the BioLab.

He quickly pressed his microphone button and said, "Don't suit up, I'll be right out."

The boys nodded in response and waited.

"You have a good time kid. Me an Blue are gonna be having our own camp-out here." Matt said with a smile.

"You can tell me all about it when I get back." Ronny said with a smile, then moved to the containment foyer to change.

Hank hurried behind Ronny and said, "I'll take that sample before you leave. It will take less than a minute... I promise."

Ronny nodded as the decontamination sequence started.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wait, what's the difference between this one and the last one?" Alan finally had to ask.

"Dad, these two are bigger than the last two." Jimmy said seriously.

William and Janine walked into the room and sat on either side of their dad.

"Can you tell me what we have missed?" William asked hopefully as he looked at all the baby clothes strewn across every surface of the room.

"Various articles of clothing for babies, and some supplies to feed them, bathe them and disinfect them between bathing times." Jimmy said as he watched Dawn pull out a rattle.

Alan chuckled at Jimmy's description.

"What is the purpose of that device?" Janine asked curiously.

"It's a rattle." Dawn said and handed it to Janine.

"I do not understand it's function." Janine said as she carefully examined it.

"Babies like things that rattle and jingle." Dawn said with difficulty, never having thought about 'why' a baby liked a rattle.

"I believe it supplies sensory stimulation to the infant which aids in the development of sensory neural pathways." Jimmy said seriously.

Janine nodded in comprehension before giving the rattle one final shake and handing it back to Dawn.

Alan looked at his children sitting around him, learning all they could about the baby things and felt a sensation of peace wash over him. [Everything will be fine.]

\* \* \* \* \*

As Hank and Ronny exited the containment foyer, Bobby said, "You ready to go? Scott's waiting for us out front."

"In just a minute. The doc needs to take a blood sample before I go." Ronny said seriously.

"Oh God! What happened?" Bobby asked with a look of terror.

Ronny realized what Bobby was thinking and said, "I don't have what Logan had. I just need to know that I didn't get anything... like AIDS and stuff from... you know." Ronny finished with an imploring look.

Bobby got a blank look which turned to serious thought. Finally he said, "Hank, can you do me too?"

"What?" Hank asked curiously.

"I've got the same reasons as Ronny for needing a blood test. Do me too." Bobby said as he held out his arm.

"Me too." John said.

At Hank's look of worry, John said, "If Bobby's got something, then I probably got it too. Just do it."

Ronny looked at Bobby and John carefully, then smiled, "I was afraid you guys would think I was just being stupid, worrying about stuff like this."

Bobby smiled warmly and said, "No. I'd think you were stupid if you didn't worry about stuff like this. And no matter what our tests say, we're still brothers and I still love you."

"God, stop the mushy stuff. I may want to eat something later." Ronny said with a sour look.

"Okay, I'm done." Bobby said with a smile.

"Me too. You three enjoy your camping. I will probably have your results ready by tomorrow afternoon." Hank said as he finished labeling the last vial of blood.

"Thanks Doc. You'd best hurry before you miss too much of your movie." Ronny said as he moved with the boys toward the door.

"Not a problem. I've memorized every episode." Hank said to the boys retreating forms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott drove the truck down the road back toward the boathouse, then at a certain point, he pulled off the road and began to drive through the woods.

Robert watched in amazement as they traveled into the thick trees.

Everyone was jolted and jarred as the truck ran over rocks and small trees, deeper into the woods.

"You guys tell me if you see a place, I'm just driving." Scott said when they were well away from the road.

All the boys started looking intently at their surroundings as Scott slowed the truck, so they could have more time to look.

"There's a clearing." Ronny said, pointing.

"Let's get out and look at it. We need a clear spot big enough for the tent and a little space for the fire away from the trees." Scott said to the group.

All the boys got out and looked around the clearing that Ronny had found.

"The ground is kinda rocky. I don't wanna sleep on that." John said in comment more than complaint.

"Yeah, and it's sloped, we'd all wake up in a pile at one end of the tent." Bobby said with a teasing smile.

"You'd love that, admit it." John said with a laugh.

Bobby looked at Robert, who seemed a bit overwhelmed and said, "Not interested, there's just one guy I want on me."

Robert looked at Bobby and gave him a tiny, gentle smile.

"Stop, you're gonna make me puke." Ronny said playfully between gagging noises.

"So I guess this site's a no. Let's keep looking." Scott said and headed back to the truck with a smile.

After a last look around, all the boys trooped back to the truck.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So you simply combine hot water with these powders and it becomes the geleatneous confection we had for dinner?" lcheb asked in wonder.

"Well, you have to let it chill first, but yeah. That's it." Alex said, enjoying lcheb's look of wonder.

"Look at this." Trey said in amazement as he looked into the Jell-O.

"What?" Alex asked curiously.

"With my ocular implant I can see the gelatin forming into a complex strata... it is fascinating." Trey said in amazement.

"My implant does not have the acuity to scan in the microscopic range." Icheb said sadly.

"Connect to my data node and you can view through my implant." Trey said simply.

"Really?" Icheb asked in wonder.

"Yes, you are my brother. Of course you may access my data node." Trey said as he continued to watch the Jell-O.

Icheb carefully injected his tubules into Trey's data node, then closed his eyes, obviously seeing what Trey was seeing.

"The formation of the structure is not progressing." Icheb said with disappointment.

"It needs to be chilled to gel." Alex said absently, watching the surreal scene before him.

"Perhaps we could take it outside. The temperature is similar to that of the refrigeration device." Icheb said with excitement.

"Okay, just put on some coats, they're in the closet by the front door, and don't go too far from the house." Alex said, still feeling awed by the weirdness of this.

"We will sit on the boat dock. The temperature is cooler by the lake. You will be able to see us from the glass door." Icheb said as he disconnected from Trey's data node.

"Okay. Don't stay out too long... have fun." Alex finished weakly.

"When I was that age, we went to a movie for fun... it'd cost fifty cents." Lee said in memory.

"When I was that age, we didn't have movies, but we'd gather in someone's parlor and pass on the stories that we'd heard." Spike said in distant memory.

"You two are making me feel seriously young here." Alex said as he made a plate of food for Lee.

"You're old enough to stand up for yourself, so you're old enough." Spike said with pride.

"Thanks Spike." Alex said with a smile and moved to kiss Spike.

Lee looked on with wide eyes as Alex and Spike shared a kiss, obviously not their first one.

When the kiss ended Alex looked at Lee bashfully and said, "Sorry if that bothered you... it just kinda happened."

"You guys have known each other for three hours and you're already kissing?" Lee asked incredulously.

"It does seem a little slutty, doesn't it?" Alex asked in thought.

"Sluttish." Spike corrected.

"Okay, sluttish, you're the wordsmith." Alex said with a proud smile.

"Anyway, I'm a virgin, Spike's been in love three times in one hundred twenty years. One little bout of love at first sight doesn't make us whores." Alex said as he held close to Spike.

"I guess not. It just seems a little fast, that's all." Lee said, seeing the truth of their emotion.

"What can I say? We're in love. Everything else don't matter." Alex said with a shrug.

"I'm happy for you guys. If you want, you can have a little privacy while the boys watch the Jell-O gel." Lee said with a smile.

"Thanks Lee, that sounds great." Alex said with excitement and handed Lee his warmed plate of food.

"Yeah, thanks mate. I didn't know how Alex's family would feel about us." Spike said shyly.

"I'm not family." Lee said quietly.

"Yeah, you are. You're my brother's father-in-law, that makes you... I guess my father-in-law too, sort of... however it works, you're family." Alex said firmly.

"Thanks Alex." Lee said with a smile.

"Just yell if you need us." Alex said and led Spike out of the kitchen.

"I will." Lee said as he watched Alex and Spike's retreating forms. [Ah... young love.]

\* \* \* \* \*

"Look over there." Robert said with excitement.

Scott followed Robert's pointing finger and they came to a wide clearing among several tall trees.

"Let's check it out." Scott said as he looked up at the diminishing light.

Everyone got out of the truck and started looking around the area.

"It looks pretty level." John said in a considering voice.

"And not too rocky." Ronny said as he walked around in a circle.

"I think we've found our campsite." Scott said happily.

"Then let's get the stuff unloaded so we can get set up." Bobby said happily.

"I'll take care of the unloading if you want to gather some wood for a fire." Scott said, worried about the darkening sky.

"We brought some wood. We got some of the wood they use in the fireplaces at the mansion. That way we don't have to chop or saw anything." Bobby said happily.

"Good thinking Bobby. Then why don't you guys look around for some stones for us to use as a fire circle." Scott suggested.

The boys all scattered and began looking for rocks.

Scott started pulling the supplies from the truck, careful to take stock of what they had chosen to bring.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander and Remy walked into the boathouse, obviously tired after their day's exploits.

At the sight of Lee sitting alone, watching a cartoon, Xander asked, "Where is everyone? This place was crawling with people when we left."

"Well, Andrew, Alan, William and Janine are at the mansion looking at the baby things. Jimmy is working for Warren. Icheb and Trey are on the boat dock watching Jell-O gel. Robert and Scott went camping. And Alex and Spike are upstairs... enjoying some privacy." Lee finished with a little blush.

"Alex and Spike?" Xander asked with a wide eye.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Lee said with a shrug.

"Remy been sayin dat Alex need to get laid." Remy said simply.

"What are you watching?" Xander asked as he watched little blobs of color moving around the TV screen.

"I'm not sure. I think the little blue things are going to attack the little yellow things. They've been moving around like little armies." Lee said as he watched the shapes moving.

"I think the yellow things are laying a trap, you see that hook pattern in their layout? If the blue ones attack the big part at the center, then that hook will close in behind them, cut their supply line, and close off their retreat." Xander said as he took a seat.

"Remy tink de blue ones be smarter dan dat. Dey gonna attack from de South." Remy said as he took a seat beside Xander.

"Let's see what happens." Lee said in anticipation.

"Come on yellow, protect your flank." Xander said to the screen.

"Blue need to move. Yellow be on to de plan." Remy said intently.

## *[Chapter 35: Movements in the Dark]*

Dr. Hoffman walked into the library to find Kurt reading and making notes.

"I'm sorry I took so long, they had something of a crisis in the BioLab." Dr. Hoffman said as she took her chair.

"It was no problem Herr Doktor. It has given me time to read the notes Warren had for the meeting." Kurt said seriously.

"Anything interesting?" Julia asked curiously.

"Ja, very much. We will have to discuss many things." Kurt said seriously and handed Julia the papers.

Julia began to read as Kurt awaited her reaction.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, I do not feel well." Jimmy said in a quiet voice.

"What's wrong?" Andrew asked with immediate concern.

"I am feeling pressure in my abdomen, the sensation is unpleasant." Jimmy said with a note of worry.

"We'll be home in just a minute and I'll check you out." Andrew said and speeded up the car.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, we're ready to start the fire. John? Do you want to do the honors?" Scott asked with a smile.

John nodded and lit his ever present zippo. When the flame rose up, John focused his power and made a fireball that drifted gracefully down to the pile of wood and immediately began to burn it.

"You've really learned some control John. That was perfect." Scott said in an impressed voice.

"Yeah, I've been practicing." John said shyly.

Everyone gathered around the fire, since the temperature seemed to be dropping rapidly.

"Bobby, you're in charge of the fun, what are we going to do first?" Scott asked as he settled into a spot before the fire.

"I had an idea, and since John just got to show off, how about stupid mutant tricks?" Bobby asked happily.

"I don't know what that is." Scott said slowly.

"You're always trying to get us to develop our abilities to be the most useful that they can be. Stupid mutant tricks are the things we've learned to do along the way that have absolutely no practical value, but are just fun." Bobby said in explanation.

"I guess this means you have one." John asked with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah." Bobby said with a smile and drew on his power to cause a cloud of freezing mist to form before him.

"Pretty." Scott said in a casual, not overly impressed voice.

"That isn't it." Bobby said as he rolled his eyes.

"Oh, okay." Scott said and waited.

Bobby concentrated his power, then looked carefully at Robert.

The mist began to swirl and flow until it resolved into the transparent form of Robert.

"You've been able to make ice statues for a year." John said simply.

"But they couldn't do this." Bobby said as the 'ice Robert' walked over to where John was sitting and proceeded to give him a 'wet willy'.

"Ewww, gross." John said as he tried to swat the ice Robert away.

When the ice Robert persisted in teasing him, John decided to try something and pulled a flame from the campfire, then made a flaming humanoid form.

Everyone watched in surprise as the flames became more and more focused, until the form could clearly be recognized as Andrew.

The flaming Andrew walked up to the ice Robert and shook his finger in admonition, then pointed away, indicating for him to leave.

Bobby made the ice Robert hang his head and walk away in a dejected posture, scuffing his feet as he left.

Robert, Scott and Ronny laughed at the scene as Bobby and John both let their powers go and the elemental forms dissipated.

"That was cool. My mutant thing don't do nothing like that." Ronny said to the group.

"I never got to see you use yours, what can you do?" Bobby asked curiously.

Ronny focused his power on a rock by the fire, intending on crushing it, then was assaulted by inspiration. Instead of increasing the gravity on the rock, he removed it.

Everyone watched as the rock floated straight up from the fire circle and hovered before them.

Then with a little concentration, the gravity began to pull the rock from one side and the rock floated through the air to hover in front of Ronny.

"That's cool. You've got telekinesis." Bobby said with excitement.

Fascinated by using his new ability, Ronny focused his power into the center of the rock and created a surge of gravity. The rock immediately imploded, becoming little more than a speck hanging in the air before him.

"Awesome." John said as the firelight glittered in his eyes.

"Very impressive." Robert said in wonder.

Ronny let the compacted rock fall before him and asked, "Do you know any tricks Robert?"

"I am not a mutant." Robert said shyly.

"Sure you are, what do you say guys? Let's make Robert an honorary mutant." John said with a genuine smile.

"Okay, and if you don't know any tricks, that's fine." Bobby said and sent a look of thanks to his friend.

"I know one." Robert said hesitantly.

"Go ahead." Ronny said with excitement.

"It is somewhat embarrassing." Robert said shyly.

"Guys, whatever happens tonight, we keep between us. Right? Everyone, even Scott, has gotta swear that whatever we say and whatever we do tonight won't be mentioned to anyone else." John said seriously.

Scott noticed the look of hope in John's eyes and an almost identical one in Ronny's.

"I'll agree, but this doesn't mean that you can do anything. It just means that whatever is said or done won't be mentioned outside this group." Scott said carefully.

"Okay. Everyone agree?" John asked as he looked at the group.

Serious nods went around the fire.

Robert looked around and finally said, "I will need a piece of cloth."

Bobby took out a handkerchief and handed it to Robert, saying, "Don't worry, it's clean."

Robert handed Bobby his coat as he accepted the handkerchief.

The group watched as Robert bent forward and reached behind him to place the handkerchief on his butt.

Silence fell over the camp as Robert bent at the waist and spread his feet about two feet apart, then put his palms flat on the ground between his feet.

Robert began to walk his hands back through his legs until his chest was fully behind his calves.

Then with a slight sound of effort, Robert pulled his head up and grabbed the handkerchief off his butt with his teeth.

Robert quickly uncurled himself and stood expectantly, waiting for the others' reactions.

John was the first to speak and said, "Bobby, your boyfriend is double jointed."

"That was really cool Robert." Ronny finally said.

"Yes Robert, that was really..." Scott trailed off, not knowing a word to describe what it really was. He couldn't think of what word you use to describe something that was interesting yet mildly disturbing.

Bobby got up from beside the fire and helped Robert put his coat on before hugging him gently.

Robert smiled and walked back to his place by the fire, next to Bobby.

\* \* \* \* \*

Orroro walked into the MedLab to find Tara examining some blood samples.

"Good evening Tara." Orroro said pleasantly.

"Good evening, how are you?" Tara asked with genuine pleasure in her voice.

"I am well. I have come to see Matthew Logan. How have you been?" Orroro asked curiously.

"Great. Working for Uncle Hank is the best experience I could ever get in biochemistry. Everything is so fascinating, such a challenge. I love it." Tara said happily.

"I am glad. You have been doing a fine job. Your uncle was becoming overworked before you arrived, you have truly been a great help to him." Orroro said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you Orroro, I'll walk with you to the BioLab. I need to talk to Uncle Hank about one of these blood samples anyway." Tara said and led the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander, Remy, Alex, Spike and Lee were sitting on the couches, each rooting for their favorite color to win the coming war when Andrew hurried into the house with Jimmy in tow.

"What's up?" Alex asked immediately.

"I'll know in a minute." Andrew said as they walked into his bedroom.

A moment later William and Janine walked into the house, each holding onto one of their dad's hands.

Xander and Remy immediately got up and cleared the space for Alan to sit on the couch.

"Thanks guys. These babies are really getting heavy." Alan said as he tried to lower himself gently onto the couch.

"What's wrong with Jimmy?" Alex asked in concern.

"We don't know yet, he's feeling some discomfort. Andrew is looking at him now." Alan said with a glance of worry toward the bedroom door.

"I hope it isn't serious." Alex said with his worry escalating.

"I'm sure he'll be fine." Alan said, trying to sound confident.

"Dad, I am feeling an unusual sensation... here." Janine said and pointed to her lower belly.

"Go tell your father." Alan said quietly, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Janine walked toward the bedroom door as Andrew stepped out.

"Do we have any way of getting in touch with Scott?" Andrew asked in worry.

"He probably has his cell phone, what's wrong?" Alex said, moving from worry to panic.

"William, get Trey and Icheb in here." Andrew said as he noticed Janine standing beside him rubbing her belly.

"Love, you'd better tell us or someone's going to explode." Alan said, then glanced at Alex.

William entered the room at a near run. Icheb and Trey followed immediately after. Trey was carrying a bowl of Jell-O.

"Okay, this may sound trivial to the adults, but just realize that the kids have never gone through anything like this before. It could be terrifying to them." Andrew said in prelude.

"Just tell us." Alex pleaded.

"They ate food today. It has to go somewhere. Their bodies are trying to figure out how to process it, so there is some discomfort." Andrew said as carefully as he could manage.

"So they need to use the bathroom." Xander said simply.

"Yes, and they've never done it before..." Andrew said with an imploring look at Xander.

"So it's going to scare the shit out of 'em." Spike said with a look of apology at the bad joke.

"They'll need to be told how. The subject never came up before." Andrew said intensely, trying to get the others to understand how traumatic this could be.

Alex looked around the room and said, "If everyone takes a kid, we can get this potty-training done before it's a problem."

Andrew smiled at Alex and said, "Great idea. Jimmy's waiting in the bedroom, so I'm going to get back to him."

"I'll call Scott and let him know what's going on." Alex said quickly.

"Okay kids, who do you want to tell you about this?" Alan asked the silent children.

"I want you daddy." Janine said immediately.

"Okay pumpkin, come over here by me and I'll tell you what to expect in a minute." Alan said tenderly.

"Would you help me Uncle Spike?" William asked shyly.

Spike was surprised for a moment, but then looked at the young boy who had chosen his name and reluctantly nodded and motioned for William to follow him to the dining room.

"Uncle Remy, would you help me?" Trey asked hopefully.

"Oui, come wit Remy. Everyting be alright." Remy said and led Trey into the kitchen.

"Uncle Xander, could you assist me?" Icheb asked shyly.

"Sure, come with me to my room and we'll have a little talk."

As everyone went their separate ways, Alex said with relief, "Scott, I'm glad you brought your phone..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Orroro walked into the BioLab to a curious sight. Logan was sitting on his bed and Hank was sitting in a chair wearing a huge biosuit. They were both watching television and had such looks of concentration that one would think they were watching earthshaking news.

