

# Circumstantially Hurt

## *Hurt & Comfort - II*

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## **[Chapter 1: Approaching Moonlight]**

A lone figure sat beside the window, observing the sunset outside while a similar fading light was being felt in his own heart. The faint impression of the full moon could just be seen in the darkening sky. The soft melody of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata started to play in the background, filling the darkening room with music that oddly fit the atmosphere. A song for the approaching moonlight.

Thoughts of all that he had lost filled his mind as tears started streaming down his face. His true love, the center of his life, his best friend, was gone... forever.

As the music eventually ended and restarted, the shifting light of the sunset glittered on a shard of broken glass laying on the carpet.

He picked up a piece of glass near his feet, a result of his outburst earlier in the evening, looking into it, he saw a stranger. He closed his eyes, unwilling to look into his reflection.

Everything would be all right, he told himself. Everything would be all right.

When the music eventually ended he weakly lifted his hand and removed his glasses. A blast of red light shot through the broken window and streaked across the approaching night. Then the blast of light became fainter and fainter until it ceased to be. The light from the full moon cast an eerie glow into the room, across the broken glass, the carpet soaking in blood and still dripping from the wrist of the limp form in the chair...

\* \* \* \* \*

Professor Xavier was sitting in his study, looking over some reports when he was assaulted by a wave of grief so strong that it was almost a physical force. //Scott! Scott! Answer me!// He called out telepathically but got no response... not even a presence.

He had only an instant to decide what to do and made his way as quickly as possible to Cerebro.

He entered the room, silently damning the need for security and hoping the lost moment for the optic scan wasn't the crucial one to save Scott from oblivion. [It's not like it's stopped anyone who wanted to get in,]

He put on the helmet and forced his way through the start-up sequence, frantically searching for Andrew and Hank.

//Andrew, Hank. Come back to the mansion immediately. Scott needs help

NOW!!! He sent with more force than he intended.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do... do I know you?" Tara asked in a timid, fearful voice.

"No... It's a long story and not important right now." Andrew said, shaken to the core to see the woman that Warren had killed standing alive before him.

"Tara, gather your things and we'll take you someplace safe. Then we can decide what to do next... Okay?" Hank asked in his gentle way.

"Okay." Tara mumbled and started to gather some things from around the room.

//Andrew, Hank. Come back to the mansion immediately. Scott needs help NOW!!!

Both Hank and Andrew fell to their knees, clutching their heads at the booming voice.

Andrew reacted immediately and ignoring the power required, opened a portal directly to Scott's room at the mansion.

He stumbled through the portal and landed on his knees beside the chair where Scott sat, unconscious.

A moment later Hank walked through the portal, cradling a frightened Tara close to his chest.

"Scott." Andrew rasped in a hoarse whisper.

There was no response and Andrew instinctively let loose a small flux of power to see the unseen and try to understand what was wrong. In an instant he knew.

Andrew raised a shaking hand to the portal to draw the power back into himself. Then to the shock of Hank and Tara he spread his arms and the room changed around them.

They found themselves standing in the same room, but different. Hank immediately ran to the dying form of Scott Summers and started evaluating his condition.

"Tara, bring me that sheet, we have to stop this bleeding." Hank said, now in full doctor mode.

Tara did as she was told and brought the sheet from the bed. A few quick rips could be heard as Hank muttered, "It isn't enough, I have to get him to

MedLab now." He lifted Scott's unmoving form from the chair and asked, "Andrew, can you do it?"

Andrew felt wetness on his upper lip but ignored it and responded by lowering his arms and closing his eyes. Hank was shocked when he saw Scott still sitting unconscious in the chair beside him as well as in his arms.

Andrew made a growl in his chest as a vortex appeared above the occupants of the room. With a jerk of his arms and a grunt of effort, the vortex moved down to engulf all of them and suddenly they were all in the MedLab as was Scott's chair and table. Hank turned in time to see Andrew drop to his knees, then collapse unconscious. Then he noticed blood flowing from Andrew's nose to puddle on the floor.