Her first instinct had been to join the men, but she decided to stand and watch through the window for a moment.

There was some conflict on the TV screen and both men sat forward to intently watch the ensuing action. They were obviously too engrossed in the show to notice her presence.

A feeling of warmth infused her being at the sight. Two men, literally from different worlds, sharing this thing that they had in common.

Carefully Orroro turned and said, "Is there any reason that you must disturb your uncle at this moment?"

"No, he doesn't expect the results until morning... it can wait." Tara said with a tender smiled directed at the men.

"Then let us leave them to their enjoyment. I can visit later." Orroro said and moved to the door.

"That's a good idea. I haven't seen Uncle Hank having fun for a long time."  
Tara said and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you think I should bring him home?" Scott asked with a concerned gaze turned toward Robert.

"It's your call bro. If you can handle it there, that'll be fine. If you want to bring him back, I'll help him when he gets here." Alex said with assurance.

"I'll play it by ear. Thanks for the heads up Alex. I would have thought he was having appendicitis or something if he'd started complaining of stomach cramps." Scott said with relief.

"I know. If anything out of the ordinary comes up on this end, I'll call you so you know what to expect." Alex said seriously.

"Thanks, and good luck." Scott said with a smile.

"Yeah, you too." Alex said and hung up the phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm not sure where to start." Xander said as he paced the room.

"I have some memories of this bodily function, so I will just need to know how to use the facilities properly." Icheb said helpfully.

"Good, I don't know how I would explain it anyway. Come to the bathroom with me and I'll show you the basics." Xander said seriously.

"Thank you Uncle Xander, perhaps when you've completed your instruction, I might be able to help my brothers and sister." Icheb said seriously.

"Good idea. I think the others would appreciate the help." Xander said and led Icheb into the bathroom he shared with Scott and Alex.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew led Jimmy quickly out of the bedroom and into the bathroom.

Alex listened carefully, hoping that Jimmy wouldn't be too scared by this new sensation.

Andrew stepped out the door a moment later and slammed it behind him.

"Get everyone in here." Andrew said with deep gasping breaths and tears running down his face.

"EVERYONE - GET IN HERE NOW!" Alex called into the air.

"Father?" Could be heard from the bathroom behind Andrew.

"I'll be right back Jimmy, stay right there for a minute." Andrew said over his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Alan asked with panic at the sight of Andrew flustered and in tears.

As everyone reentered the living room Andrew quickly said, "It's horrible. I don't know what their bodies are doing with the food, but... we need to get some biohazard suits from the MedLab."

"You're exaggerating." Alan said with a disappointed shake of his head.

"Go in there, then tell me I'm exaggerating." Andrew said with force.

"Fine." Alan said sharply and levered himself off the couch and to his feet.

Everyone watched as Alan made his way to the bathroom and gently knocked on the door.

"Jimmy, it's dad, I'm coming in." Alan said softly.

"Okay." Jimmy said in a timid voice.

Alan quickly walked into the bathroom, then one second later stepped out, gasping for breath.

"Get the biosuits." Alan gasped.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, thanks for the warning." Scott said and turned off the phone.

"What is it Scott? Who keeps calling?" John asked curiously.

"It's Alex. Robert, would you come for a walk with me?" Scott asked carefully.

Robert looked at Scott curiously, then said, "Do you wish to walk to afford me privacy?"

"Yes Robert, that's why." Scott said seriously.

"I will not mind if you tell me in front of my friends. But if it would be more comfortable for you, we can walk." Robert said honestly.

"I guess, but guys, you have to act maturely. Just try to respect Robert's feelings." Scott said in warning.

"Yeah, sure. What's the big secret?" John asked seriously.

"Robert and the rest of the kids ate for the first time today. No one thought about what was going to happen next." Scott said in thought, trying to be delicate.

"So he's gonna have to take a crap. What's the big deal?" Ronny said immediately.

"Robert, since you've never had to use the bathroom before, the new sensations might be a little scary." Scott said carefully.

"Why?" Robert asked curiously.

"New things are sometimes scary, that's all." Scott said honestly.

Robert nodded in acceptance of that statement.

"So that's it? What are you so worried about? We're not gonna tease Robert, we like him." John said frankly.

"Yeah." Ronny added.

"I'm glad. If you weren't friends, you could really hurt his feelings by teasing him about something so personal." Scott said grimly.

"Yeah. I can see that." John said in a considering tone.

"Guys, to tell you the truth, I could stand to go behind a tree right now. Why don't I just show Robert how it's done?" Ronny said, looking at Robert.

"Thank you. That would be helpful." Robert said in surprise.

"Just a minute." Scott said and ran to the truck. He came back carrying a small shovel.

"You'll need to dig a latrine, and make sure that you do it far enough away from the camp." Scott said seriously.

"Sure thing. You got any TP? Cause I don't wanna think about having to use a leaf. I don't wanna get poison ivy on my ass." Ronny said frankly.

"Yeah, it's right inside the door of the tent." Scott said with a smile.

"I never dug a latrine before, how do I do it?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Just about three hand widths deep, three or four hand widths wide. When you're done, fill it back in." Scott said professionally.

"I can help with the digging since you are helping me." Robert said quietly.

"Sure, thanks Rob." Ronny said and went to the tent to get the toilet paper.

A moment later Ronny started walking away from the camp.

"Ronny?" Scott called out.

"Yeah?" Ronny asked.

"That way is down wind." Scott said pointing.

"Yeah." Ronny said and changed direction, followed immediately by Robert.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Holy Mother of God!" Xander screamed as the foul stench wafted out of the bathroom.

"Open a window... open all the windows." Xander screamed as he proceeded to open every door and window on the second floor of the house.

On the main floor Trey said, "I cannot wait, I must go now!"

"Wait a moe, the little bloke isn't done!" Spike said quickly.

Trey barreled into the bathroom, a moment later Spike and William came running out gagging and covering their faces, William trying to pull up his pants as he stumbled from the bathroom.

"I've lived in graveyards and crypts. I've run with the spawn of hell and been through plagues but I never smelt nothin like that. How can something alive make that smell?" Spike said as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"I didn't get to finish." William said quietly.

"Just hold it a minute. We'll get you taken care of mate." Spike said with assurance.

Lee held a towel firmly over his face and went to Jimmy.

"Are you all done?" Lee asked carefully.

"Yes.. I am much... relieved." Jimmy said as he choked on the acrid stench.

"Let's go to the basement then." Lee said and pulled Jimmy away.

Jimmy nodded enthusiastically and followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Xavier Institute, how may I help you?" Orroro said sweetly into the phone.

"I'm not sure if you can. I'm trying to find my son and he used to go there. Maybe you have some idea of how I can get in touch with him." A man's voice said, filled with desperation.

"Who is your son, perhaps I can help." Orroro said with immediate concern.

"John Allergyce."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hold on for a minute, let me clean this up and we'll be ready for the next one." Andrew said quickly.

"Please hurry father." Janine whimpered.

"I'll have it cleaned up in just a minute pumpkin. Check with Uncle Xander and see if the upstairs bathroom is free yet." Andrew said quickly.

"William and Spike are in there." Janine said with a whine in her voice.

"I'll hurry pumpkin, I promise." Andrew said through his biosuit as he carried the bucket and mop into the bathroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello." Scott said quietly into his phone.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do know how to get in touch with John Allerdyce, why do you want to know?" Scott said loudly enough to catch John's attention.

"Give him my number and I'll talk to him. Thanks for calling Storm." Scott said and hung up the phone.

"What's that all about?" John asked as soon as the phone was turned off.

"Your dad is trying to get in touch with you. Do you want to talk to him?" Scott asked carefully.

"No. Not really. But I'd kinda like to know why he's trying to get in touch with me after all this time." John said honestly.

"Okay John. I'll talk to him. And if I can get him to tell me, I'll find out what he wants." Scott said with assurance.

"Thanks Scott. I appreciate that." John said apprehensively.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny and Robert made their way deep into the woods, Robert holding the flashlight.

"Thank you for being nice to me Ronny. I'm glad you've stopped being a bad person." Robert said into the silence.

"Yeah, sure. You're important to my brother so I figure I should try to be your friend. You're probably going to be around for a while." Ronny said casually.

"Are you going to look for someone to be your mate?" Robert asked curiously as Ronny pointed to a spot, well off what might be considered a path.

Robert began to dig as Ronny held the flashlight and said, "Not for a while. Too much stuff has happened to me. Besides, I never met anyone that I felt... like that... about."

"Bobby was the first one that I ever noticed in a romantic or sexual context. But before him, I was as you are." Robert said seriously.

"I guess." Ronny said and shined the light so he could see the depth of the hole that Robert had dug.

"I think that's deep enough. I've really got to go now." Ronny said seriously.

"How can you tell?" Robert asked curiously.

"I don't know, it's like pressure. Here take the flashlight and I'm going to show you. I'll answer your questions when I'm done." Ronny said quickly.

Robert took the light and shined it on Ronny's bare butt as his pants were pulled down.

"Remember that you promised that you wouldn't tell no one about this... right?" Ronny asked with the need for reassurance.

"Yes, I promise." Robert said immediately.

Ronny carefully squatted at the edge of the hole as Robert watched.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew hurried out of the bathroom and said, "It's ready for whoever's next."

Janine and Alan went into the bathroom as quickly as they could manage.

A minute later Alan came out and said, "Love, I can't do it. You've got the biosuit, would you help her through it?"

"Anything for you love." Andrew said and walked into the bathroom.

"Spike, where is everyone?" Alan asked as he looked at the empty room.

"Either in a bathroom or the basement." Spike said quickly.

"Would you walk with me outside for a minute? I really need some air and I don't want to go alone... in my condition." Alan said shyly.

"I could use me a walk in the night air. Come along mate and I'll walk with you." Spike said kindly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is Scott Summers"

"Hi, I'm Rick Allerdyce, John's father. The lady at the Xavier Institute said you might be able to get in touch with my son." Rick said hopefully.

"Yes, I can get a message to him, I'm just not sure he'll take it." Scott said as he watched John listening to his every word.

"Yeah, don't hold it against him, I gave him plenty of reasons not to want to talk to me." Rick said darkly.

"Is there anything you can tell me that might make him want to listen?" Scott asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Tell him I'm getting help. I'm seein a doctor about my temper and the doctor wanted to talk to John, maybe help make things better." Rick said honestly.

"I can see how that might help to assuage some of your guilt over the past, but what does it do for John?" Scott asked carefully.

"Ass what? Mister, give me a break. I don't know the ten dollar words." Rick said helplessly.

"If he goes to visit your therapist, it'll make you feel better, but it will just cause him to relive things he's worked hard to forget." Scott said and noticed a nod from John.

"He's my son, I want to try and fix what's wrong between us." Rick said desperately.

"He's been granted emancipation by the courts. That means he's legally able to make his own choices and decisions. If he chooses not to work it out, you'll have to accept it." Scott said firmly.

"Yeah. I know." Rick said in nearly a whisper.

"Mr. Allerdyce, your son is a fine young man. When he first came here he was another student, but over time he became a friend. I'll give him your message, but I don't think you should get your hopes up. It's taken him some time, but he's finally got his head on straight, his life on track, he has friends, he has respect, and everything he has, he's gotten for himself. He hit bottom and came back stronger than before. He deserves respect. If you can't give him that, then you'd do best to stay out of his life." Scott said in a calm, clear voice.

"Okay. Yeah. Would you just give him the message? I know he might not want to meet with me, but I've got to try." Rick said helplessly.

"He'll get the message. Does he know where to reach you?" Scott asked and noticed John nodding again.

"Yes. He can call me at home or at work." Rick said quietly.

"Okay. Good luck Mr. Allerdyce." Scott said and hung up the phone.

## [Chapter 36: Paying the Price]

Tara left the MedLab feeling good. With a few small exceptions, the day had been filled with interesting and exciting events. As she entered the room she shared with Dawn, her attention was immediately drawn to a piece of jewelry laying on her pillow.

Tara walked to the bed and looked with wonder at the golden snake covered with jewels. Her first thought was that Dawn had bought her a gift, but when she looked more closely at the snake, she had a vague memory of seeing it in a picture.

Tara hurried to a bookcase and began looking through books, trying to identify the mysterious gift. After only a few books she stopped. In her hands she held the ancient book which told of Astarte and the gifts she had been known to bestow. She carefully read the properties of the Serpent of Astarte and her spirits fell. She knew within herself that she had been given a great duty to perform... and it might destroy her.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on the door of the boathouse.

After a moment of waiting, Andrew opened the door looking exhausted.

"Come in Wesley." Andrew said with honest happiness at seeing him.

"Just for a moment. I am leaving and needed to say a few things before I go." Wesley said as he walked into the room.

"Sure, what is it?" Andrew asked and took a seat on the sofa.

"First I wanted to thank you for inviting me to join you this afternoon. Everyone here has been very kind to me since my arrival, but most especially your family." Wesley said quietly.

"Of course Wesley. Alan was speaking for both of us at dinner today. You are welcomed as part of our family anytime you want to join. Anytime you are able to visit, you're welcomed here and I'm inviting you to spend Christmas with us." Andrew said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you. My work for the council is such that I cannot predict my whereabouts that far in advance, but I will make every effort to join you for Christmas." Wesley said happily.

"Good, we'll be expecting you then." Andrew said with tenderness.

"I have something of a serious matter to discuss with you in regards to your family." Wesley said carefully.

"What is it Wesley?" Andrew asked with immediate concern.

"Since Spike was resurrected using your father's blood, there is a distinct possibility that he is genetically your brother... I just thought you would want to know." Wesley said quietly.

Andrew sat stunned for a minute, then shook himself back to the present. "Thank you for telling me Wesley. I hadn't considered that." Andrew said carefully.

"I must be going now if I'm to make my plane. Enjoy your wonderful family, I hope you know what a blessing you have received." Wesley said as he walked toward the door.

"I do, believe me. And may the gods protect you on your journeys Wesley. All our best wishes go with you." Andrew said as he watched Wesley walk toward his rental car.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn walked into her room to find Tara sitting and staring into space.

"What's going on honey?" Dawn asked as she walked to Tara's side.

"This." Tara said darkly as she held out the Serpent of Astarte.

"It's beautiful. Where did you get it?" Dawn asked curiously.

"Why don't you call on the air and see if you can find the answer?" Tara asked quietly, trying to keep the menace out of her voice.

Dawn shrugged and called on her command of the air.

"There's nothing." Dawn said in confusion.

"I know. The water won't tell me anything either." Tara said solemnly.

"You obviously have an idea of what this is about. What gives?" Dawn asked with the beginnings of worry in her voice.

"Marguerite." Tara said quietly.

"What about her?" Dawn asked in confusion.

"This is the price." Tara said as she looked at Dawn with sad eyes.

"Tara honey, you're freaking me out. What is this thing? Is it cursed or something?" Dawn asked in an imploring voice.

After a long moment of thought Tara said, "It's the means to link the life of a mortal to that of an immortal."

Dawn stood in stunned amazement for a long minute before saying, "This is great! I've been worrying about the future. I've never told you but I think that since I'm a key, I'm immortal. This way we can be together forever."

Tara shook her head and remained silent.

"What am I missing?" Dawn asked, confused by Tara's dark mood.

"It's not for us." Tara said firmly.

"What? What do you mean?" Dawn asked curiously.

"I mean, it's not for us. We were given this... thing, so we can bestow it on someone who needs it. The price had to be something precious to us. The price we have to pay for restoring Marguerite to health is giving up this chance." Tara said with certainty.

"No, no. You said that the water isn't showing you anything. The air isn't talking to me. How can you be sure?" Dawn asked with desperation.

"I am sure. It's the natural order. What we've been given is a gift to bestow or a curse for us to bring down on ourselves." Tara said, imploring Dawn to understand.

"What do you mean a curse?" Dawn asked, still not believing.

"If we refuse to follow the natural order and bestow the gift, what do you think will happen to Marguerite?" Tara asked with force.

"You're just guessing. You can't know..." Dawn said, beginning to get angry.

"I do know." Tara said firmly.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about me maybe being immortal before. But I've been trying to find something like this since I met you." Dawn said hopefully.

Tara looked deep into Dawn's eyes and said, "I've known for a while now. When you told me you were a key, I did some research to see just what that means. And I think you're right, you're immortal, it's your natural state... But it's not mine."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Scott, will you help me? I don't know what to do." John said quietly.

"What do you want to do?" Scott asked in a voice that was much calmer than he actually felt.

"I want to talk to my dad and believe that things can be okay between us. At the same time I want to never talk to him again. And there's another part of me that wants to go there and tell him how much he hurt me." John said with despair.

"John. I'm sorry I don't know what to tell you. If I had any idea of what would make you happy in the long run, I'd tell you to do that. I honestly don't know." Scott said with apology in his voice.

John stopped his thought and looked carefully at Scott. After a moment of consideration he said in astonishment, "You really care."

"Of course I do." Scott said immediately.

"But... I mean, I know it's your job to care about us, but you *really* care." John said as a statement, but it was obviously a question.

"John, you remember that I promised you a happy ending? That's what this is about. You have a series of choices to make and hopefully the right combination of choices will lead you to that happy ending. I can't make the decisions for you, but I'll do everything I can to provide you as many choices as I can." Scott said seriously.

John nodded and said, "I think I'm going to go and see what he has to say."

"If you want me to go with you or to talk with you afterward, all you have to do is ask and I'm there for you." Scott said seriously.

"Why?"

"Because I was telling your dad the truth, you used to be a student, but now you're a friend." Scott said and let the honesty be seen in his face.

"Thanks Scott. I've never been real good at the friendship thing." John said simply.

"Neither was I until recently. But now we've fallen in with a pretty good group." Scott said happily.

"Yeah. All you guys are pretty cool. I thought when Marie outed me to the entire school that my life was over. But maybe it was just beginning." John said in thought.

"You know your orientation doesn't make any difference to me, don't you?" Scott asked and looked into John's eyes to gauge the truth.

"Yeah, I guess I do... Scott, can I tell you something?" John asked and looked over to see Bobby with his attention turned fully toward the direction where Robert and Ronny had traveled.

"Between us?" Scott asked quietly.

John nodded.

"Of course. John, you can tell me anything." Scott said with a shiver of dread at this turn in the conversation.

"Right before I got Bobby's message, I was thinking about ending it." John said quietly.

Scott nodded, then asked in a whisper, "How close?"

John reached into his pocket and pulled out a bottle of pills. "This close." John said as he handed the pills to Scott.

"This would do it." Scott said absently, then looked at John again.

"Yeah. I figured I'd see Bobby one last time, then... that's all." John said with a tremble in his voice.

"And now?" Scott asked, hoping he was right.

"You already said it to my dad. I got friends and respect. Plus I got a future thanks to you. Would you get rid of those for me? I won't need 'em anymore." John said with a note of peace in his voice.

"Sure. Glad to do it... is it getting colder?" Scott asked as he pulled his coat tighter.

"Yeah, either that or Bobby's worried enough about Robert that his power's getting away from him." John said with a look of concern toward Bobby.

"You still love him, don't you?" Scott asked in nearly a whisper.

"Yeah, but like a friend. I'm not going to come between him and Robert." John said with a wistful tone in his voice.

"It'll happen for you. Don't worry." Scott said gently.

"What about you?" John asked with a curious look.

"What about me?" Scott asked suspiciously.

"When are you going to find someone?" John asked seriously.

Scott was taken aback by the direct question and responded, "Who's the adult here?"

"No one. We're just two friends talking. Now tell your friend what's going on with you." John said seriously.

"For years I've been a part of a couple and I lost my own identity, so I'm taking some time to be single and figure out who I am." Scott said honestly.

"That's deep. You think you could talk with me about that sometime? I've never really figured out about myself, I've kinda gone along with whoever was running my life at the time." John said and glanced at Bobby again.

"Which explains why you were so lost when Bobby moved on to Marie." Scott said in a speculative voice.

"Yeah." John confirmed in a whisper.

"Sure, I don't know how much I can tell you. Most of it's feelings more than words." Scott said with a slightly pained look at the thought of having to explain all that.

John giggled and said, "I'm not going to ask you to tell me all your feelings and junk. I'd just like to know how to understand my own, maybe you could help me with that." John said with a smile.

"Yeah. I'd be happy to." Scott said with relief.

\* \* \* \* \*

"But we need to be together." Dawn pleaded.

"Please stop trying to control me." Tara said desperately.

"I'm not, I just want you to understand that this may be our only chance. We've got to go for it." Dawn said with a pained look.

"The Undine and the Sylph defied the natural order on our behalf. They expended energy to do our bidding. Now it's our turn to do the same in return. We must alter the natural order in a way that they cannot and expend energy to repay them for what they spent." Tara said carefully.

"But you can't know that. The elements are silent." Dawn said defensively.

"Exactly. When have you ever known the elements to be silent when we've asked for guidance. We are being tested. If we fail, we're cursed." Tara said, pleading for Dawn to hear her.

A moment of understanding crossed Dawn's face, then faded with a shake of her head.

"No. You just don't want to commit to me. You want to be able to leave anytime you want without obligation. If we did this you'd be bound to me forever." Dawn said with a look of speculation at Tara.

Silence fell over the room as Tara thought about Dawn's words.

Finally Tara got up from her chair and walked toward the door.

"Tara?" Dawn asked with panic.

"That hurt Dawn. I love you. I've told you, I've shown you... I need some time." Tara said and walked out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Well, do you have any questions?" Ronny asked as he pulled up his pants.

Robert thought carefully, then said, "No, I believe I understand. Thank you for demonstrating Ronny. I don't think I would have understood a description of the act."

"Sure. I guess we'd better fill this thing in." Ronny said and held out his hand for the shovel.

"I am feeling some pressure in my lower abdomen. I believe it is nearly time for me to... crap." Robert said with difficulty.

"It sounds funny when you say it." Ronny said with a chuckle.

"What would be the proper term for me to use?" Robert asked seriously.

"I dunno. I suppose a technical term. That's kinda the way you talk." Ronny said in thought.

"Very well. I believe it is time for me to defecate." Robert said and lowered his pants.

"Okay dude. I'm right here if you have any problems." Ronny said, back to a serious attitude.

Robert squatted at the edge of the hole and nature took its course.

"That was simple enough." Robert said in thought.

"Woah man! That shit is rank!" Ronny said and quickly moved upwind of Robert.

"Yours did not smell like wildflowers." Robert said simply.

"Well, yeah." Ronny said and let it go, remembering what Scott had said about teasing.

"Would you hand me the paper, it is beyond my reach." Robert asked quietly.

"Sure buddy." Ronny said and handed him the toilet paper.

"That was not scary." Robert finally said as he fastened his pants.

Ronny shrugged and shook his head.

"But it could have been without your demonstration. Thank you again Ronny." Robert said fondly.

"Yeah, no problem. Let's get that hole filled in and get back to camp. It's getting colder." Ronny said in thought.

Robert nodded and began to shovel.

Ronny pointed the flashlight up for a second and said, "That tree's gonna die!"

\* \* \* \* \*

At the ringing of the doorbell, Orroro went to answer it.

She opened the door and was surprised to see Mystique and a young man who looked vaguely familiar looking back at her.

"Can I help you?" Orroro asked carefully.

"I think that's my line." Mystique said as she walked past Orroro into the entry hall.

"I don't understand." Orroro said honestly.

"I was told to offer my help to you. That's why I'm here." Mystique said simply.

"Oh, why?" Orroro asked in confusion.

"Magneto said he was going away and I was to offer to help if you needed it... do you?" Mystique asked shortly.

"Not at the moment. I was about to walk the halls. Perhaps you could join me and we could determine if there is any need at the same time." Orroro said speculatively.

Mystique seemed surprised by the invitation, but only for a moment before nodding and walking to Orroro's side.

"I was looking for a girl." Lance interrupted.

"One in particular?" Orroro asked gently, with a touch of humor.

"She was about this tall and had brown hair... she's nice." Lance said with difficulty.

"He's looking for Shadowcat." Mystique said with a roll of her gold eyes.

"Oh, you'll find her in the common room, just through there." Orroro said pointing.

"Thanks." Lance said quickly and left to find her.

"He's smitten." Mystique said in explanation.

"Oh. Kitty is a challenge to get to know. I wish him luck." Orroro said and began to walk down the hall.

Mystique thought about her words as she silently followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chris opened the door of the library and stopped just inside.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was in here." Chris said quickly.

"Do not worry Chris. Come in, we are simply talking." Kurt said kindly.

Chris walked further into the library followed by his father.

Julia's eyes got big and her mouth fell open at the sight of Angel.

He noticed her shocked expression and looked curiously at her. She looked familiar, he searched his vast centuries of memory trying to place her.

"Master Angelus?" She finally said.

The voice. He recognized that voice. Deep within him he felt his demon arise and take notice.

"Julia?" Angel asked in wonder as he walked to her.

She got up from her chair and ran to him. She pulled him into a tight embrace and buried her face in his shoulder.

"Oh God. I never thought I'd ever see you again! I'd heard you'd been killed in Russia." She said as her tears began to soak through his shirt.

Hesitantly he put his arms around her and whispered, "Be calm good doctor. I promised that I would return, and so I have."

"You know ze doctor?" Kurt asked in surprise.

"We met... about two hundred years ago." Angel said, trying to remember the date.

"It was the spring of seventeen ninety four in Collinsport, Maine." Julia said with adoration in her voice.

"Dad?" Chris called hesitantly.

"Chris, I'd like for you to meet Dr. Julia Hoffman... Is it still Hoffman? Have you married again?" Angel asked carefully.

"It's still Hoffman. There hasn't been anyone else since you. You're a tough act to follow." Julia said and pulled back to reveal a smile of love and tenderness.

Angel nodded and continued, "Julia, this is my son, Chris."

"Your son? I thought you couldn't father children." Julia said, her scientist eager to understand.

"I adopted Chris. But he's as much my son as a child I had fathered myself would be." Angel said firmly.

"I'm pleased to meet you Chris. I knew your father a long time ago." Julia said with a fond look at Chris.

"Do you love my Dad?" Chris asked seriously.

"Very much." Julia said quietly.

Angel looked surprised by the admission.

"Master Angelus, do you remember the last thing you asked of me?" Julia asked hesitantly.

"I sent you to find the gem of Amara." Angel said in thought.

Julia pulled a chain from around her neck to reveal a yellow gem set in a ring.

"You found it?" Angel asked in wonder.

"After I returned to this time it took me two years, but I finally found it." Julia said with a voice filled with accomplishment.

"Julia, I'm not Angelus anymore. I was cursed with a soul and I'm known as Angel now." Angel said with difficulty.

Julia looked into his eyes and saw the truth.

"Angelus is still inside me, a part of me. But I'm not the same man you knew." Angel said, trying to be gentle.

Julia thought about the words, then handed the chain and gem to Angel.

"I want you to have this. I've kept it as a symbol of our love for all these years, now you should have it. If Angelus is in you, I know he'll understand." Julia said seriously.

"I do not understand." Kurt said into the intense moment.

At Angel's questioning look, Kurt continued, "If your demon was in control. Why would she love him?"

"Julia is the only human Angelus ever loved. That's why he didn't turn her. He wanted to keep her just as she was. He sent her off on the quest for the gem to protect her from his enemies." Angel said in distant thought.

Tears fell down Julia's cheeks at the words. "He's the only man I ever truly loved." She whispered.

Angel saw the sight and felt his demon wanting, needing to comfort his chosen mate. Feelings rushed through him and he realized that it wasn't only Angelus that had loved her.

"Julia, if you'd be willing... we could give it another try." Angel asked hopefully.

"Really?" Julia said in wonder.

"Really. But you'll have to get to know the man that I am now. I'm not the same as before." Angel said quietly as he fell into the loving gaze in her eyes.

"I'd like that... what do I call you now?" Julia asked with a voice between nervous laughter and frustration.

"Call me Angel."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ronny and Robert had returned to the campfire without saying much more than 'everything came out okay'.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the camp that Scott couldn't account for. Finally he had to ask, "What's got everyone in such a depressed mood? I thought we were going to have fun."

Bobby and John both looked to Ronny. He had a momentary look of question and both gave barely noticeable nods.

"Bobby, John and I all had blood tests today. We're a little nervous about getting the results." Ronny said honestly.

"Blood tests... like for HIV?" Scott asked carefully.

All three nodded.

Scott absorbed the implications of that, then said, "So what are you going to do if it's good news?"

All three boys thought, then Bobby finally said, "Nothing I guess. Just business as usual."

The other two nodded.

"And what if it's bad news?" Scott asked in a voice more like his teacher's voice.

The boys looked at each other, but no one would answer.

"Okay guys. Let's think about it like this. Bobby, your test comes back positive. Ronny, what are you going to do?" Scott asked directly.

"Um, be sorry. Be sad." Ronny said quietly.

"Would you refuse to talk to Bobby anymore?" Scott asked carefully.

"No way. After what he's done for me in the past two days? I'd be right there for him... whatever he needed." Ronny said definitely.

"John?" Scott asked quietly.

"Same." John said with force.

"Robert, do you understand what we're talking about?" Scott asked, hoping he didn't have to explain it.

"Yes, I understand." Robert said gravely.

"And how would you treat Bobby if he were infected?" Scott asked, hoping Robert truly understood.

"I would hold him close and let him know that it didn't make any difference in the way I feel. I would love him as much as I do now." Robert said with certainty.

"Okay guys, what if it was Ronny?" Scott asked the group in general.

"Same." John said without inflection.

"Me too." Bobby said, looking at his brother with love.

Robert nodded, looking to be sure that Ronny saw the move.

"I think you guys get the point I'm trying to make. Some things are out of our control. We have to deal with what's already been done the best we can. But all of us here, me included, will be with you all the way no matter what the tests say." Scott said honestly.

"Thanks Scott. You know if you ever need us, we're there for you too." John said seriously.

"I know." Scott said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Orroro and Mystique came upon Tara who was quietly crying in a small alcove off the main hall.

"Tara, what is wrong?" Orroro asked with immediate concern.

"I... I don't know what to do." Tara said helplessly as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Be calm child, let me help you." Orroro said in her most soothing tone.

"But you can't. There's no way you could understand." Tara said in anguish.

"Then who might be able to understand?" Orroro asked calmly.

Tara thought about the question, then realized. "Andrew! He'll be able to understand. Maybe he can help." She said with a glimmer of hope creeping into her eyes.

"Then I will call him immediately." Orroro said and moved to go.

"No. It's something I need to show him... I need to go to the boathouse." Tara said quickly.

"Child, you are not in a state to go out by yourself." Orroro said in a gentle but firm tone.

"I will go with her." Mystique said simply.

"Are you sure?" Orroro asked, not understanding the blue woman at all.

"I am here to help, this is how I can help." Mystique said frankly.

"Very well. Tara, Mystique will accompany you to the boathouse. Is that alright with you?" Orroro asked carefully.

Tara looked at Mystique and shyly nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm so old now." Julia said in despair.

"You're as beautiful as you ever were. The wild rose, blooming without permission or regret." Angel said with a smile.

Julia laughed and said, "You always were enamored of bad poetry."

Angel smiled and said, "The worst. But you always found some way to overlook that."

"Every word, no matter how badly written was said with such honest emotion that I couldn't help but respond... Do you think we can? What will people say?" Julia asked with worry.

"The people who matter, our friends and family, will know the truth of our love and will accept us as we choose to be. Please Julia, no one is promised a second chance, but we've gotten ours. Let's take it." Angel said with hope.

"I could never deny you anything Angel. But if you're spouting bad poetry already, and I'm as giddy as a schoolgirl, there is little left to chance. I love you Angel." Julia said and moved in for a full kiss.

"Is Julia going to be my mother?" Chris asked in confusion.

Angel pulled out of the kiss and asked, "How would you feel about it if she was?"

"Do you love her?" Chris asked carefully.

"Yes son, I do." Angel said, looking Chris in the eyes.

"...And she already said she loves you..." Chris continued in thought.

Julia nodded and gave Chris time to work it through.

"Do you want to be my mother?" Chris asked her as he looked in her eyes.

"I've always wanted a little boy of my own." Julia said with a tender smile.

Chris nodded. "Yeah, okay. But will I still be able to visit with William and the guys?" Chris thought to ask.

"Sure, we'll work it out." Angel said and put his arm around Julia.

"I still do not understand. How could you have met Angel in seventeen ninety four?" Kurt asked in confusion.

"It's a very long story that I'll tell you sometime, for now let's just say that I was sent into the past for a few years, then found my way home." Julia said and gave a look of love to Angel.

Kurt thought about Andrew and Alan's encounter with time travel and accepted the explanation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby reached into a cooler and produced a pack of hot dogs. From a bag he pulled marshmallows.

"Who's up for munchies?" Bobby asked with a smile.

Nods and grunts of agreement went around the fire.

"We'll need to get sticks for toasting the marshmallows and the hot dogs." Bobby said simply.

"Come on then. Now that I'm thinking about food, I'm hungry." John said impatiently.

"Robert, can you stay for a minute?" Scott asked as the others headed away from the campfire.

"Yes Uncle Scott?" Robert asked happily.

"I just wanted to be sure that you're okay with the new..." Scott trailed off.

"Bowel function?" Robert asked helpfully.

"Yeah, that." Scott said quickly.

"I am well. Ronny demonstrated what I was to do, then I did it. The sensation was unusual, but not painful or frightening at all." Robert said calmly.

"I'm glad. Your Uncle Alex was concerned. I thought about taking you back to the boathouse so you could be with your brothers and sister... I thought it would be easier if you weren't the only one going through it." Scott said seriously.

"Uncle Scott, I am fine. And I am glad I was able to stay here. I have never had friendship on this level before. Thank you for including me." Robert said honestly.

"The guys invited you. I had nothing to do with the guest list." Scott said honestly.

Robert thought about the words and finally said in a voice of absolute wonder, "I am happy."

## *[Chapter 37: Darkness, Decisions, Consequences]*

Mystique and Tara arrived at the boathouse door. Tara gently knocked, not sure what she was going to say.

Lee answered the door and said, "Hello?" As he noticed the young woman accompanied by a blue naked woman.

"I need to speak to Andrew, is he around?" Tara asked shyly.

"Let me check. I think he's just in his room." Lee said and gestured for Tara and Mystique to enter.

A moment later Lee returned and said, "He'll be out in a minute."

At Tara's questioning look Lee timidly said, "I'm Andrew's father... I'm really older than I look. I've been told I carry my age well."

A spark of realization lit in Tara's eyes, but she remained silent as she felt in her pocket for the Serpent.

"I have also been told that I carry my age well." Mystique said plainly.

"By whom?" Lee asked automatically.

"Johnny Kennedy." Mystique said with a purple blush.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't know if you'll need a stick for anything, but we got one for you too Robert." Bobby said as the group of boys returned to the camp.

"Thank you Bobby." Robert said with a look of affection.

"Actually it was John's idea. And Ronny used his... mutant thing, to snap the branches. I just held the flashlight and sharpened the ends." Bobby said, enjoying Robert's glow of happiness.

"Thanks guys." Robert said as he was handed a stick.

"Okay, let's cook some food!" John said and moved for the hot dogs.

Bobby handed everyone a hot dog, and when everyone was outfitted, he asked Robert, "Do you want to try one?"

"I will try. If I cannot eat it, may I give it to you?" Robert asked quietly.

"Sounds like a plan." Bobby said and handed Robert a hot dog.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked out into the living room to find Tara looking nervous and fidgety.

"What's wrong Tara?" Andrew asked with immediate concern.

"Can I talk with you and Alan? It's about Dawn." Tara said with worry.

"Sure, we were just laying down talking. It's been a really long day." Andrew said and led the way to the bedroom.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Lee asked quickly as they left.

"I am Mystique." She said with a sultry look of lust.

"I'm Lee." He said with an answering look.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lance walked into the common room to find Kitty talking with a group of girls.

"Can we talk?" Lance asked abruptly.

"Sure." Kitty said with wide eyes and moved across the room to stand by Lance.

"I've been thinking about you since we met at the meeting... I'm Lance." He said trying to maintain his calm appearance.

"Kitty." She said, looking into his dreamy brown eyes.

"I guess I just wanted to know if you wanted to, I dunno, go out sometime and do something." Lance asked awkwardly.

"Yeah, I'd like that." Kitty said with a fascinated gaze into Lance's eyes.

"Oh, okay, great." Lance said with surprise.

"But since you're here. We could hang out. You like any movies or anything?" Kitty asked hopefully.

"Not really. I don't really get into movies. But I like music." Lance finished with hope.

"What kind?" Kitty asked quickly.

"I like the older stuff... alternative, punk, garage bands... the gritty stuff." Lance finished with a shrug.

"Oh, *real* music, before the studios and sound mixers take all the character out of it." Kitty said with a knowing smile.

"Yeah." Lance said with a look of surprise.

"Wait here a minute and I'll be back with some music." Kitty said quickly.

"I'll go with you." Lance said and began to follow.

"We aren't allowed." Kitty said with a note of regret.

"What if we don't tell anyone?" Lance asked with a sly smile.

"You see those girls over there? They'll rat us out in a heartbeat. Just stay put and I'll be right back." Kitty said with a smile, then whispered, "And I'll work it out so we can be alone for a few minutes later."

Lance nodded as Kitty bounced away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guys, I think I'm about to do something that could break Dawn and I up for good." Tara said with a tremor of fear in her voice.

Andrew took her hand to offer comfort.

Tara looked down at Andrew's hand and held out her other hand in invitation to Alan.

Immediately Alan took hold of Tara's offered hand.

"Dawn loves you like crazy. Whatever it is, she'll understand." Andrew said with assurance.

Tara carefully guided Alan's hand to Andrews, and they automatically took hold of each others hands as she held onto them both.

"She won't understand this." Tara said as she reached in her pocket and found the Serpent.

"What is it? What could you do that would upset her that much?" Andrew asked, wanting to help.

"This." Tara said and dropped the Serpent on their joined hands.

"What is it?" Alan asked, then felt it begin to move on it's own.

"It's called the Serpent of Astarte." Tara said and used both her hands to hold their joined hands together.

"It's moving." Alan said in panic and tried to pull away.

"Please, trust me, this isn't a bad thing... it needs to be done." Tara said as she continued to hold their joined hands.

"What are you doing? This is a spell." Andrew said in realization as he felt the magics at work.

"Yes, an ancient and powerful spell." Tara said as the Serpent finally settled around their wrists.

"What spell? What are you doing to us?" Andrew asked nervously.

"Andrew, are you immortal like your father?" Tara asked directly.

"Yes, I think so." Andrew said quietly.

"Alan, you aren't, are you?" Tara asked, looking in his eyes.

"No." Alan whispered.

"That's what I'm doing, fixing that problem." Tara said honestly.

"How?" Andrew asked as he saw the Serpent begin to devour its own tail.

"By combining your life forces and linking you for eternity. As you are, so shall you be... now and forever. Linked lives, destinies entwined." Tara said in a whisper voice that was nearly a chant.