//Professor, I need help.// Hank thought frantically as he carried the bleeding Scott to a bed.

A moment later Orroro, Piotr, and Bobby ran into the MedLab as Kurt appeared in a BAMF.

"Piotr, get Scott to a bed... Bobby and Kurt, get Andrew. Orroro, Tara, come here. I have to perform surgery on these veins or we're going to lose him." Hank said.

//Just think what you need and I'll coordinate, it will be faster.// The Professor sent from the Cerebro chamber.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Professor had relayed Bobby and Piotr's observations of Scott and Andrew to Hank while Hank was working furiously to repair enough damage to keep blood in the other Scott's body. He sent them basic instructions to stabilize his other patients while he was diligently working to save the life before him. Tara brought whole blood and supplies to the surgery while Orroro handed Hank the surgical instruments as he needed them. An observer would have been amazed at the team silently working on the three men. The only sound that could be heard was the occasional muttered curse from Hank as he performed the delicate surgery to repair the damage the broken glass had caused. The actual surgery only took a matter of five minutes but every person in the room would have sworn that it went on for hours.

"He is stable. We'll have to wait a while to see if there was any brain damage from the extensive blood loss." Hank said as he huffed a sigh of relief.

"What about this Scott?" Piotr asked with worry.

//He appears to have received a sort of backlash from the other Scott's emotional state. He is in a coma.// The Professor sent to the group.

"How about Andrew?" Bobby asked, worried by the pale form of Andrew laying motionless on the bed.

"I suspect that he overused his powers and is paying the price now, though the nosebleed does concern me." Hank said as he took a scanning device and moved to examine Andrew.

"Is he going to be well, herr doktor?" Kurt asked nervously.

"Well, the nosebleed stopped on its own. I think that's a good sign. I'm going to perform an MRI on him, then I should know enough to make an educated guess." Hank said as he pulled Andrew's bed to the Magnetic Resonance Imaging scanner.

"What can we do to help now?" Piotr asked seriously.

"You can help me lift Andrew onto the MRI table. The rest of you should go and try to relax for a while. There isn't any more that you can do here, I promise that I'll let you know if anything changes for any of them." Hank said, then noticed Tara trembling in the corner.

"Orroro, this is my niece, Tara. Could you please take care of her for me? I'm a little..." Hank trailed off, trying to find a way to say it that didn't sound like she was a burden.

"Of course Hank. Come Tara, you look like you could use a cup of tea to calm your nerves." Orroro said kindly.

"Thank you all for your help." Hank said as the group started to leave.

"Anytime... You're welcome... If you need us again, just call..." Were the responses as they left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Orroro led Tara to the kitchen and began to prepare a cup of tea. After she started the water heating she turned to see Tara standing just inside the doorway, looking too frightened to move.

"Come child, have a seat while I prepare us some tea." Orroro said in her most comforting voice.

She watched as Tara made her way to the table and saw her carefully consider each seat before choosing the one in the middle, facing toward her. [A telling choice, not the head of the table, where she would be the center of attention, and not the next place over where she would be most

easily accessible but the middle position where she is most difficult to reach. Not on this side of the table where she would be facing away, thus thought to be rude... This child seems to be carrying a great hurt.] Orroro thought to herself until the tea kettle started to whistle.

She quickly prepared the tea and on impulse reached for the cookies, to find none. [Scott and Andrew must eat three bags of cookies a week.] She thought with exasperation... and fondness. [I was so worried about Andrew when he arrived, but it turned out that he helped Scott as much as Scott helped him... I'm ashamed that I didn't notice how depressed Scott was before Andrew arrived. But the difference is like day and night... Scott is alive again... and Andrew is becoming more self-assured. They really do bring out the best in each other.] Orroro thought, then realized that she was keeping Tara waiting while she was woolgathering.