The Serpent grew tighter and tighter then... was gone. A golden scaled band was all that was left on both their wrists.

"What?" Alan asked.

"She made you immortal. You won't age, you won't die... at least from old age." Andrew said as he looked at Alan with love.

"Why didn't you ask?" Alan asked Tara in confusion.

"Because I don't have time. Dawn wanted me to use the Serpent on us... but it wasn't meant for us." Tara said sadly.

"You wanted it to be, didn't you?" Andrew asked with sympathy.

"Yes. A part of me wants to be with her forever, but another part knows that it isn't meant to be that way. I am mortal, I'm not supposed to have forever." Tara said with resignation.

"But I am... was mortal too. Why is it wrong for you and not me?" Alan asked in confusion.

"I don't have those answers. I just know that a force that is greater than I am gave me this thing. If Dawn and I used it we would be cursed for eternity. I don't know why, but I'm sure of it. This was meant for you." Tara said seriously.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert brought the hot dog to his mouth and took a tiny bite. The flavor overwhelmed his taste and he spit the small piece of meat into the fire.

"I'm sorry Bobby. I cannot tolerate the strength of the flavor." Robert said in disappointment.

"That's okay Robert, that's why we brought these." Bobby said and handed Robert the bag of rice cakes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Have you seen Tara?" Dawn asked in panic as she found Orroro walking the halls.

"Yes, be calm child, she is fine." Orroro said soothingly.

"We had a fight, and I said some things, and she left, and now I can't find her." Dawn said, nearly in tears.

"She went to the boathouse to ask Andrew for his advice." Orroro said calmly.

"Oh, okay. I'm going to find her." Dawn said immediately and walked hurriedly for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guys, as much fun as this is, it's really getting cold. Let's move into the tent." Scott said with a shiver.

"Yeah. I didn't think it would get this cold." John said from his position, almost in the fire.

"Okay. You want to take care of the fire John?" Scott asked as he picked up the lantern.

With a wave of his hand the fire went completely out.

"We really need to gauge your abilities. You've learned a lot." Scott said as he gathered things to take into the tent.

John nodded as he also gathered things.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You know I'm a student... what do you do?" Kitty asked as the music played in the background.

"Not much. I was doing some jobs for Magneto but, he really hasn't had much for us to do lately. I've been thinking about getting a groundskeeper job. I like working with plants and stuff." Lance said as he looked into Kitty's eyes.

"That sounds nice. And there's a lot of places around that have big grounds like this place. It should be a pretty good job." Kitty said speculatively.

"Yeah, I've been having fun hanging out, doing nothing most of the time, but I started thinking about what I want to be doing a few years from now. I think a real job is the answer." Lance said quietly.

"I'm going to stay in school for a while. I'm thinking about becoming a veterinarian." Kitty said, enthralled by Lance's handsome features.

"That sounds good. I love animals." Lance said and became lost in her eyes yet again.

Only music could be heard as the two looked at each other, soaking in each other's appearance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everyone started unbundling sleeping bags when Bobby asked, "Do you mind if Robert and I zip our sleeping bags together? To conserve body heat?"

Scott thought about it for a second, then said, "I'm guessing you have other reasons, but that's fine. It is getting pretty cold. Just behave yourselves."

"We will." Bobby promised.

Bobby and Robert worked to zip the sleeping bags together as John said, "That actually sounds like a good idea, I mean the body heat part. Could I double up with one of you guys?"

"Sure." Scott said with surprise.

John automatically moved to combine his sleeping bag with Scott's.

Robert noticed the momentary lost look on Ronny's face and asked Bobby quietly, "Can Ronny join us? I believe there is room."

"Sure." Bobby whispered back, then said more loudly, "Ronny, if you want, there is room for you with us. We could use your sleeping bag as another cover."

Ronny looked with question at Robert who gently nodded.

"Okay. Thanks guys." Ronny said quietly.

Scott was surprised by this development. He had expected Ronny and John to double up.

"I'm not sleepy yet. How about everyone else?" John asked as he pulled off his shoes and climbed into the sleeping bag.

"Not really. Just cold. What do you guys want to do now?" Ronny asked the group.

"Wanna play truth or dare?" John asked with a smile.

A chorus of "No." Came in unison from everyone in the tent.

"Oh." John said with disappointment.

"John, I think we're past that. If there's something you want to know about one of us. Just ask." Bobby said honestly.

"Actually I was hoping for a dare." John said quietly.

"Which one?" Bobby asked curiously and propped himself on an elbow.

"I was kinda hoping I could get someone to kiss me... I mean like a real one." John said with a warm blush.

Bobby looked sadly at John, thinking again about how badly he had treated his friend in the past.

"Would anyone mind if I kissed John?" Bobby asked, looking at Robert and Ronny.

Robert looked tenderly at Bobby and shook his head. Ronny just rolled his eyes and gave a look of 'whatever' before shaking his head.

"No Bobby. You need to keep that for Robert." John said quietly.

"Who do you want?" Ronny asked with a little worry.

"Scott." John said and turned to see Scott's surprised look.

"You're a student... I can't." Scott sputtered.

"No, I'm not... not yet. And I'm considered an adult by the state of New York. I'm not asking for sex or nothing like that. Just one kiss... I want to know what a real kiss is like." John said, his voice becoming more quiet.

"I'm sorry John, I really can't." Scott said with apology.

Ronny said in deep thought, "I think I'd like to try it."

"I thought you were straight." Bobby said in confusion.

"So did I. But that was mostly because of all the crap we were taught as kids. I think I'd like to try a kiss, just so I'd know what it's like." Ronny said in thought.

"Sure buddy." John said with a peaceful smile.

Ronny and John moved in their respective sleeping bags until they could reach each other easily.

Ronny had a slight look of fear in his eyes, so John said, "Why don't you kiss me? That way you won't have to do any more than you want."

A look of relief fell over Ronny's face as he carefully pressed his lips to John's.

There was almost no pressure, only a whisper of a touch as John automatically opened his mouth in invitation.

"Is it getting hot in here?" Bobby asked as he watched the display.

"I believe it is." Robert said as he watched the kiss with fascination.

Ronny took the invitation and tentatively moved his tongue into John's mouth to explore.

"We're the couple and we're not getting to kiss." Bobby said with a jolt of realization.

Robert took that as permission and pulled Bobby into a gentle kiss.

Scott looked on with tenderness as the four boys were kissing, not passionately, but tenderly, with gentleness and caring.

Finally John and Ronny's kiss broke and they both looked at each other with question.

"It was good." Ronny finally whispered.

"Yeah, your kiss was gentle, like you weren't sure, it was like you were scared of hurting me. It was nice." John said with a smile.

Ronny blushed and mumbled, "Thanks."

"Guys, I think we need to talk." Scott said to the group.

Robert and Bobby stopped kissing and turned their attention to Scott.

"As nice as this is, you need to save the kissing for those you really care about. Playing games with peoples feelings is a sure way to hurt someone." Scott said seriously.

"I know how that feels, I wouldn't do that." John said grimly.

"Me either." Bobby said with a note of regret.

"I got it." Ronny said seriously.

Robert nodded.

"Good. You are all great guys, I just don't want you making the mistake of thinking a kiss is a casual thing. It has meaning. And it may mean something different to someone else." Scott said and looked around the group again.

Everyone nodded.

"Good, what do we want to do now?" Scott said, more than ready for the kissing part of the night to be done with.

"Why don't we get Robert to tell us about when he was in space? We've never really sat down and talked about it, and I know I'm interested." Bobby said with a hopeful look at Robert.

"I am not a story teller like my brother Jimmy, but I will do my best." Robert said and sat up to think about his story.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I haven't seen you around here before... I think I'd remember." Lee said with a smile and a glance at her naked body.

"I only just arrived. I was told to help out here while Professor Xavier is on vacation." Mystique said carefully.

"Oh, okay. I just arrived here this morning... has it only been one day? Anyway, I'm new here too, so if you need someone to hang around with, I'm here for you." Lee said in a rambling tone.

"Thank you. I am known to these people, but I am not one of them." Mystique said without emotion.

"What do you do? I mean, do you have a job?" Lee asked with interest.

"Yes, I have assumed the life of a Senator and have been working very hard to further the goals of mutant kind." Mystique said with a note of pride.

"I don't understand." Lee said hesitantly.

Mystique shifted her form to that of Senator Kelley.

"Wow, that's really something... and slightly disturbing. Would you mind changing back?" Lee said, hoping he did not offend her.

She changed back and gave a gentle chuckle.

"I know it's impolite to ask a woman's age, but if you knew John Kennedy, I'm guessing you're a little older than I am." Lee said in speculation.

"A little." Mystique said vaguely.

"Okay, don't ask, don't tell. I got it. Can you tell me about some of the interesting people you've known through the years?" Lee asked seriously.

"That's a lot of ground to cover. What would you like to know?" Mystique asked as she shifted to be more comfortable on the couch.

"Who's the most interesting person that you've ever met?" Lee asked and also shifted.

"I found Theodore Roosevelt to be a fascinating man. I know about his faults and his overblown ego, but inside he was an incredible person." Mystique said, looking into distant memory.

"For me it was a woman named Melissa Brooks, she wasn't famous or anything, but she was the most incredible person I ever met. She ran a mission in Salem, Oregon... I couldn't understand how anyone could have that much genuine caring and compassion... and patience." Lee said in fond remembrance.

"I have known many special people throughout the years. It's been hard to let them go when the time came." Mystique said with a memory of distant pain.

"I know. The ageless thing really is a curse." Lee said, thinking about his own pain.

"It doesn't have to be." Mystique said and looked into his eyes, conveying her meaning without further words.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on the door that startled Lee out of his fascinated gaze into Mystique's eyes.

A look of apology came over his face as he got up to answer the door.

"Is Tara here?" Dawn asked abruptly.

"Yeah, in there." Lee said, pointing.

Dawn nodded and walked to the bedroom.

Lee walked back to Mystique and said, "I think I need to get a list of the people who live here because I'm tired of answering the door and not knowing who these people are."

"That was Tempest, Sprite... Tara, is her lover." Mystique said quietly.

"Oh, then that didn't sound good." Lee said and cast a look toward the once again closed bedroom door.

"I don't think it's anything to be concerned with. I've seen enough people to recognize true love when I see it. They'll work it out." Mystique said with assurance.

Lee nodded, then shifted back to his comfortable position to resume their talk.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Tara, I was worried." Dawn said as she moved into the bedroom.

"It's done. I used the Serpent." Tara said with fear and regret.

Dawn looked at Andrew and Alan's joined hands and recognized the gold scaled pattern on their wrists as that of the Serpent.

"You said you loved me, don't you want to be with me forever?" Dawn asked in pain as tears trailed down her face.

"I'm not meant to have forever, it's my destiny to live my life here and now, then move on." Tara said as her own tears began to fall

Tara looked around and saw Andrew and Alan trying not to watch them.

"Andrew, would you mind porting us back to our room? I think we're going to have a long talk." Tara asked quietly.

Andrew nodded and formed a portal right in front of them.

Tara walked through the portal, then sparing one look at the gold pattern on the men's wrists again, Dawn followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I feel so guilty." Alan said absently.

"I know, and you really don't have a reason to. We weren't asked, Tara did it herself... but I feel it too." Andrew finally conceded.

"Love, I hate to think that we're responsible for hurting Dawn. She's my sister, I'd never do anything to hurt her." Alan said in comment.

"I know, come here. Let me hold you." Andrew said in a whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Scott, I been thinking about something, and I don't know if you can help." John said into a gap in the storytelling.

"I'll try, what do you want to know?" Scott asked honestly.

"You know about me and my dad, some of it anyway. I was just wondering if I'm gonna end up like that." John asked carefully.

"Are you asking about your temper?" Scott asked carefully.

"Okay, I guess we can start with that." John said in resignation.

"I haven't noticed you having any problem with it. Anytime I've seen you even slightly angry, you've dealt with it appropriately." Scott said, looking back through his memories of John.

"Okay, I think I was wondering more about how my dad is with his family... am I going to be like that?" John asked with a furrow of worry.

"Tell me how it is. I mean, I know about the violence. How is it with your father besides that?" Scott asked quietly as the others listened.

"I don't think he has a clue. He tried taking me to a baseball game once..." John trailed off in a defeated chuckle.

"Neither of us are even a little bit interested in baseball so I'm guessing he was trying to do a 'family' thing." John said as he thought back.

"What else?" Scott asked in a near whisper.

"He dragged me and mom... before she left, down to Coney Island. She bitched and nagged the entire way, both ways. And while we were there, we didn't have the money to do hardly anything." John said sadly.

"So he tried." Scott said quietly.

"Yeah, I guess he did." John said in realization.

"I don't think it's going to be a problem for you. It sounds like your dad's heart was in the right place, he just didn't know what to do." Scott said simply.

"How can I keep from doing the same?" John asked with worry.

"Guys? What do you think? If John was in a relationship and he wanted some quality family time, what should he do?" Scott asked the others.

"Play a game that you enjoy." Robert said immediately.

"Visit family." Bobby said, thinking about trips to his grandmother's when he was a child.

"Go for a long walk together." Ronny said, remembering the times when he and Bobby had just gone walking for the sake of walking.

"There you go, three very good ideas." Scott said, then continued, "You've got friends here who can help you when you don't know what to do. If you call on us, we'll help you with your problems."

"That's it." John said suddenly.

"What?" Bobby asked curiously.

"I don't think dad has any friends. All he ever does is stay home and drink in front of the television. God, how lonely is that?" John said in a wondering voice.

"What about your mom?" Robert asked quietly.

"I think they got married cause he knocked her up... And she never forgave him." John said in thought.

"So they didn't love each other?" Bobby asked, thinking how sad that was.

"They didn't even like each other. They would constantly insult and argue with each other until one day she finally just left. I felt so bad... because I didn't feel bad." John said in confusion.

"I think I understand. By the time she left, it was just a relief." Scott said, looking back into his own childhood.

"Yeah. Dad really tried I guess, but we couldn't get along. I guess after years of fighting... it's all I ever knew... how would I know how to care about him... I never saw anyone who did." John thought sadly.

"It's not too late John." Scott said quietly.

"You know when you said you'd go with me... did you mean it?" John asked hopefully.

"Yes. I meant it." Scott said with assurance.

"Good, maybe we can figure out some way that we can get along without trying to hurt each other." John said hopefully.

"I think it's worth a try." Scott said and gave John a hug of support.

"I guess we missed our chance to set things right?" Ronny said, thinking about his dad.

"There's a difference bro. John's dad tried, he wanted things to be better." Bobby said seriously.

"Yeah." Ronny said with regret.

"Bobby?" Scott asked carefully.

"Yeah?" Bobby said and turned his attention to Scott.

"If you guys ever need someone to do dad things, I think between Matt and I we've got you covered." Scott said gently.

"Thanks Scott, but it's too late for you to be like a dad to me." Bobby said simply.

At Scott's raised eyebrows Bobby continued, "You're a friend now, you're one of the guys. It just wouldn't be the same."

"Okay, I guess Matt's going to have to bear the burden of fatherhood alone." Scott said as he enjoyed the thought that he was 'one of the guys'.

"I just want to be there if you decide to call him 'dad'." Bobby said with an impish grin.

"It's a deal." Scott said with a chuckle.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Come in." Andrew said, immediately awake.

"Father, I am having discomfort, and my alcove will not connect properly." Jimmy said with a cranky voice.

Andrew got out of bed and threw on a robe before getting the medical tricorder.

After a brief scan, Andrew said, "You're just growing. The pain you're feeling is the growth plates in your legs... come over to the bed and lay down on your stomach."

Jimmy hesitantly complied.

Andrew began to massage Jimmy's legs and the pains subsided.

"Thank you father, that feels wonderful." Jimmy said in relief.

"I'm glad. And I think your alcove problem may be with your height. When you go back downstairs, check to see if your occipital implant is aligning with the data transfer coupler." Andrew said as he continued the massage.

"I didn't know you were versed in Borg alcove mechanics." Jimmy said curiously.

"I know the absolute basics. I couldn't repair one, but I know what most of the basic functions are. I just thought it would be best to know in case one of you had a problem, I could at least have a clue about what you were talking about." Andrew said as he rubbed down the sore legs.

"I believe you are correct, it did not occur to me to measure my own height." Jimmy said in thought.

"Will you be able to adapt the alcove if that is the problem?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yes, we will need to disassemble part of the alcove and reconstruct it. But the modification should take less than two hours." Jimmy said seriously.

"Good. I'm glad it won't be a problem. How about tonight? Will you be able to regenerate?" Andrew asked as he finished the rubdown.

"Yes, I believe so. Now that I know the source of the problem, I believe I can make some temporary adjustments for the night. Thank you Father, enjoy your rest." Jimmy said as he got up from the bed.

Andrew pulled Jimmy close and said, "I love you Squirt, remember that."

"I know, I love you too Father." Jimmy said as he returned the hug.

## *[Chapter 38: What's Weird]*

Robert was cuddled close to Bobby who was fast asleep.

The stories he had told earlier in the night made him remember just how much had changed in the past few months.

He had been Borg. He was unable to comprehend even the most basic feelings. Everything around him had seemed foreign and like a dream.

Then he met his Father and his Dad. These two men who knew nothing about him had shown him caring and understanding.

Alan had told him and William that they were special and would not be separated. He had told them that they would always have each other to confide in and depend on.

Robert thought about his brother and smiled. William was his best friend, closer than Bobby to him in some ways. No matter the circumstance, William was interested, concerned and willing to help.

Icheb had been their father first. He had watched out for them when they could not understand how to fit in among humans. He had given the benefit of his observations and listened to their concerns.

Trey had been the example of how to be an individual. Even though his choice had been to embrace his Borg identity, his willingness to overcome the prejudices of the crew was an inspiration to become truly individual, not just what others expected.

Jimmy had been their passage to the human world. Through his writings and explanations, he had carried the rest of the children into the world of humans by providing understanding of emotions and excitement in exploring the unknown.

And Janine had been the first of them to learn to play. She had given back the most precious things that the Borg had taken. The ability to enjoy simple activities, the company of others and the willingness to express emotions openly.

Robert felt the love for his family wash over him, then looked again at Bobby.

Bobby was his true love. This boy, this man was willing to wait for him. His love was pure, his concern honest, his caring was plain for anyone to see.

The hurts in his former life had made him able to empathize with others, and given him a humility that made him easy to like.

John was tortured, but still willing to hope. After his varied experiences, he still had the capacity to love and risk the possibility of more pain.

Ronny was brash and abrasive, and yet was capable of the most genuine acts of compassion. His offer to help Robert had been so simple and honest, and yet was a true sacrifice of his privacy.

Uncle Scott had been willing to overlook many infractions of the normal rules. He didn't voice disapproval when they used improper language, he didn't discourage their kissing, he didn't shy away from sensitive topics, but instead answered their questions as honestly as he was able.

All these people were his friends. They liked him, they chose to include him. They had offered him food, made him an honorary mutant, included him in their conversations and discussions.

Robert felt such love in his heart, beyond anything he had ever known, or could have imagined. He snuggled closer to Bobby, and Bobby reflexively tightened his arms around Robert and gave a gentle kiss on his forehead.

Robert knew peace as he drifted into his first sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

An ancient force moved silently through the night.

His was the duty and the responsibility to bestow the gift and curse of dreams on those that he found worthy of his gifts.

He moved through the night, barely aware of geography as he glided along. Suddenly, something caught his attention.

There was a sleeping consciousness that was new... untouched. This young one had never known his gifts before, had never experienced the excitement of a voyage into the unreal or the release of tensions from seeing his fears given life.

Morpheus looked into the sleeping mind and saw past pain, and present happiness.

[He's living his dream... such courage, such love.] He thought with admiration.

[Such a special child deserves a gift in his first sleep.] Morpheus thought as he gently glided his hand over Robert's sleeping eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew awoke to the sight of morning light trailing into the bedroom window.

He looked at the sleeping form of Alan. Peace and love washed over him at the sight of his husband.

After placing a gentle kiss on Alan's cheek, he carefully made his way out of the bed and pulled on some clothes.

Andrew walked into the living room and noticed his father and the blue naked woman asleep on the couches.

He quietly made his way into the kitchen and started a pot of coffee.

Then, with coffee making, he made his way through the living room and down into the basement to check on the kids.

William and Jimmy were awake and working on Jimmy's alcove.

"Good morning guys. How's it going?" Andrew asked as he walked up beside them.

"We are making the necessary modifications to my alcove. The work is proceeding normally." Jimmy said as he continued to work.

"Just let me know if you need any help with anything." Andrew said quietly.

"Of course Father." William said as he handed Jimmy a tool.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and Robert were walking hand in hand down the street of a town. No one was paying any attention to their action or Robert's appearance.

"This is the address. I don't know why she wants to see me, but maybe it won't be too bad." Bobby said and led the way up to a porch.

"Bobby?" The older woman said breathlessly.

"Hi mom." Bobby said shyly.

"Come in, tell me how you're doing." Mrs. Drake said with overflowing emotions.

"Thanks mom, this is Robert. My husband." Bobby said quietly, waiting for her reaction.

Mrs. Drake froze in place, then shook herself and said, "Come in Robert. Come in."

"Thank you Mrs. Drake." Robert said shyly and was surprised by the deeper tone of his voice.

"Please call me Madeline." Mrs. Drake said warmly.

"Thank you... Madeline." Robert said, barely able to speak.

"Bobby, I'd like for you to meet my new husband." She said proudly.

Bobby's eyes went wide as a smallish Asian man walked into the living room where they stood.

"This is Taichi Kamia." She beamed with pride.

"Please call me Tai." The man said gently.

"Nice to meet you Tai." Bobby said in shock.

"I've been wanting to call you for months, but I've just been so ashamed... I'm sorry about... everything." Madeline said with downcast eyes.

"So you don't care that I'm a mutant?" Bobby asked incredulously.

"No. Not anymore. Your father... I can't blame him. Not really. I chose to believe him. But he was so sure that he was right that it never occurred to me that he could have been wrong... Tai's shown me that I was wrong." Madeline said with a look of adoration at her husband.

"And my being gay isn't a problem?" Bobby asked, still not believing that this was happening.

"After what your father did, I'm just glad that you were able to let yourself love someone. I was afraid that you'd end up alone, unable to trust or love anyone again." Madeline said quietly.

"No problem there." Bobby said as he pulled Robert close to his side.

"I'm so sorry that I didn't call you when your father and brother died... there's no excuse..." She trailed off in tears.

"Shhh. Remember what we discussed, all that's in the past, you can't let it eat at you." Tai said soothingly.

Bobby smiled at the man who was obviously concerned for his mother.

"Um, mom?" Bobby said hesitantly.

Madeline looked at Bobby with tearful eyes.

"Ronny's not dead. He lives about two miles from the mansion." Bobby said shyly.

"What!?" Madeline screamed with shock and joy.

"When dad died, Ronny called me for help. I came and got him and took him to a doctor. That's when we found out that he was a mutant too." Bobby said as he watched the joy fill his mother's face.

"My baby's alive? Can I see him?" Madeline asked hopefully.

"I'll tell him that you want to. I don't know... When he found out that he was a mutant, he thought you would disown him... like you did me. So he figured that he was better off letting you believe he'd died." Bobby said quietly.

"He was right. Back then, I probably would have. But now, thanks to Tai's help and a year of therapy, I'm able to see past the lies that I believed most of my life." Madeline said with a shaky smile.

"I'll tell him. It's all I can do. But just so you know. He's fine. He's happy. He has friends, he's graduated high school and is getting ready to start

college... he's interested in politics... mutant issues." Bobby finished quietly.

"Thank you. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry." Madeline said and broke into tears again.

"It's okay mom. All that stuff is over. I'm just glad to see that you're happy." Bobby said in comfort.

"Please bring Ronny to visit... I miss my boys." Madeline said through her tears.

"Why don't you... both of you, come to the mansion and have dinner with us this Sunday. Ronny will know you're coming and if he chooses to talk with you, he'll be there." Bobby said quietly.

"Thank you Bobby. That's very kind of you." Tai said as he held his wife close.

"Your glockenspiel needs lubrication." Madeline said seriously to Robert.

"What?" Robert asked in confusion.

"There are fungi growing in the parsonage." Tai said in response.

Robert jerked awake and looked at Bobby's sleeping face.

He gently kissed Bobby, then settled his head against Bobby's chest.

[I dreamed.] Robert thought with astonishment, then thought about the images he had seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked up the stairs and gently knocked on Janine's bedroom door.

Janine quickly opened the door and Andrew walked in.

"What are you doing pumpkin?" Andrew asked curiously at the things scattered around her bedroom floor.

"I am making a Kadis'ka board for Theresa. She mentioned that she likes to play, but can only play when I visit." Janine said as she went back to work.

"That's nice... but I thought Theresa couldn't speak." Andrew said curiously.

"If she concentrates, she can whisper. It is difficult for her, but she can talk." Janine said as she continued to work.

"If you need any supplies or help, just let me know." Andrew said with a gentle smile.

"I have everything I need, thank you Father." Janine said, intent on her work.

Andrew nodded and left the room. He had a thought and returned to his bedroom to grab the medical tricorder.

\* \* \* \* \*

After walking by Xander and Remy's room and hearing nothing, Andrew walked to Alex's room and heard talking.

Andrew knocked gently on the door and asked, "Can I come in?"

"Sure, it's not locked." Alex answered immediately.

Andrew walked in to find Spike and Alex each in their own beds.

"So what are you guys up to?" Andrew asked casually.

"We were just talking. What's going on?" Alex asked curiously.

"Well... I've got something to tell Spike." Andrew said, a bit nervously.

"Bad news?" Spike asked with an air of unconcern.

"That's up to you..." Andrew said, then continued, "Wesley thinks that because we used Dad's blood to resurrect you, that you're genetically my brother."

"Maybe that's why I feel so different." Spike said in thought.

"If you wouldn't mind, I can run a comparative genetic analysis with the medical tricorder. It isn't sensitive enough to do much genetic analysis, but it can compare us and tell if we're brothers." Andrew said quietly.

"Sure mate. Do what you need to do." Spike said without concern.

Andrew carefully scanned himself, then pressed a few buttons before he walked beside Spike.

"Even if you aren't my brother, you're still family Spike. I'm sorry I attacked you yesterday." Andrew said before starting his scan.

"No worries mate, it ain't a problem for me." Spike said casually as he watched Andrew pressing the buttons.

"That settles it." Andrew said and looked into Spike's eyes. "According to this it's ninety eight percent certain that you're my brother. Anything above ninety percent is considered a definite match."

There was a long silence, then Spike said, "I never had me a brother before. But now I have two."

"You'll love Chris. He's a great boy." Andrew said tenderly.

"I'm glad Peaches stopped pining for the slayer. He's better off here." Spike said seriously.

Andrew smiled and hesitantly gave Spike a quick hug. "Welcome to the family Spike. When dad wakes up, we'll tell him he has another kid." Andrew said with a smile.

"I wonder what he'll think bout that?" Spike said with a speculative look.

"I get the feeling that he regrets not having more kids. I think he'll be thrilled." Andrew said happily.

"So what are you doing this morning?" Alex asked curiously.

"Just making the rounds, seeing what everyone's up to." Andrew said as he turned his attention to Alex.

"Well, we're just talking. Spike and I have known each other one day... but it feels like a lifetime." Alex said dreamily.

"Never thought I'd be in love again after all I been through... Specially with another bloke. I never saw me as a pouf." Spike said with a chuckle.

"If you're in love with each other's souls, everything else is just window dressing. I'm glad to see you two taking the time to get to know each other." Andrew said honestly.

"Yeah. And Spike's life would make a great movie." Alex said with a teasing glance at Spike.

"More like a series, given his age. You're what? One hundred twenty?" Andrew said with his own teasing look.

"That makes me your older brother. Which means I can kick your skinny arse." Spike said seriously.

At Andrew's surprised look, Spike's serious glare broke into a smile.

"Big brothers are supposed to protect their little brothers, not pick on them." Andrew finally said.

"No mate, you got it wrong, we're supposed to do both." Spike said with an evil grin.

"I'm going to check on Icheb and Trey now. The coffee's ready in the kitchen. I'll see you later." Andrew said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew walked to the attic door and knocked gently.

There was no immediate answer so he tried the knob to find the door locked.

"Trey? Icheb? Are you guys okay?" Andrew asked quietly.

"We are fine." Trey answered hesitantly.

"Can I come in for a second? I just want to talk to you guys." Andrew said, feeling that something was wrong.

"Do you require our assistance immediately?" Icheb asked hesitantly.

"No. I was just seeing what everyone was up to." Andrew answered curiously.

"We have need of privacy for a few minutes, we will be downstairs within half an hour." Icheb said in an embarrassed voice.

"Oh, um, privacy... Okay, I'll see you when you're... done." Andrew said with difficulty and walked downstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lower, right there." Icheb said with difficulty.

"It will not fit." Trey said hesitantly.

"It will fit. You must apply sufficient pressure to complete the insertion." Icheb said with force.

"Father is going to be angry when he finds out." Trey said as he applied force.

"Perhaps. But it is my body, my choice." Icheb said firmly.

"It is in. How does it feel?" Trey asked with concern.

"I feel a sensation of tightness, but there is no discomfort." Icheb said carefully.

"Activate the implant so I can make the necessary adjustments." Trey said and picked up some delicate tools.

"How does it look?" Icheb asked with a note of concern.

"It is adjusted for me, therefore it looks wrong. Give me a moment to adjust the projector's properties." Trey said seriously.

"Thank you for doing this." Icheb said quietly.

"I understand your desire to look human. During my trip with father it was a comforting feeling to know that I looked the same as everyone else." Trey said as he worked.

"I hope Marie likes it." Icheb said absently.

"Is that why you're doing this?" Trey asked and stopped to look into Icheb's eyes.

"No. I wish to forego the appearance of those who created me to be a weapon and take the appearance of those who accepted me and helped me become the person I am... I just hope Marie likes the change." Icheb said seriously.

Trey nodded and continued to work.

"This would be easier with Robert's help. He has a talent for making these adjustments." Trey said as he continued to fine tune the holo-camouflage.

"I am concerned that his experience with the new bodily functions might have caused him discomfort or embarrassment." Icheb said seriously.

"Uncle Scott would have brought him home if it were a problem. Trust in his judgement." Trey said with assurance.

After a long minute of silence, Icheb said, "I hope father is not upset that we would not let him in."

"I think he believes that we are enjoying sexuality." Trey said with a slight blush.

Icheb's eyes went wide as he considered the implications of that.

"So he may not be angry when he sees your altered appearance, just relieved." Trey said and stood back to look at Icheb's new, 'human' face.

"Is it ready?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Yes, come look in the mirror." Trey said with a smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew returned to bed and lay beside Alan who awakened from the movement.

"What's going on out there love?" Alan asked in a dreamy, half asleep tone.

"Not much. Alex and Spike are in love. I used the medical tricorder to confirm that Spike is my brother. I think Dad and the blue naked woman are hitting it off, they're asleep in the living room. Jimmy had a growth spurt and outgrew his alcove... oh yeah, I think Trey and Icheb may be having sex in the attic." Andrew said seriously.

Alan thought about the words, and finally said, "Just a normal day huh?"

"Yeah. A few months ago this would have seemed weird."

"Weird is normal for us, love." Alan said in resignation.

"Is that why you're peeing on me?" Andrew asked suddenly.

"Oh god! I think the water just broke." Alan said in a panic.

Andrew grabbed some towels from their closet as he tried to think.

"We've got to get you to the MedLab... I'll port you... no I can't port the babies... I'll drive you... can you make it to the car? Oh gods..." Andrew said in panic.

"Love, calm down. Why don't you just get Hank and bring him here?" Alan asked as he tried to sop up the leaking fluid.

"Yeah. Hank. I'll be right back. Love you." Andrew said before he disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara awoke and turned to find Dawn looking at her.

"Do you still love me?" Tara asked quietly.

"Yeah. I do. It just hurts." Dawn said quietly.

"I know, please trust me, this is the way it's meant to be. Don't be angry." Tara pleaded.

"I can't help it. I love you. I don't want to think about you dieing and me living on without you."

"Then don't think about it. Enjoy today, leave tomorrow to take care of itself."

After a long soul searching gaze into Tara's eyes Dawn said, "I promise to try honey. I don't know how long it's going to hurt, but I'll try not to let it come between us. I *do* love you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew appeared in Hank's room to find Hank fast asleep.

"Hank. The babies. The water broke. Come quick." Andrew said in panic.

Hank's eyes snapped open and he tried to make sense of what Andrew was saying.

"Come on. The babies. They're coming." Andrew said, near hyperventilation.

"Allow me a moment to dress, perhaps you could get Tara for me, she might be able to assist. I'll meet you in the MedLab." Hank said calmly.

"Okay, I'll be right back." Andrew said and vanished.

"I'm sure you will."

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert carefully disentangled himself from Bobby and Ronny and went to the door of the tent.

When he opened the flap, he was amazed by the sight that greeted him.

"Bobby! Come look!" He said with excitement.

Bobby immediately awoke as did everyone else in the tent.

"What is it?"

"Everything is covered with frozen crystalline water. It's beautiful." Robert said in amazement.

"Yeah, it's beautiful. By March you'll probably be sick of seeing it. But the first snow of the year is always beautiful." Scott said as he looked out the tent door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew appeared in Tara and Dawn's room without warning.

"Tara, come quick. The babies. Alan's having the babies. Now!" Andrew said and vanished.

Tara automatically got up and began to get dressed.

"I'm not going." Dawn said quietly.

"What?" Tara asked and froze in mid movement.

"I'm not going with you. I just can't..." Dawn said with regret.

"Your nephews are being born. You have to be there." Tara said and continued to dress.

"No. If I have to look at Alan and Andrew... together... forever... I can't." Dawn said and buried her face into her pillow.

"Okay. I'll go. But remember that they didn't do this. I didn't ask them. I just did it. It's not their fault." Tara said as she pulled on her shoes.

"I know. But I still can't." Dawn said in a muffled voice through the pillow.

Tara looked regretfully at Dawn before she made her way to the MedLab.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on. Alan needs us." Andrew barked as Hank gathered the things he would probably need.

Tara ran into the MedLab and asked, "What can I do?"

"Just come with me. If I need something, I'll let you know." Hank said gently then asked Andrew, "Would you port us over?"

Andrew was in such a panic that he ported them and the examination table into his bedroom.

"Would you put that back? I've already lost one bed to your teleports." Hank said as he moved to Alan's side.

Andrew only vaguely understood what Hank was saying but managed to port the table away... somewhere.

After a cursory examination of Alan, Hank nodded.

"Just lie back. The babies are ready to be born. I'm just going to give them a little help." Hank said as he turned the babies gently into position.

"Tara, would you get the children, get everyone, I want them to see the babies born." Alan said quickly.

Alan's navel, which had been spread three centimeters wide to begin with, began to spread open to reveal the crown of the first baby's head.

The family came by ones and twos and stopped in wonder at the sight of the baby's head pushing through the small opening.

"Which one is it?" Andrew asked in panic.

"We'll know in a minute. The one with optic blasts is Chakotay." Alan said calmly as the baby's whole head came through the tight opening of Alan's navel.

Hank coaxed the baby free and asked, "Andrew, would you like to cut the cord?"

"Yeah." Andrew said shortly and cut the cord like an expert.

Hank handed the baby to Tara who wiped it off with some damp towels and wrapped it in a baby blanket.

"It looks like his brother is anxious to be born." Hank said in surprise as the second baby emerged without any coaxing from him at all.

The first baby began to cry and Tara said, "Uncle Hank, look at this."

Hank guided Andrew to take hold of his emerging child and went to Tara's side.

"The child seems to have a variation of Alan's optic blast." Hank said curiously as the red heat beam came from the screaming baby's mouth.

"Is he okay?" Andrew asked in panic as he pulled the second baby's legs free of Alan's abdomen.

"Just fine. His mutant ability is just not exactly as we expected." Hank said assuringly.

The second baby began to cry as Andrew handed him to Tara to wipe and wrap.

"Here is your son." Hank said and handed the baby to Alan. "Shhh Chakotay. I know it's scary out here, but everything will be fine." Alan crooned.

"And here is your other son." Hank said and handed the second baby to Alan.

As Alan cradled both babies on his chest, they both quieted.

"They missed each other." Andrew said with a tender smile.

"Everyone, come closer, meet Chakotay and Thomas." Andrew said proudly to the group of silent people.

"Those are our brothers." Trey said in wonder.

"Hank, something's happening." Alan said as he felt something pushing in his abdomen.

"Oh, Andrew, why don't you take the babies out to the living room where there's more room for everyone to see them while I take care of this." Hank said quickly.

"What's wrong?" Andrew asked in worry.

"Afterbirth." Hank whispered.

Andrew nodded and said, "Everyone. Come out to the living room and get to know the babies."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What? Just now? Oh, I'm sorry I missed it. We'll be right there." Scott said before hanging up the phone.

"What is it? Did something happen?" John asked with worry.

"Nothing bad. Robert's brothers were just born. I think we should get to the boathouse so we can see the newest members of the family." Scott said with a smile.

"My brothers?" Robert asked with surprise.

"Come on guys, help me break camp. This snow might make it difficult." Scott said as he began to pack up.

Bobby looked around and concentrated his power.

A moment later the snow began to swirl and flow like an ocean, then with one dramatic move of his arms, the snow all swept away from the campsite and settled around the edges.

"Thanks Bobby, I didn't know you could do that." Scott said in an impressed voice.

"I didn't either. Now let's go see the babies." Bobby said with a smile directed at Robert.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Father, look at this." William said as he watched Thomas crying and fussing.

"It's because he's not with Chakotay." Andrew said as he walked closer.

"No, watch." William said and pointed at the baby.

Then Andrew saw it. It was like watching the baby under a strobe light. He was in one position, then another, then another.

"What's causing that?" Andrew asked with concern.

"He is destabilizing time, but just for himself. He is generating intermittent tachions that are disrupting his temporal stability." Trey said as he watched.

"Can you stop it?" Andrew asked with worry.

"I can. I'll emit some anti-tachions to negate the effect." Jimmy said and moved his hand gently over the baby, about a foot away.

"It won't hurt him will it?" Andrew asked as he watched Thomas stop strobing.

"No, it will simply negate the temporal effect of his mutant ability." Jimmy said with assurance.

"Bring Chakotay over here so he'll stop crying." Andrew said to the children.

Alex and Spike carried Chakotay over and laid him beside his brother.

Both babies quieted again.

"They love each other." Janine said as she watched.

"Of course, that's what brothers do." Jimmy said with a smile.

"That's right mate." Spike said and spared a quick glance toward Andrew who was smiling at the words.

## **[Chapter 39: Firsts]**

"I believe the children are hungry. Who do you want to have the honor of 'first feeds'?" Hank asked Andrew as he and Alan walked from the bedroom.

"Dawn... where's Dawn?" Andrew asked, looking around.