"I'm sorry Tara, I didn't mean to keep you waiting, I keep thinking about Andrew and Scott..." She trailed off.

"Th... That's okay. Will... will th... they be alright?" Tara asked with a tremble in her voice.

"Your Uncle is a talented physician. I am sure they will recover under his care." Orroro said soothingly then noticed that Tara was clutching a sketchbook.

"Oh, do you draw? Do you mind if I look?" Orroro asked kindly.

Tara immediately held the book closer. "Th... they're not very good." She stammered and looked down at the table.

"Please child, don't worry about their quality, I would like to see them but only if you are willing to let me... I am not now, nor will I ever, be demanding anything from you." Orroro said quietly but seriously, letting it sound like the solemn vow that it was.

Tara nodded her head slightly and scooted the sketchbook toward Orroro.

Orroro opened the sketchbook expecting to see flowers, maybe deer in the forest. The last thing she expected to see was the snarling beast with bloody fangs standing over the mangled corpse of what had probably been a human. She carefully turned the page and saw the image of a hideous thing that she could only describe as a hellbeast devouring an infant while another was holding the baby's mother, making her watch.

Orroro couldn't go further. She closed the book and scooted it back toward Tara.

"I... I told you." Tara mumbled and held the book tight against her breast.

"Your pictures are quite good, expertly drawn... It's the subject matter that concerns me... Where do you get these images from?" Orroro asked in concern.

"My dreams." Tara mumbled as she began slightly rocking herself in the chair.

"Enough of such seriousness, lets enjoy our tea and get to know each other." Orroro said as she thought, [This child is a well of pain. Whatever her problem is, I pray that we can help her.]

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thank you all for coming." Dr. McCoy said to the assembled X-men in the MedLab's conference room.

"Since all of you are concerned about our patient's conditions, I thought I would tell all of you at once. Word has gotten out to the students that Scott and Andrew are injured. Now you will have up-to-date information to pass on to them. Plus later, I will be asking for some of you to volunteer to help them." Hank continued.

"Just tell us already Doc." Logan growled.

"Scott and Andrew are going to be fine. There is nothing organically wrong with Scott, and the Professor assures me that he is on his way to recovery. Andrew overused his powers and ruptured a few blood vessels. It isn't life threatening and will cause no lasting damage." Hank said happily.

A collective sigh of relief and a few muttered praises to deities were heard before Hank continued. "However, since Scott was in a coma for several hours and Andrew had three blood vessels hemorrhage, one of them in the brain, they will both be restricted to bed-rest for a full week. At the end of that week I will reevaluate them to see if further rest is indicated. I think they would be most comfortable in their rooms, but I won't let them leave MedLab unless there is someone to stay with them. So, I would like to ask for volunteers. I want them to wake up to a friendly face, and once they're awake, I would prefer that they have someone to talk to."

There was collective agreement and, as expected, all in attendance volunteered to help out.

"Do you have any idea what caused Scott to go into the coma?" Bobby asked with worry for Scott.

"From the circumstantial evidence at hand, I can only speculate on that point. But the working theory that the Professor and I have come up with is that Scott and his counterpart may have some sort of empathic link. That

coupled with the fact that they were occupying exactly the same space in the two universes when the other Scott tried to take his own life may have caused our Scott to overload on the sensation... As I say, it's only a theory at this point." Hank finished quietly.

"Vat about Andrew? Vas zer brain damage from zee ruptured blood vessels?" Kurt asked with extreme worry.

"Yes Kurt, there was a minimal amount of brain damage. The area affected may interfere with his motor control slightly, but the brain is a resilient organ and I do not foresee any dramatic or far-reaching consequences." Hank said with assurance.

"Please Herr Doktor, I wish to understand, if zer vas brain damage from a ruptured blood vessel in the brain, does that not mean Andrew had a stroke?" Kurt asked worriedly.

"Yes Kurt, Andrew had a very mild stroke." Hank said quietly.

"What about the other guy?" Piotr asked.

"He has not regained consciousness yet but my tests show no physical damage to his brain, and the Professor didn't detect any irregularities from his surface telepathic scans. Our guest will be restrained for his own protection, since his wounds were self inflicted. The Professor and I will take turns sitting vigil over him until he awakens. After talking with him, we will decide the next course of action." Hank said as he glanced through the window at his patients.

"So when can we get Scott and Andrew out of here?" Bobby asked, looking out the window at the two.

"Now if you'd like. They're both just sleeping. We can take them to their rooms, and someone can sit with them. Whoever is with them needs to fetch and carry for them. They are not to get out of bed except to go to the bathroom, and even then, their caregiver will need to stay nearby. Either of them could become faint or fall asleep without warning." Hank cautioned.

"One other thing... Tara, would you come here?" Hank asked Tara who seemed to be trying to blend into the corner.

Tara walked to the front of the room and stood shyly by her uncle.

"This is my niece, Tara McCoy. In all the confusion, I didn't get to properly introduce her. She is going to be my go-between with those who are sitting with Scott and Andrew as my time will most likely be dedicated to our unexpected guest."



\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew heard the door open and fought to open his eyes, they felt heavy and his body seemed to weigh a ton.

"Scott?" he rasped in a gravelly voice.

"Scott is fine, he's asleep in his room. Just relax. Would you like some water?" Bobby asked quietly.

Andrew nodded and fought to get to a sitting position.

Bobby immediately moved to help him and piled a few pillows behind him so he could rest back on them.

"Are you sure he's okay?" Andrew asked in a slightly panicked voice.

"He's fine, he was in a coma for a while, but now he is just sleeping normally. Please Andrew, try to relax. Tara, please tell your uncle that Andrew is awake. He might want to check him out or something." Bobby said, then turned back to Andrew.

Andrew hadn't even noticed that she was there. He barely caught a glimpse of her before she nodded and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking down the hall, Tara could hear a commotion coming from Scott's room. Quietly, she walked in to see Piotr trying to keep Scott still.

"What do you mean 'Andrew had a stroke'? I want to see him now!" Scott screamed as he fought Piotr.

Tara silently left the room and made her way to the MedLab and her uncle.

\* \* \* \* \*

//Bobby, Piotr, Kurt. We've had a change of plans. Hank has decided that Scott and Andrew need to be in the same room. Tara noticed that they are both becoming agitated with worry for each other and suggested that they would both be happier if they were in the same room. This will allow them to see that they are both fine and will also allow one caregiver to watch after both of them. So Piotr, please help Scott to Andrew's room, carry him if he is unable to walk that far. Once he's settled, you can move Scott's bed in there.//

A chorus of //Yes Professor.// Sounded in Charles' mind and he knew that it would be handled.

//Hank will be up in a few minutes to check on them since they're both

awake. I'll be in MedLab watching after our guest.//

\* \* \* \* \*

"Scott, the Professor said that we can move you to Andrew's room. So if you're ready, we'll go now." Piotr said and reached out a hand to Scott.

Taking the hand, Scott levered himself off the bed and supporting his weight against Piotr's side, made his way across the room.

"Why didn't he tell me himself?" Scott asked, as they approached the door.

"He says no telepathy, no mutant powers, and complete bedrest for you for one week." Piotr said as he opened Andrew's door.

"Will you share your bed with Scott for a moment?" Piotr asked.

Andrew nodded and with Bobby's help, shifted over to give Scott a place to lay down.

"How are you feeling?" Andrew asked Scott seriously.

"I was just in a coma. How do you think I feel?" Scott answered with an impish grin.

"Enlightened?" Andrew said with a weak laugh.

Bobby was watching the scene and had a look of confusion on his face.

"Inside joke Bobby. So what's going on?" Andrew asked politely.

"The guys are moving Scott's bed in here. Do either of you need anything?" Bobby asked with concern.

Scott and Andrew looked at each other and answered as one, "Cookies."