"She... didn't come." Tara said shyly.

Andrew looked at Tara's shy, sad, downcast expression and came to a decision.

"Kids, go out to the car and gather all the baby things we brought home last night. Just stack them in here for now. I'm going to get the babies' Aunt Dawn so she can give her nephews their first meal." Andrew said before stepping into a portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Maybe you should be renamed 'snowblower'." John said in a half-teasing voice as Bobby cleared their path through the trees with his power.

"Do you know how close you are to getting an ice wedgie?" Bobby asked as he continued to move the snow from before the truck.

"Guys, before we get back, I just want to say thanks... I never really had friends before..." Ronny trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, I wish to thank you too." Robert said, still feeling stunned by the thought of his brothers being born.

"It's the same for all of us I think... including me. Guys, whatever happens, we need to stick together, watch out for each other." Scott said as he finally brought the truck back onto the road.

"Yeah. We will." Bobby said seriously.

"Ronny, have you figured out which school you want to go to?" Scott asked as the truck headed for the boathouse.

"I just want to be with you guys. If you're going to Xavier's then I will too." Ronny said timidly.

"Yeah, me too." John said with a nod.

"Good. I agree, it doesn't matter as long as you get to stay together." Scott said with a smile as they pulled into the driveway of the boathouse.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew appeared without warning before Dawn.

"Dawn, the babies were born. Please come with me." Andrew asked quietly.

"I can't." Dawn whispered with regret.

"I know it hurts, but your nephews... your family... they need you. Tell me what I can do... if you want me and Alan to stay away while you get to know them, we will." Andrew said with pleading in his voice.

Dawn looked at him with question.

"The babies are ready to receive their first feeding. I really want you to be the one who has that honor. You bought all the clothes, food, diapers and everything for them. Please don't turn your back on them... they need you." Andrew asked hopefully.

"Okay... open the portal... just... please don't talk about what happened last night... it hurts too much." Dawn said with desperation.

"Not a word." Andrew said and opened the portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Robert ran into the boathouse followed at a slower pace by the rest of the campers.

"Robert, come and meet your brothers." Alan said with a serene smile.

Robert walked close to his Dad and saw the two babies being cuddled close to him.

"They are beautiful... I have no words." Robert said in wonder at the tiny babies.

"Do you want to hold your brother Chakotay?" Alan asked quietly.

Robert nodded and held out his hands carefully.

"You need to support his head." Alan said quietly and shifted Chakotay into Robert's waiting arms gently.

Robert stood motionless holding his sleeping brother.

"William, would you like to hold Thomas?" Alan asked quietly.

William stepped forward and carefully took the offered baby to hold it close.

"You two, sit here. I need to talk to Icheb." Alan said as he got up off the couch.

William and Robert took their seats, never letting their gaze slip from the babies.

"Icheb, come with me." Alan said in a near whisper, so as not to disturb the babies.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn and Andrew walked into the boathouse to the scene of Robert and William holding their brothers as everyone else watched.

"Where's Alan?" Andrew asked quietly.

"In the kitchen talking to Icheb." Lee said as he remained focused on the babies.

"I'm going to get their food ready. Who wants to help me?" Dawn asked, forcing a smile onto her face.

"I will help." Jimmy said immediately.

"Me too." Janine said and ran to Dawn's side.

"Yeah, I need to know how to do this." Alex said as he walked to Dawn.

Spike followed Alex silently.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Will you explain to me why you look human?" Alan asked emotionlessly.

"I do not wish to look Bruhnalli anymore." Icheb said timidly.

"Andrew told me about the cartoon. I just want to be sure that you're doing this for the right reason." Alan said with concern.

"When I look at myself, I see the face that they created. I see the features of those who made me into a weapon. Choosing to keep their appearance is like honoring them and I do not wish to do that." Icheb said in thought.

"So this is your revenge?" Alan asked carefully.

"Perhaps, but it is more my way of honoring those who helped me become more than the Bruhnalli intended me to be." Icheb said quietly.

"Okay, I guess I can accept that. I just want to be sure that you're doing this for the right reasons." Alan said seriously.

"Am I?" Icheb asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, I think you are... I love you. I just want you to be happy. That's all." Alan said and pulled Icheb into a hug.

The kitchen door opened and Dawn entered followed by a group of people.

"You guys want to learn how to prepare the babies' food?" Dawn asked, carefully avoiding looking at Alan.

"Yes, thanks Dawn." Alan said quietly and continued to hold Icheb close to his side.

"Icheb? You're looking a lot more human today." Dawn said curiously as she gathered the things she would need.

"Yes Aunt Dawn... Do you like it?" Icheb asked hopefully.

"Yeah, you look great." Dawn said with a small smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

The group left the kitchen, led by Dawn.

"Who's hungry?" Dawn asked as she looked at the babies.

Thomas looked up at the movement and squinted his eyes at Dawn.

Her heart melted at the intent expression on the baby's face and she carefully took him from William's arms.

"Come here little guy, it's time for you to eat." Dawn said quietly as she brought Thomas close.

Alex handed Dawn the prepared bottle and watched as she fed Thomas.

He didn't seem to know what to do at first, but he figured it out after a minute and began to drink the milk hungrily.

"Whoa, little guy. You eat too fast and you'll get a tummy ache." Dawn said and took the bottle away from him.

Thomas began to scream as Dawn lifted him to the towel on her shoulder and began to pat him gently.

He screamed louder and suddenly Dawn realized that everything around her had stopped moving.

The only sound she could hear was Thomas' howling screams as she patted his back.

Finally he gave a little burp and she took the bottle from Alex who was frozen motionless.

As soon as Thomas had his bottle again, everyone started moving.

"What was that?" Alex said as the bottle seemed to suddenly disappear from his grasp.

"I think this little guy just stopped time for a few seconds." Dawn said with a tender smile directed at the baby.

"Jimmy? I thought you stopped him from doing that." Andrew asked curiously.

"I stopped him from strobing. He emitted a concentrated burst of tachions that resulted in a time disruption. My anti-tachions were insufficient to negate the effect." Jimmy said speculatively.

"Is there any way to stop him from doing that?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Not that I can think of. I can emit a larger dose of anti-tachions, but repeated exposure to large amounts of anti-tachion emissions could be harmful to biological organisms." Jimmy said, glancing at Trey who nodded in confirmation.

"Fine, we'll just try to keep him from having too many tantrums." Andrew said in thought.

"I think Chakotay wants to eat... or maybe he's missing his brother." Robert said as Chakotay was becoming restless.

"Give him here. Will someone burp Thomas while I feed Chakotay?" Dawn asked gently.

"I will." Janine said immediately.

Dawn sent a look of question to Alan who nodded.

Dawn carefully handed Thomas to Janine and asked, "Could someone get a towel for her? Chances are he's gonna spew when he burps."

Mystique grabbed one of many towels from the pile of baby supplies and handed it to Janine.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Thomas was burped, Lee asked if he could diaper him.

"Who wants a lesson in baby diapering?" Lee asked and carried Thomas to the coffee table.

All the children and most of the adults gathered and watched.

"Okay, here we go." Lee said and laid out the diaper beside the squirming baby.

"Just accept the fact, he's gonna hose you down every chance he gets. As soon as the old diaper comes off, he'll try to mark his territory." Lee said as he efficiently moved the baby onto the diaper and quickly covered the crotch.

"Did father do that to you?" Jimmy asked with a smile.

"More times than I can count." Lee said with a fond smile as he stuck the velcro tabs of the diaper.

"There we go, one diapered baby." Lee said proudly.

"Now we dress him." Xander said and grabbed a jumpsuit off the pile.

"That is too large for him." William said and grabbed a smaller version of the same thing.

Xander accepted the smaller jumper from William and went to Thomas' side.

Apparently Thomas thought it was a wonderful game as he kicked and flailed his arms and legs, effectively preventing Xander from getting the jumpsuit on him.

"I guess someone with depth perception needs to do this." Xander said in defeat and stood back.

"Remy do dis." Remy said and took the little piece of clothing from Xander.

Remy's quick reflexes and gentle nature prevailed to allow him to capture the squirming appendages and put them in the proper places until he finally got the baby dressed.

"May I dress Chakotay?" Trey asked hopefully.

"Go ahead." Andrew said and watched as Trey followed Remy's example and got the baby dressed.

"Andy, Hank, I need to talk to you for a minute." Alan said quietly and moved to the bedroom.

"Father, may I call Chris to let him know that my brothers have been born?" William asked with excitement.

"Yes, in fact, call everyone who was here for dinner yesterday. If they want to come visit, it'll be fine." Andrew said, then followed Alan and Hank into the bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What?" Chris asked in surprise.

"I'll ask my father if we can go now." Chris said and hung up the phone.

"Dad, William's brothers were just born! Can we go and see them?" Chris called as he ran into his father's bedroom.

Chris stopped in his tracks when he saw Julia and his father holding each other closely.

"It's okay if you come in Chris... but next time it might be better if you knocked and waited for me to answer before coming in." Angel said quietly, not wanting to sound harsh.

"Um, okay dad. I, um, I didn't know Julia stayed last night." Chris said with a blush.

"We were up late talking and it didn't make any sense for her to go home... are you okay with this?" Angel asked hopefully.

Chris looked at the peaceful smile on Julia's face and the hopeful look on his father's before saying, "It's great Dad... Do you want to go to William's house to see the babies?"

"Sure. Go get dressed and get your wheelchair." Angel said quietly.

"Awww Dad. I can walk." Chris whined.

"No, not that far you can't. I'll take you through the tunnels, and once we're there you can walk as long as you sit down whenever you need to." Angel said carefully.

"Okay." Chris said reluctantly and left the room.

"Where are we going?" Julia asked in a sleepy whisper.

"Just to the other side of the property. Alan and Andrew just had their babies." Angel said, then placed a gentle kiss on Julia's forehead.

"Andrew and Alan? Is that their mutation?" Julia asked as she brought herself to a sitting position.

"No, they traveled through time to the future and Alan had an appliance installed that made him able to carry their children." Angel said and pulled Julia into an embrace.

"I think we'd better get ready to go. Your son is liable to leave without us if we don't hurry." Julia said with a chuckle.

"Our son will wait for us if we ask him to. He is a good boy." Angel said and gave Julia a gentle kiss.

"Then let's get ready so 'our' son doesn't have to wait. A good boy deserves some indulgences." Julia said lovingly.

"Right you are." Angel said and got out of the bed.

He extended a hand to help Julia up. When they were both standing, he pulled her close and gave her a full deep kiss filled with love.

Finally the kiss broke and Julia looked into Angel's eyes and said, "Good morning."

\* \* \* \* \*

Aunt Vada hung up the phone and went back to her kitchen, deep in thought.

The doorbell rang and she hurried to answer it.

"Stevie, Evelyn... it's so good to see you." Vada said with genuine affection.

"Just a second Aunt Vada." Steve said and ran back to the car.

"Where's he going?" Vada asked Evelyn curiously.

"Just look." Evelyn said with a tender smile.

"Lacie?" Vada asked in surprise as she saw Stevie helping an elderly woman from his car.

"Vada, oh it's good to see you." Lacie said as she carefully walked at Stevie's side.

"Lacie, come to the garage and you'll only have to come up one step." Vada said hurriedly as she retreated back into the house.

"She was always the most thoughtful woman." Lacie said as she and Stevie changed direction.

The garage door opened and Vada walked out to take Lacie's other arm and help her up the single step.

"I thought you were in Atlanta dear, what brings you here?" Vada asked as the group walked into the living room.

"Stevie mentioned that he saw you and I said that I'd like to visit... next thing I know he's driven all the way down to Atlanta, picked me up and brought me back here to visit with you." Lacie said with a look of adoration at her son.

"Oh Stevie, that was so sweet of you." Vada said and walked over to give him a kiss on the top of his head.

"Thanks Aunt Vada." Steve said shyly.

"I wasn't expecting you till lunch." Vada said as she took her seat.

"I know, but we may need to leave early for me to get Mom home at a decent hour." Steve said with apology.

"Oh my poor dear, you're going to be driving all night aren't you." Vada said with concern.

"Mom's worth it." Steve said shyly.

"Stevie said you were in his courtroom with a gay couple. What was that about?" Lacie asked curiously.

"They're sweet boys, Remy and Xander." Vada said with a smile, then said, "Maggie filled out an organ donor's card, so when she died her eyes went to Remy who was completely blind."

"How horrible, how was he blinded?" Evelyn asked with concern.

"From what I could gather, some mutant hating fanatics captured him and cut out his eyes." Vada said in a pained voice.

"How awful. I never imagined." Steve said, remembering the two men he had married.

"I went to visit them yesterday in Westchester... such a lovely family. They remind me of how I was brought up." Vada said with a fond smile.

"How so?" Judge Hawkes asked curiously.

"There are six children living there, orphans who were adopted into the Summers family. All of them are so happy and loving... I can't imagine a better place for Marguerite to be raised." Vada said with a distant look.

"If she's going to be the youngest of seven children, she's going to be spoiled rotten." Lacie said with a chuckle.

"No, just before you arrived I got a call. Two babies were just born into the family, less than an hour ago. Even though they won't be related, they'll be like her brothers." Vada said with a smile.

"How perfect. Several older children to watch out for her. Two brothers her own age to relate to... it seems the perfect place for her to be raised." Lacie said in thought.

"Yes, and I've done some investigation into their past... for the sake of the adoption... Alexander Wainwright is extremely wealthy. Marguerite won't have to worry about wanting for anything." Steve said seriously.

"Yes, but he lives modestly. He and Remy live in the house with the Summers family because they are such close friends that they have become a part of the family." Vada said peacefully.

"I had wondered about that. I thought they might just be eccentric." Steve said honestly.

"No. They recognize the importance of family and don't let the money get in the way of their happiness." Vada said with a smile.

"What a blessing, to have the money to provide for the family and the wisdom to put the family first." Evelyn said dreamily.

"Well said Evie." Lacie said with a smile.

"So they called you when the babies were born... I can't think of any better proof that you really are part of their family." Steve said peacefully.

"Oh yes. I was greeted with enthusiasm when I arrived. They introduced me to everyone, family and visitors as their Aunt Vada. I was fed the most wonderful meal, prepared by Remy. There was a little family crisis, they included me in their discussion and listened to my opinions. Then we went

to the hospital to visit Marguerite. There is no doubt whatsoever that I am a part of the family." Vada said with joy.

"Oh Vada, I'm so happy for you. Being in Atlanta, I know how lonely it can be. I'm glad you've found a family." Lacie said with moisture forming in her eyes.

"Mom, you know you can come live with us anytime you want." Steve said honestly.

"I know Stevie, but you and Evelyn need to have your own lives. I just can't take care of myself anymore. I know you would try and care for me but you don't need that kind of burden and I'm really happy at the assisted living center. It's just that Vada's new family... it sounds nice. Like it used to be with all the aunts and uncles and parents and grandparents and kids living within a few blocks of each other all their lives." Lacie said in a dreamy voice.

"That's exactly what it's like. The entire community is like an extended family... Stevie, how would you feel about doing some more driving?" Vada asked with a smile.

"Actually, I'll do the driving. He needs to rest for his trip to Atlanta tonight." Evelyn said quickly.

"Thanks Evie. If you wouldn't mind, we could go to visit Marguerite, then go to see the new babies in Westchester." Aunt Vada suggested hopefully.

"I don't mind, but don't you think you should call to let them know we're coming?" Steve asked carefully.

"Stevie... they're family."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just now? Have you called Kurt yet?" Warren asked excitedly.

"Then I'll tell him. Thanks for calling William." Warren said quickly and hurried to dress before leaving to tell Kurt.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Peter, the babies were just born." William said hurriedly into the phone.

After a moment of stunned silence, Peter said, "Are you sure?"

William stopped and thought about the question.

Bobby noticed William's puzzled look and took the phone from him.

"Pete, Robert's brothers were just born. You've got to come and see them." Bobby said hurriedly.

"I have some things I have to do first..." Peter began to say.

"Pete.. that can wait. Come and see the babies." Bobby said firmly.

"Very well." Peter said in resignation.

"I'll see you in a few minutes." Bobby said and hung up the phone.

"Thank you Bobby, his response confused me." William said quietly.

"No problem, I think Pete was a little preoccupied." Bobby said in thought.

William nodded, then said, "I must call Mr. Howlett."

"Okay, I need to talk to your Uncle Scott."

Bobby walked to Scott and quietly asked, "Scott, can I talk to you for a minute? I've got a little problem."

"Sure Bobby, come into the dining room where we can have some privacy." Scott said quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Andy, Hank... I want to have Joyce right away." Alan said seriously.

"But you just gave birth, you should give yourself time to recover." Andrew said with concern.

"The artificial womb did all the work. I just had to carry them around. Andy, do you remember why we chose to have the twins so soon?" Alan asked carefully.

"Because our lives move so quickly that you didn't want the chance taken away from us." Andrew answered quietly.

"Right... Hank, is there any reason that I can't get pregnant again right away?" Alan asked with concern.

"No, no medical reason." Hank said quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a moment Scott and Bobby were in the dining room and Scott quietly asked, "What's wrong Bobby?"

"It's Pete, I'm worried about him." Bobby said nervously.

"What's wrong with Peter?" Scott asked with immediate worry.

"I think he's got a problem... I invited him to go camping last night, and he was..." Bobby trailed off, not knowing how to phrase it.

"He was what?" Scott asked.

"Jacking off." Bobby muttered.

After a long moment of silence, Scott said, "So?"

"Scott, you're not getting it. I invited Pete to go camping with us, but he said he wanted to stay in... Just now he tried to put off coming to see the babies... I think he's got a problem. I mean, spanking the monkey is fun and everything but he's not doing anything else." Bobby said, his worry overriding his embarrassment.

Scott thought about the words and finally said, "Bobby, I can see that you're worried about Peter. Thanks for telling me. I'll keep my eyes open and if it's a problem, I'll deal with it. If you're right, he needs his friends to stand by him."

Bobby nodded and said, "I won't mess with him about it. But I'm afraid if I don't say anything about it, he's going to think it's okay."

"Bobby, please let me handle this. It's possible that you're misreading the situation. Just be his friend... no matter what his problem is, that's the best thing that you can do right now." Scott said seriously.

Bobby nodded and said, "Thanks Scott. I just want Pete to be okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mr. Howlett, this is William Summers. I just wanted to inform you that my brothers were born this morning and invite you to come and see them." William said happily.

"Thank you for calling me William. It seems that I've become a part of the family without trying." Ken said with a chuckle.

"Yes. We all think of you as our family." William said seriously.

Ken stopped laughing and thought about the words. Finally he said, "I'll be there as soon as I can. Thank you again for calling."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter hesitantly knocked on the boathouse door.

"Hi Peter." Scott said with a gentle smile.

"I am here to see the new babies." Peter said shyly.

"That can wait for a minute, would you come with me right now?" Scott asked seriously.

Peter nodded and followed Scott into the dining room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you ready?" Angel asked as he and Julia walked into the main room.

"Yes, can we go now?" Chris asked hopefully.

"Sure... but there's been a slight change in plans." Angel said with a smile.

At Chris' look of question, Angel continued, "We don't have to use the tunnels anymore... Thanks to Julia, I can walk in the light."

"Really?" Chris asked with excitement.

"Really. Julia, would you mind driving us to the boathouse? I don't think Chris' wheelchair will make the trip through the snow very well." Angel asked with a loving smile.

"I wouldn't mind at all." Julia said tenderly.

"Then I'll push you down to Julia's car. We'll bring the chair in case you need it." Angel said as the three left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just lay down and I'll get the things we need." Andrew said with a look of tenderness in his eyes.

"May I ask, why is it so important to have your next child right away?" Hank asked curiously.

"Because so many things happen to us, so quickly, if we don't have her right away, something might happen so we would never have her." Alan said seriously.

"I understand. If anyone else had said that, I would believe it to be a sign of paranoia. But in your case, it just seems to be that the natural course of events is chaotic conditions." Hank said softly.

"Are we ready?" Andrew asked as he walked to the bed holding the necessary implements.

"Yeah Andy. Let's do it." Alan said and exposed his navel.

"Whoa, look at that." Andrew said as the device slipped into Alan's navel easily.

"Is it done?" Alan asked with surprise.

"Yeah love. You're pregnant again." Andrew said with a tender smile.

"Thanks for not fighting me on this Andy." Alan said peacefully.

"I understand love. I want her too." Andrew said with affection.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello again Aunt Vada, I didn't expect to see you again today." The nurse said happily.

"Hello Serena, I'd like you to meet my friends Steve and Evelyn and one of my oldest friends, Lacie. Everyone, this is Serena. She's been taking care of Marguerite since she was born." Vada said with a smile.

"How are Remy and Xander today?" Serena asked as she walked with them down the hall toward the nursery.

"They are with Andrew and Alan and their twin boys who were born this morning." Vada said proudly.

"Oh that's wonderful. Are the babies okay?" Serena asked hopefully.

"They are perfectly healthy. We'll be going to see them as soon as we've visited Marguerite." Vada said with a gentle smile.

"I think Dr. Ross is with Marguerite right now. He'll probably be done in just a minute, I'll let him know you're here." Serena said and left them in the waiting area of the natal ward.

"Does everyone know you here?" Steve asked with a teasing smile.

"Yes, most everyone does. I've spent enough time here since Marguerite was born that I should have my own chair." Vada said with a smile.

"Aunt Vada! It's good to see you." A husky black woman said and pulled Vada into a hug.

"Maybeline. How are you? How's your boy doing?" Vada asked from the hug.

"Oh he's just fine. I heard from him three days ago. Here I was all worried about him being shipped out and it turns out that he's on a supply ship about a thousand miles from any fighting." Maybeline said with a chuckle of relief.

"Oh that's wonderful news dear. I'm so glad to hear that he's safe." Vada said honestly.

"Where are Remy and Xander today?" Maybeline asked curiously.

"They're celebrating a birth with their family, but I'll wager that they'll be here before the sun sets." Vada said with certainty.

"No wager. They haven't missed a day yet. They'll be here." Maybeline said seriously.

"That's right dear, oh goodness. Where are my manners? Maybeline, this is Lacie Hawkes, her son Steve and his wife Evelyn. This is nurse Maybeline, she works the desk in the natal ward." Vada said with a smile.

"Good to meet you all. Let me go find out what's keeping Dr. Ross. He thinks he's in charge of this ward, but the rest of us know better." Maybeline said conspiratorially.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Peter, Bobby suspects something. I think you need to tell him the truth." Scott said quietly.

"I cannot. There is no way he will understand." Peter said with anguish.

"Peter, he cares about you. He came to me because he thought you had a problem... i think he needs to know." Scott said seriously.

Peter thought about Scott's words and nodded.

"Do you want me to be there when you tell him?" Scott asked quietly.

"I can't tell him... It was just so good to have a friend that I didn't want it to end." Peter said sadly.

"He might surprise you Peter." Scott said, hoping Bobby would prove him right.

"Will you tell him for me? I cannot find the words." Peter said nervously.

"Sure Peter. Let's go see the babies and then I'll tell him." Scott said softly.

## **[Chapter 40: Variations]**

"Father, there is a large truck in front of the house." Icheb said through the bedroom door.

Andrew, Alan and Hank walked out of the bedroom in time to see the first boxes being hauled into the living room.

"What's all this?" Andrew asked with surprise.

"Cribs, changing tables, playpens, bassinets, swings... baby stuff." Dawn said as she carefully took stock of what was being brought in.

"What are two babies going to do with all this stuff?" Andrew asked as more and more boxes were unloaded.

"Three babies... And some of this stuff is for the mansion. It just made sense to have it all delivered where the majority was going, rather than deal with separate shipping instructions for every single thing I bought." Dawn said seriously.

"Okay... I don't know what we're going to do with all this stuff. I don't even know what some of these things are." Andrew said in an overwhelmed voice.

"Dawn, would you mind if I took Andrew and Alan out of here for a few minutes?" Lee asked quietly.

"Would you please?" Dawn asked hopefully.

Lee nodded then said, "Robert, watch out for Chakotay. William, watch out for Thomas. Your fathers and I will be in the bedroom for a few minutes if you need anything."

Robert and William nodded as they held their brothers close.

"Misty, would you help me?" Lee asked hopefully.

Mystique looked surprised for a moment, but quickly covered it and walked to Lee's side.

"You get Alan, I'll get Andrew." Lee said and took hold of Andrew's arm to gently guide him to the bedroom.

"I can't, the babies..." Andrew began to say.

"The babies are fine. Their brothers are watching out for them and they'll call us if there is any problem." Lee said with assurance.

Finally, after a few stops and starts, they were able to make it into the bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Bobby, would you come here for a minute?" Scott asked from the dining room doorway.

"Um, sure." Bobby said, glancing at Peter who was looking at the babies.

"Sit down." Scott said absently as he closed the dining room doors.

"What is it? Is it about Pete?" Bobby asked with worry.

"Yes. He gave his permission for me to talk to you about this." Scott said with difficulty.

"What is it Scott? You're freaking me out here." Bobby said in worry.

"Tell me about Peter. How would you describe him... as a person?" Scott asked slowly.

"Um... big... definitely big. Friendly... honest... shy sometimes, but not always." Bobby said in thought.

Scott smiled at the description, finally he asked, "What about his organization?"

"Oh yeah, I guess he's organized, just like you and Warren." Bobby said with a slight nod.

"You don't know how good it is to hear that you think of Peter that way... he's been working with the Professor to overcome a disorder, an obsessive-compulsive disorder, for the past three years." Scott said quietly.

"Oh... I never noticed." Bobby said in thought.

"He's much better than he used to be. He was almost unable to leave his room when he first arrived... but he still has times when it's a problem for him." Scott said gently.

"So he didn't want to go camping with us because he was... what?" Bobby asked in confusion.

"Peter has a need for routine. Certain things need to be done in a certain order. A disruption in his order throws him into chaos, his reaction can be anything from depression to what might be classified as a seizure because it's so powerful." Scott said with worry.

"Then how did he come to lunch yesterday?" Bobby asked curiously.

"I don't know. I was surprised to see him come back from running with you. I guess he has good days and bad days. He must have been having an exceptional day to agree to break his routine and come to lunch." Scott finished with a shrug.

Bobby nodded and thought.

"He's afraid he's going to lose you as a friend because of this." Scott said into the silence.

"Why would he think that?" Bobby asked immediately.

"Because it's happened before." Scott said quietly.

"Oh." Bobby whispered.

"So what do you think?" Scott asked, hoping for a good reaction.

"I think I need to talk to Pete... Would you mind asking him to come in here?" Bobby asked as he looked at Scott with concern.

"Sure Bobby." Scott said and got up from the table.

"Thanks for telling me Scott." Bobby said gently.

"It was Peter's choice to tell you." Scott said in response.

"I know, but thank you for doing it for him." Bobby said with a gentle smile.

Scott nodded as he left to get Peter.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Aunt Vada, you're in awfully early." Dr. Ross said as he shook her hand.

"Yes. I had some early visitors today and we wanted to visit Marguerite before we go to Westchester." Vada said happily.

"Oh, you're going to see Xander and Remy?" Dr. Ross asked with interest.

"Yes. Two new babies were born into the household and we're going to pay our respects. This is Lacie, Steve and Evelyn Hawkes." Vada said kindly.

"A pleasure to meet you. If you'll follow me, we can visit Marguerite together." Dr. Ross said as he led the way.

"How is she doing?" Vada asked immediately.

"Extremely well. With the proper care, she could leave the hospital today." Dr. Ross said simply.

"Excuse me Dr., but what kind of care would that be?" Steve asked carefully.

"Just someone with a delicate touch since she's so small and someone attentive who can stay with her." Dr. Ross said and opened the door into a small lounge.

"Have a seat and I'll be back in a second." Dr. Ross said and walked through another door.

"What are you up to Steve?" Evelyn asked curiously.

"Aunt Vada, do you think Remy and Xander would be able to give her the proper care she needs?" He asked curiously.

"Yes. I'm certain of it." Vada said with a swell of excitement.

"Then maybe we should bring Xander and Remy a surprise when we visit." Steve said with a smile.

"Oh Stevie, that would be wonderful. And that would be like all three babies being born on the same day." Vada said joyfully.

"Here she is." Dr. Ross said as he carried the tiny bundled form of Marguerite into the lounge.

"She's so small, are you sure she can leave the hospital?" Steve asked in awe of the tiny baby.

"She's small, but she's strong. This little girl has more fight in her than just about any patient I've had." Dr. Ross said with admiration.

"That's my granddaughter." Vada said proudly.

"Would you like to hold her?" Dr. Ross asked Steve carefully.

"I'm afraid I'll hurt her." Steve said in a whisper.

"Just cradle her... you'll do fine." Dr. Ross said with a smile.

Steve carefully took the tiny baby into his hands. Her tiny eyes opened and he was immediately in love with the tiny angel.

"Look at her, oh Evelyn, look at her." Steve said in a gasping breath of wonder.

"She's gorgeous. Oh Vada, what a beautiful little girl." Evelyn said in awe.

"Hello Sweet Pea, your grandma is here again." Vada said and brushed the tiny baby's cheek with her finger.

"Will Remy and Xander know what to do if we bring her home?" Evelyn asked with concern.

Dr. Ross gave a curious look toward Aunt Vada.

"Dr. Ross, Stevie is also known as Judge Hawkes, the man who is overseeing Marguerite's adoption." Vada said gently.

"I've seen your name on some paperwork... and I think Remy and Xander mentioned how you helped them speed up the adoption." Dr. Ross said in memory.

"Yes, well, if you were serious about Marguerite being able to leave the hospital today and would be willing to let me take her to Xander and Remy, then I'll file the official paperwork and make it all legal in the morning." Steve said as he kept his gaze fixed on Marguerite.

Dr. Ross nodded in thought, then said, "To answer your question, Xander and Remy have been here and helped care for her enough that they know what to do."

"Good... I don't have a car seat." Steve said suddenly.

"She wouldn't fit in one anyway. You'll need to carry her just the way you're doing." Dr. Ross said with a smile.

"Oh. Thank you Doctor... does this mean we can take her with us?" Steve asked in surprise.

"Aunt Vada will need to sign her out at the desk. As far as I'm aware, she's still the baby's legal guardian. But then... yes. I'll have Serena gather a few things to take with you... diapers and things." Dr. Ross said and walked out of the room.

"May I?" Evelyn asked and held out her hands.

Steve carefully handed the tiny baby to Evelyn and saw the rightness of how she looked holding a baby.

Evelyn glanced up and saw the look in her husband's eyes.

"Yes." She said in a near whisper as peace and joy radiated out from her.

Vada and Lacie looked at each other as Lacie said, "Well it looks like I'm *finally* going to be a grandmother. I was afraid I was going to have to sit him down and have 'the talk' with him again since it didn't seem to take the first time."

Vada chuckled and said, "Look at them. They'll be perfect parents."

"Thank you dear, I think you're right." Lacie said as she watched her son and his wife with Marguerite.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter walked into the dining room hesitantly.

"Hi Pete. Will you talk with me for a minute?" Bobby asked carefully.

Peter nodded and took a seat at the table.

"Scott didn't give me any details, and I don't really need any. I just need for you to tell me the truth." Bobby said seriously.

Again, Peter nodded.

"He said you need routine... like the running." Bobby began and Peter nodded in confirmation.

"Would it be possible for me to, like, follow along with you one day? I mean, so I could understand your routine?" Bobby asked carefully.

Peter got a look of horror at the thought.

"Pete, I'm not demanding anything. I'm your friend and I want to understand this so I can, I dunno, work around it, or share it with you, or something." Bobby said hopefully.

Peter looked at Bobby in shock, so Bobby continued, "Will you tell me what you need to be doing right now?"

"It is time for me to prepare to run." Peter said quietly.

"Okay, hold on for a second." Bobby said and jumped up.

Peter just watched as Bobby walked out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott walked into the living room to find everyone milling around looking at the boxes that nearly filled the room.

"Where is all this stuff going to go?" Scott asked the room.

"Some to Andrew's room, some to Xander's room and some to the mansion." Dawn said seriously.

"Okay. How much needs to be assembled?" Scott asked as he noticed that many of the boxes were suspiciously flat.

"Most of them." Dawn said seriously.

"Alright. Do you mind if we start?" Scott asked Dawn, who seemed to be in charge.

"No, that's a good idea." Dawn said with a note of relief.

"Do you have the invoice?" Scott asked as he surveyed the room.

"Right here." Dawn said and handed it to him.

"Right... Icheb, will you work with Xander, Remy, Alex and Spike to carry the things for Marguerite upstairs. When you get it there, start assembly and put things where they're going to go. Dawn can tell you which boxes are yours." Scott said with authority.

"If you can find me a marker, I'll mark an 'X' on their boxes." Dawn said.

Trey immediately ran into the kitchen and came back with a large marker.

"Trey, Jimmy, Janine and your fathers can move things into Andrew's room and do the same. Those boxes will be marked with an 'A'." Scott said to Trey.

Trey nodded.

"Robert and William can continue to tend to the babies for a while longer." Scott said, looking at the two boys holding their brothers.

"John and Ronny, will you help me move the things for the mansion over by the door? Dawn can mark those things with an 'M'." Scott said and received a nod from both boys.

"Once the boxes are all marked, Dawn and Tara can go through the bags of clothes and separate them into piles." Scott said in their direction.

Tara nodded with confidence.

"Okay, let's do it." Scott said and walked to the first box.

"That one goes to Andrew's room." Dawn said and quickly marked an 'A' on the side.

"What of these?" Trey asked from beside a stack of diapers.

"Put one in your father's room, the rest can go to the basement till we need them... and everyone, break down your boxes and store the flattened cardboard in the basement." Scott said to the room.

Bobby came out of the dining room and walked to Robert for a moment.

Robert shook his head and whispered to Bobby with an expression of regret.

Scott walked over to them and asked, "What's up Bobby?"

"It's time for Pete to go running. I just wanted to see if Robert could join us." Bobby said quietly.

"Robert, if you want to go, someone else can watch your brother while you're gone." Scott said honestly.

Robert had a look of indecision.

"I think your brothers and sister would like to get a turn at taking care of the babies too. Go ahead." Scott said with a smile.

"Thank you Uncle Scott." Robert said quietly, so as not to wake his brother.

"Jimmy, would you like to take a turn at holding Chakotay?" Scott asked Jimmy as he was rushing by.

"Yes, I would like that very much." Jimmy said with excitement.

"Robert, give Chakotay to your brother and get ready to go running." Scott said peacefully.

Robert did so and walked with Bobby back to the dining room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Andy, Alan, you've got to realize that you've got a huge family here. This isn't all on your shoulders." Lee said seriously.

"But they're our kids." Andrew said immediately.

"Yes, but everyone is going to help care for them." Lee said firmly.

Andrew nodded.

"If you stress yourselves out, you're not helping anyone and you might end up making it harder for people to help you. Let the people around you help and just jump in where you're needed." Lee said seriously.

"How do you know about all this Dad?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Because when you were born, I took care of you. Your mom wasn't very... nurturing. And I nearly drove myself to a nervous breakdown before I asked for help. You don't have to ask... everyone is offering. All you have to do is accept it." Lee said and automatically put an arm around Mystique as he spoke.

"Thanks dad. You're right." Andrew said as Alan nodded in agreement.

"Of course, I'm a father." Lee said with a teasing smile.

There was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Come in." Alan said in a moderate tone.

"May I come in and start assembly of this sleeping unit?" Trey asked hesitantly.

"Sure, when it's done, just put it by the dresser over there... dad, would you help me move the dresser over a little so there's room for both the cribs?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"Of course son." Lee said happily.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bobby and Robert walked into the dining room to find Peter sitting with a look of anxiety.

"Pete, Robert and I can go running with you if you want." Bobby said seriously.

A smile came over Peter's face and he said, "Thank you Bobby."

"Yeah, no prob. Go on and get ready and we'll do the same. When should we meet you at the track?" Bobby asked carefully.

"Will one hour give you enough time?" Peter asked carefully.

"Yeah, that'll be fine." Bobby said with a smile.

"I will see you then." Peter said and hurried to leave the room.

"Pete, just a second." Bobby called quickly.

Peter turned and looked at Bobby with question.

"Can I tell Robert?" Bobby asked hopefully.

Peter looked at Robert who was standing next to Bobby, looking back curiously.

Finally Peter said, "If you like, but please tell no one else."

"I promise Pete, I'll never tell anyone without your permission." Bobby said as a vow.

"Thank you." Peter said with a smile before he left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Warren and Kurt arrived at the boathouse to what seemed to be chaos.

Janine let them in, then went back to whichever duty she had been assigned.

"What's going on? This is a madhouse." Warren asked as he looked at people carrying boxes up the stairs, cardboard down the stairs, bags of baby clothes being stacked in various piles. In the midst of it all were William and Jimmy holding two sleeping babies.

Kurt walked to the boys and said, "May I hold one of ze babies?"

William nodded and carefully handed Thomas to Kurt.

"What is his name?" Kurt asked in a whisper.

"Thomas Ahnikan Summers." William said in an answering whisper.

"May I?" Warren asked in front of Jimmy.

Jimmy nodded and handed Chakotay to Warren.

"This is Chakotay B'Elan Summers." Jimmy said proudly.

"They're beautiful. Perfect little babies." Warren said as he held Chakotay close.

"Yes, they have exceeded my expectations." William said with a tender look at his brothers.

"What's going on here? What's everyone doing?" Warren asked as he looked at all the people rushing around.

"They are relocating the things for the babies and assembling the things that need it." Jimmy said seriously.

"Do you need any help?" Kurt asked.

"Uncle Scott is coordinating the activities. He is in my fathers' bedroom." William said as Kurt handed Thomas back to him.

"Let's go see if we can help." Warren said and handed Chakotay back to Jimmy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angel walked up to the door with Chris on one side and Julia on the other.

He knocked gently and the door was answered by a blue naked woman.

"Hello? I'm here to see the babies." Angel said in confusion.

"They're in the living room." Mystique said and stood back.

"I don't think we've met. I'm Angel." he said cautiously.

"I am Mystique." She said simply and led the way to the babies.

"Chris!" William said with hushed excitement.

"Hello William. We came to see your new brothers." Chris said happily.

"Would you like to hold him? His name is Thomas." William said with a smile.

Chris nodded and sat beside William.

"Just make sure you hold his head." William said with caution.

"May I?" Julia asked and immediately received a baby in her arms.

"His name is Chakotay." Jimmy said proudly.

"That's a curious name... but he's a beautiful baby." Julia said as she cuddled the baby close.

"Where is your father?" Angel asked curiously.

"Either my father or my dad look out that door every five point two seconds." William said and pointed to the bedroom door, just as Andrew poked his head out to see how the babies were doing.

Angel and Julia both laughed as Andrew and Alan came into the living room.

"How are we doing out here?" Andrew asked curiously as he held close to Alan.

"Just fine... but I think this little guy is ready for a diaper change." Julia said quietly.