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott fought to open his eyes and found himself looking into the face of Charles Xavier.

The Professor was surprised by the flash of fear, confusion and resigned acceptance that went through Scott when he awoke.

"I guess I died and this is my hell. Figures you'd be here you sick fucker!" Scott spat at the Professor.

The Professor was speechless from Scott's attitude.

"Go ahead, rip out my eyes and tell me it's for my own good. I've got nothing else to lose... Go ahead you son-of-a-bitch!" Scott screamed and

began to pull at his restraints.

Professor Xavier decided that there was nothing he could say that would convince Scott that he was safe, so he just said, "Try and rest." and wheeled out of the room.

Scott fought to stay awake as he saw Xavier leave the room, but his weakened state finally got the better of him and he drifted back into sleep.

## **[Chapter 2: Midnight Wanderings]**

Scott awoke in a panic. He was a captive in Xavier's 'Friends of Humanity' stronghold... or maybe he was in hell. Memories flooded back to him and he tried to sit up only to find that he was restrained.

"Please, calm yourself Scott." Orroro said in a soothing tone.

"Rorro? You're back?" Scott asked in wonder.

"Not exactly. Scott there are some things we need to discuss... and they may be hard for you to believe." Orroro said seriously.

"Your hair looks great like this, I mean the mohawk looked good but I like this a lot better." Scott said, looking at her with admiration.

"Thank you Scott. What is the last thing you remember before waking up here?" Orroro asked, trying to find the best way to tell him where he was.

"I remember dying... and then I was in hell... Xavier was there, of course. And I fell asleep, and now you're here. Can you let me loose Stormy? I need to get out of here." Scott said, starting to pull on his restraints again.

"Scott, you didn't die. It was a very near thing but Andrew and Hank saved you." Orroro said, trying to find the best way to tell Scott of his current situation.

"Who?" Scott asked in confusion.

"Scott, when you nearly died a mutant named Andrew found you and brought you here to get you medical attention. Hank is the doctor who performed surgery on you to repair the damage to your arms." Orroro said and moved to the bedside.

"Okay, then where is here?" Scott asked, trusting Orroro.

"This is the difficult part. You're in the institute's MedLab but in an alternate dimension. Andrew has the ability to open doorways to distant places and opened one to your dimension so he could save you." Orroro said carefully.

"You've got to be kidding me. You expect me to believe something like that?" Scott said as he renewed his efforts to escape his restraints.

"Please Scott, calm yourself. I assure you that I am telling the truth. It is our intention to restore you to health and return you to your dimension when you are ready." Orroro said and pressed the button that would raise the head of Scott's bed.

"I need proof. If you can get the Professor to tell me that this is the truth, I'll believe her." Scott said as he calmed himself.

"Her?" Orroro asked, confused.

"Professor Emma Frost. She runs this school." Scott said, beginning to believe that Storm might be telling the truth.

"If that is the proof you require, I will contact Emma in the morning and see if she will come to speak with you. She is at the Massachusetts Institute." Orroro said and offered Scott a drink of water.

"Massachusetts Institute? What's that?" Scott asked when he finished his water.

"It is a school, much like this one for young mutants to learn to control their gifts, they call themselves Generation X." Orroro said as she repositioned her chair so she could talk to Scott more comfortably.

"If this is an alternate dimension, does that mean that there is another Scott Summers here?" Scott asked, trying to find something that would help him prove or disprove her story.

"Yes, he is recovering upstairs with Andrew. It appears that when you tried to take your life, it had some kind of effect on him also. He was in a coma for a while but is recovering now." Orroro said soothingly.

"What... what about Gene. Is there a Gene Gray in this dimension?" Scott asked with hope.

"There was, she died a little over a month ago, saving a group of us from certain death." Storm said sadly.

"She?" Scott asked in confusion.

"Yes, Jean Grey... she was our Scott's fiancée. It nearly killed him when she died." Storm said with eyes that were looking into the past.