"Okay, I can take care of that." Andrew said calmly.

"Father, may I do it? I watched Grandfather carefully." Jimmy said hopefully.

"Okay, go ahead." Andrew said with a smile as Julia handed the baby to Jimmy.

"There is a changing table in the bedroom. The wipes and powder and fresh diapers are all right there." Andrew said simply.

"Thank you father." Jimmy said and carried his brother into the bedroom.

"Aren't you going to supervise?" Angel asked curiously.

"No. My father is in there and he's a diapering expert. If Jimmy has any problems, my dad can handle it." Andrew said calmly.

A moment later Jimmy came out of the bedroom, dripping wet and sputtering.

"Where's Chakotay?" Andrew asked with immediate worry.

"Grandfather is completing the diapering. I must go to my alcove for sonic cleansing." Jimmy said darkly.

"I'm sure you're only the first of many who will be christened in the coming months." Andrew said as Jimmy went downstairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Who's the woman with your dad?" William asked quietly.

"Her name is Julia... I think she's going to be my new mom." Chris whispered in return.

"Let me know what it's like to have a mother. I have no memory of having one." William said seriously.

"So far it's great. She loves my dad and has been really nice to me." Chris said frankly.

"That is good. I am happy for you." William said, looking toward the bedroom door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How did you do that?" Alex asked curiously.

"Do what?" Trey asked as he worked on the second crib.

"Build the changing table and crib so fast? Remy and Xander just barely figured out how to get the boxes opened." Alex said as he looked around the room.

"Uncle Alex, I was on the engineering staff of Voyager. The assembly of furniture poses little challenge." Trey said as he quickly put the last screw in place.

"Could you go up and help them when you get a chance?" Alex asked hopefully.

"Of course, I will go now. Janine can complete this." Trey said and followed Alex.

## **[Chapter 41: All Together]**

"Remy, would you put this one together? The instructions are written in French." Xander asked hopefully.

"Oui. Xander take over dis one. Dere be twelve types of screws an dey all look de same in de drawings." Remy said in frustration.

"How are you doing lcheb?" Xander asked as he traded places with Remy.

"I am amazed. There are one hundred twenty two pieces, seven types of screws, and yet there is only one tool and a small tube of glue needed for assembly and one single sided page of instructions." lcheb said as he worked.

"Yeah... amazing." Xander said flatly as he looked at the changing table Remy had been working on.

"Uncle Alex suggested that I might be able to help." Trey said as he entered the room.

"Don't they need you downstairs?" Xander asked.

"No... they will be able to complete assembly without me." Trey said as he surveyed the situation.

"Well, maybe you can do something with this." Xander said in frustration.

"Yes. Could you do something to help me?" Trey asked carefully.

"Sure, just name it." Xander said enthusiastically.

"Go to the basement and get a package of diapers, then get supplies from Aunt Dawn for the changing table." Trey said as he began to assemble the changing table.

"Okay, we'll be right back." Xander said cheerfully, glad to be away from his chore.

"lcheb, assemble the base structure in figure one. Disregard all else until that is complete." Trey said as he quickly screwed pieces into place.

lcheb did as he was told and the assembly of the crib was quickly underway.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What did you ask for permission to tell me?" Robert asked curiously.

"Pete has a thing, like a disorder or something. He needs to do things to keep his life in order. If things go out of order, it bothers him." Bobby said as they hurriedly walked to the mansion.

"I do not understand." Robert said with concern.

"I don't understand completely, but I guess it's like when you get used to doing something a certain way. Doing it a different way feels wrong. But he feels it a whole lot worse... it makes him sick." Bobby said carefully.

"Perfection through order." Robert said absently.

"What's that?" Bobby asked curiously.

"That is what the Borg professed to bring to those they assimilated." Robert said in thought.

"Tell me about it." Bobby said with interest.

"The Borg belief is that perfection, peace, tranquillity, harmony, quality of life... all good things... can be achieved through order." Robert said in thought.

"I guess there's a part of Pete that's like that." Bobby said speculatively.

"Perhaps he needs to understand that the randomness of life is what gives it flavor and makes it something beyond a repetition of occurrences." Robert said seriously.

"I agree with you, but we aren't going to try and convince Pete of anything. Whatever happened to him isn't his choice, it's the way he is. It would be wrong for us to try and change him. If he asks for our help, we'll give it. But Scott was right, the best thing we can do for Pete right now is be his friends." Bobby said firmly.

"I understand. I believe I can relate to some of what he is feeling due to my experience with the Borg. But I will not attempt to convince him to be anything but an individual." Robert said with certainty.

"That's good. Let's go get ready to run." Bobby said as they reached the mansion.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid I have duties that demand my immediate attention. I will tell Matt that the babies were born." Hank said as he started to walk toward the door.

"Thanks for everything Hank. Will you come back later for lunch? It isn't going to be anything fancy but I'd like to get the family together and have kind of a celebration." Andrew asked quietly.

"Yes, barring unforeseen circumstances, I will be here... and I could bring something back for Matt when I'm finished." Hank finished in a speculative voice.

"Great idea. Let him know we're all thinking about him. I'd bring the babies to visit him but they can't port and I don't want to take them out in the snow." Alan said with a warm smile.

"If all goes well, he will be able to see them himself in less than two days." Hank said happily.

"Oh, that would be great. Tell him that when he gets out, he's invited over here to visit." Andrew said firmly.

"I will tell him. I will see you at lunch. Have a good day." Hank said and was stopped by a hand.

"If you're going to Logan, can I go with you?" Ronny asked hopefully.

"Of course, I would enjoy the company." Hank said with a gentle smile.

"Me too?" John asked hopefully.

"Yes, come along so we can visit with Matt." Hank said and led the boys out of the boathouse.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Look at all these people." Julia said in amazement.

"They're a family... my family. They accept me as I am." Angel said in thought.

"I'm so glad. I can't imagine how lonely it must be to feel so different." Julia said, resting her head against his chest.

"I don't feel it anymore. I am happy here." Angel said, casting a fond look at Chris who was still holding Thomas.

"Hello Dr. Hoffman." Jimmy said as he walked into the room from the basement.

"Mr. Summers, how are you this morning?" Julia asked with a smile.

"You may call me Jimmy, I am off duty now. I am well." Jimmy said seriously.

"Well Jimmy, would you introduce me around?" Julia asked with a smile.

"Of course." Jimmy said and led Julia to his fathers.

"Dr. Julia Hoffman, this is my Father Andrew Summers and my Dad Alan Summers." Jimmy said proudly.

"Nice to meet you Dr. Hoffman... are you the dean of the college?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am." Julia said with a smile.

Andrew noticed that Julia was holding onto Angel's arm and gave a curious look.

"We're old friends." Angel said shyly.

"You've been here less than two weeks, how do you have old friends?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Do you really have time for a story that involves time travel to the year seventeen ninety four?" Angel asked with a teasing smile.

Andrew and Alan looked at each other, then around at the people carrying things into the rooms and up the stairs. Finally Alan said, "Maybe not at the moment. It's a pleasure to meet you Dr. Hoffman."

"Please call me Julia." She said with a smile, then glanced at Jimmy and continued, "I'm off duty."

"Herr Doktor, it is good to see you again." Kurt said as he exited the bedroom.

"Yes, it's good to see you too Kurt. How are you this morning?" Julia asked pleasantly.

"Very well. Warren unt I haf been helping... but ze work is done." Kurt said happily.

"Warren? Mr. Worthington is here?" Julia asked in surprise.

"Right here." Warren said with a smile as he walked out of the bedroom.

Julia was stunned by the sight of his large white wings.

"I like to hide them when I'm talking business... they're a distraction." Warren said conspiratorially.

"Yes, I suppose they would be." Julia said in a stunned voice.

"You wanted to meet Mr. Wainwright... he lives here. He should be upstairs." Warren said with a smile.

"Could I meet him now?" Julia asked hopefully.

"Sure, follow me." Warren said and led the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew noticed that Dawn was putting the last of the baby clothes into it's proper pile and walked to her.

"Dawn, are we okay?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks for pushing Andrew. You're a cool brother-in-law." Dawn said with a smile.

"And you're an excellent Aunt. If it wasn't for you, we'd be killing ourselves trying to find baby things at the last minute. You made the whole baby experience a joy instead of a frantic nightmare." Andrew said, looking into Dawn's eyes.

"Thanks." Dawn whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trey efficiently completed the bassinet as Xander cleaned up the cardboard.

"You have visitors Xander." Warren said from the door.

Xander looked up in surprise, then sat his cardboard aside.

"I've got that mate." Spike said quietly.

"Thanks Spike." Xander said with a friendly smile.

"Xander, this is Dr. Julia Hoffman, dean of Forrestgrove college and future dean of the Wagner Institute." Warren said proudly.

"Oh, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm sorry I didn't get to meet you last night. We were visiting our daughter in the hospital." Xander said as he shook Julia's hand.

"Is she alright?" Julia asked with immediate concern.

"Yes, she's fine. She was just born premature and needs to be in the hospital for a while." Xander said, impressed by her concern.

"I have to admit, you're not at all what I expected." Julia said with a genuine smile as she looked at the casually dressed man with an eye-patch.

"How so?" Xander asked curiously.

"Well, since you're a multi-millionaire and head of a major corporation. I thought you'd be a little more..." Julia trailed off, searching for a non-offensive word.

"Stuffy?" Xander ventured.

"Yes." Julia said with a hint of shyness.

"I'm just me. The money is a tool to get things done." Xander said with a shrug.

"I think that's an excellent philosophy." Julia said with admiration.

"Trey, are we done here?" Xander asked as he looked around.

"All the furniture is complete. We only need the clothing and accessories for Marguerite." Trey said seriously.

"Can we help?" Julia asked with hope.

"Sure, Dawn is sorting things in the living room. She should have a few piles of things for us to bring up." Xander said and walked toward the door.

"Thank you." Angel said in an almost silent whisper, directed at Xander.

Xander got a big smile and shrugged as he followed everyone out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think everything is assembled." Trey said in thought.

"Dawn, do you know where in the mansion the baby supplies should be ported?" Andrew asked, looking at the impressive stack.

"No. Scott?" Dawn asked as she turned to look at him.

"Room seven. As I recall, there aren't any classes scheduled in there tomorrow." Scott said in thought.

"Classes?" Julia asked suspiciously.

"Oh, we didn't mention that. Xavier's is a school for gifted children... mutants." Warren said seriously.

"Then why do you need Forrestgrove?" Julia asked in puzzlement.

"Because Xavier's is for students who need to learn to control their abilities. The Wagner Institute is going to be for students who have passive abilities... it will also be publically known as a school for mutants. Xavier's isn't." Warren said, hoping he didn't have to clarify what he meant.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be obtuse, but could you give me an example?" Julia asked hopefully.

"Sure..." Warren said and looked around the room.

"Andrew, would you mind creating a portal to show Julia an active ability?" Warren asked carefully.

"Okay." Andrew said and a portal opened before Scott.

"Is this the room you meant?" Andrew asked as Julia looked at the tear in space.

"Yes, that's it." Scott said seriously.

Andrew nodded and ported the stacks of baby supplies into the room.

"That's very useful." Julia said in an impressed voice.

"Yes, Andrew has excellent control of his gift. He can port... what is your range now Andrew?" Warren asked.

"Since my... trip... my range has increased so that I can reach anyplace on Earth." Andrew said carefully.

"But without control of his ability, he could accidentally send himself or someone near him to anyplace on Earth or into an alternate dimension." Warren said seriously.

"I need to tell Buffy and Faith!" Andrew said suddenly.

"They probably won't be awake yet. It's just after nine in the morning on a Sunday." Xander said as he took a seat on the couch.

The others in the room followed his example and the couches filled quickly.

"I think this guy needs changing." Chris said into the silence.

"Take him into the bedroom. Dad's in there with Chakotay, he'll help you if you need it." Andrew said with a smile.

"I will change him." William said with assurance.

"He will attempt to urinate on you." Jimmy said in warning.

"I will be careful." William said as he followed Chris into the bedroom.

The car pulled into the driveway.

Steve carefully handed Marguerite to his wife and got out of the car to help Aunt Vada out.

After a minute of careful walking on the light snow, they made their way to the door and knocked gently.

"You don't think they'll mind the interruption do you?" Steve asked with concern.

"No, not at all. I'll wager they have a houseful already." Vada said fondly.

The door opened to reveal a small boy.

"Aunt Vada!" Jimmy said with joy and hugged her close.

"Jimmy, this is Steve Hawkes, a friend of mine. May we come in?" Vada asked carefully.

"Of course Aunt Vada." Jimmy said with excitement.

"Aunt Vada!" Scott said with joy and went to hug her.

"Scott, I have a favor to ask of you. My friend Lacie is in the car and I'm worried that she'll fall in the snow. Is there any way you could help her in?" Vada asked in a shy voice.

"Of course Aunt Vada." Scott said immediately and walked outside, to be followed by Steve.

"Aunt Vada, I'm surprised you came. Who drove you up?" Andrew asked as he gave her a hug.

"A friend... Alan, you're looking much lighter. How does it feel?" Vada asked as she hugged him.

"It feels great. Those two were really getting heavy." Alan said with a smile.

"Xander and Remy, I've got a surprise for you." Vada said as she hugged each man.

"What did you bring us Aunt Vada?" Xander asked like a kid at Christmas.

Evelyn walked in holding a blanketed bundle.

"Evie, show Xander and Remy what we brought them." Vada said with a smile.

Evelyn took a seat on the couch, then carefully unwrapped the bundle to expose the tiny baby.

"Marguerite!" Xander said with joy.

"Tank you Aunt Vada. Dis be de best ting you could do for Xander and Remy." Remy said with joy.

Xander carefully took Marguerite into his arms and held her gently.

"Marguerite?" Andrew asked with surprise as he saw the tiny girl.

"Dr. Ross said that she was well enough to leave the hospital today. And Steve decided to bring her here to you." Vada said happily.

"Steve?" Xander asked curiously as Steve and Scott helped Lacie into the house.

"You might remember him as Judge Hawkes." Vada said with a smile.

"Judge Hawkes? Here?" Xander asked with surprise.

"Don't worry. Aunt Vada has been saying such nice things about you that I had to come and see for myself." Steve said, enjoying the look of disbelief on Xander's face.

"I believe you have some babies to show me." Vada said, looking at Alan.

"Yes Aunt Vada, they're in the bedroom with dad." Andrew said and led the way.

"Come and see the babies Stevie. Come Evelyn." Vada said gently.

Steve, Evelyn, Lacie, Vada, Andrew and Alan went into the bedroom to see the new babies.

As Bobby, Robert and Peter started to run, Peter asked, "Did Bobby tell you of my problem?"

"Bobby said that you require structure and order... he did not mention a problem." Robert said as he kept pace with Bobby and Peter.

Peter thought about that response as Bobby flashed a tender smile of approval at Robert.

"But it may cause difficulty in your plans." Peter said with worry.

"So. It's no different than if I wanted to go skiing and you had studying that you needed to do. Just because I want to do something doesn't mean we have to do it. And it could just as easily be you wanting to do something and me with a prior commitment. It's just the way it is." Bobby said frankly.

"Robert, do you feel the same?" Peter asked carefully.

"Yes, you are Bobby's best friend, but that does not mean that you cannot have your own interests and perform activities without him." Robert said steadily.

"Best friend?" Peter asked shakily.

"Yes Pete. You're my best friend. Robert's my boyfriend, that's a whole other thing. You're the one I come to when I need to know if one of my ideas is good or off the wall. You're the one who's opinion I trust about what is right and wrong. Ronny's my brother and John is a close friend but you are my 'best' friend Pete. That's not going to change." Bobby said with assurance.

"Thank you Bobby. You are my best friend too. And you are my friend too Robert." Peter said in an emotional voice.

"Thank you, I consider you a friend as well." Robert said quietly.

"Now let's get serious with this run. All we're doing is talking." Bobby said with a smile.

Peter showed his agreement by picking up his pace.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Aren't they lovely." Vada gasped in astonishment at the two sleeping babies in one crib.

"Two beautiful little boys." Lacie said as he looked at the peaceful babies.

"When they were placed in the same crib, they went to sleep. They are most comfortable together." William said informatively.

"William?" Vada asked carefully.

"Yes Aunt Vada." William said with a smile as he hugged her.

"I always have trouble telling you and Robert apart." Vada said with a smile, then at Steve and Evelyn's curious looks she said, "They're identical twins."

"My brother is running with his friends right now." William said seriously.

"So are these babies your brothers too?" Evelyn asked curiously.

"Yes, Chakotay and Thomas are our brothers and Marguerite is going to be like our sister." William said happily.

"That's wonderful. She'll have a lot of people to look after her then. And with these two sharing a crib, she can sleep in here if she wants to." Evelyn said tenderly.

"Yes, although she has a place in Uncle Xander and Uncle Remy's room until her's is built." William said seriously.

"You're building on a room for Marguerite?" Steve asked curiously.

"We are building on a wing so Chakotay, Thomas, Marguerite, Uncle Scott and Uncle Alex can each have their own room." William said, looking at both people.

"William, why don't you and Chris ask your Father about breakfast. I think in all the excitement, he forgot that he needs to eat." Lee said quietly.

"Yes Grandfather." William said and led Chris out of the room.

"Grandfather?" Steve asked curiously.

"Grandfather." Lee said simply.

The door opened to reveal Mystique.

"Lee, I must be going. I have duties to perform and am needed in Washington in the morning. It's been a pleasure to meet you." Mystique said with a genuine smile.

"Anytime you're in the neighborhood, stop in Misty. You're the first person in a decade that I've been able to sit down and really talk to. I'm glad you came." Lee said with a fond smile directed at Mystique.

"When I am next in the area, I will come to visit." Mystique said with assurance.

"Good, I'd like that." Lee said and watched as she left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Warren's cell phone rang and he moved to the corner of the living room to answer it.

"Go ahead." Warren said quickly, knowing that it must be an emergency for Rome to call him so early on a Sunday morning.

"Yeah, okay." Warren said in a dark, serious tone that caught Andrew's attention.

"How bad?" Warren said as Alan and Xander also started listening to his side of the conversation.

"At least no one was killed. Where are they now?" He asked, noticing that all conversations in the room had stopped and everyone was focused on him.

"Send them here, to the Xavier Institute. I'll work something out. Thank's Rome, 'Above and Beyond' and all that. Try to enjoy the rest of your day off." Warren said with a smile.

"Yeah, I'll take care of it here. It'll be fine." Warren said with assurance and hung up the phone.

"What is it?" Andrew asked with concern.

"A fifteen year old boy from a small farming town. He accidentally caught his school on fire with an optic heat blast. Half the school saw him do it." Warren said, looking at Scott.

"So he's on the run?" Alan asked with concern.

"No. We can be thankful for that much anyway. His mother got the tip-off about the Wagner Institute and contacted Rome. They're on the road right now and should be here in about four hours." Warren said in thought.

"Do you want to enroll him at the Wagner Institute?" Scott asked uncertainly.

"Do you think Dr. McCoy could look at him and gauge his abilities? If he's a high alpha or omega level mutant then he might need to come to Xavier's to learn some control first." Warren said, obviously thinking aloud.

"Yes, that's a good idea. It sounds like he's going to be alone and scared when he gets here. Do you think we have any kids here who could help him not be scared?" Scott finished as he looked at all the kids in the room.

Icheb and Trey immediately nodded as Jimmy and Janine said, "We will help him."

"Good. That way his mother won't feel so bad about leaving him with strangers." Scott said with a fond smile directed at the children.

"What's the boy's name?" Alex asked curiously.

"Clark Kent."

***[The End]***