"How did he deal with it? I mean... I couldn't." Scott said, honestly.

"Andrew. He was lost and alone. Scott was hurting and alone. They found each other and became the best of friends. I hate to think of what would have happened to Scott if Andrew hadn't arrived." Storm said as a tear escaped her eye.

"Good for him. I'm glad he has someone... I wish..." he trailed off and tried to wipe away his own tear before realizing that he was still restrained.

"Do not worry Scott. I assure you that as soon as we are sure that you are

no longer a threat to yourself, you will be released from the restraints." Orroro said, trying to calm the man who was so much like her friend.

"What about Xavier? I mean I know I wasn't dreaming... I saw him here." Scott asked Storm challengingly.

"Professor Xavier runs this school for the gifted. He will do everything he can to help you recover and return home." Storm said and was surprised by Scott's reaction.

Scott began to laugh. "That murderous bastard is running the institute? God, this must be an alternate universe because no one from my universe could even dream of something like that." Scott said with a bitter laugh that turned to tears.

Storm rested on the edge of the bed and gave Scott a comforting hug.

"Gene's dead... Xavier sent Cain to hunt him down. Cain found him in the grocery store and... and snapped his neck." Scott sobbed into Orroro's shoulder.

Rather than say meaningless words that couldn't possibly comfort the suffering man, Orroro just held him tighter.

"God Stormy, I'm so tired of fighting. Xavier got Warren and Remy. Logan and I got them back but... they... they cut off Warren's wings and cut out Remy's eyes... they said they were making them safe to be around humans." Scott said as Storm kept holding him close.

"And Remy's eyes weren't even part of his mutant ability, but since they looked non-human, he cut them out. And to top it off, he castrated them both. To keep them from polluting the gene pool with their mutant DNA." Scott finished in a sob.

Storm was horrified by what she was hearing. Mutilation of mutants carried out by Charles Xavier.

"But isn't Xavier a telepath on your world like he is on ours?" Storm asked in confusion.

"Xavier a telepath? Not likely! Anyone who could feel another person's pain could never do half the things he's done. Him and Cain and Stryker, they're the biggest mutant haters in the country." Scott said with certainty.

"Scott, you look tired. Please try and get some rest. I'll be right here when you wake up and we'll talk some more." Storm said as she moved back to her chair.

"You always were the best of us Stormy. God I've missed you." Scott said with a weak smile before giving in to sleep.

"Dream sweet my friend, and I'll keep watch." Storm said quietly and watched as Scott's breathing became steady.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew awoke to the sound of Scott's distress. He was thrashing and whimpering, obviously in a nightmare. Marie was there immediately at Scott's side saying, "Don't worry, it's just a dream." But the words didn't seem to be reaching him.

"Marie, help me over to him." Andrew whispered.

She left Scott's side and helped Andrew up from his bed and over to Scott.

To her surprise, Andrew climbed into bed with Scott and held him close. "Don't worry Scott, you're not alone. Hold on to me. You're not alone." Andrew said in a gentle tone.

Scott responded by putting his arms around Andrew and cradling his head on Andrew's shoulder. Once in place he calmed and a slight smile came over Scott's sleeping face. Within a minute, Andrew's eyes closed and his breathing became relaxed as he returned to sleep.

Marie couldn't put into words what emotions this scene had sparked in her. Everyone in the mansion knew that these two had gotten close over the past two weeks, but this level of... tenderness... was unexpected.

She felt happy that Scott and Andrew each had someone that they could be close to like that and felt an old pain return to her. [Will I ever get the chance to be that close to anyone?] she wondered and thought about her relationship with Bobby as she watched the two men sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt had been fighting for sleep for hours, but couldn't seem to make it happen. Finally he decided to give it up. He thought about reading his Bible, but decided that he would have a snack first. He pulled on some sweat pants and a T Shirt. His tail didn't seem to want to cooperate by threading through the trapdoor sewn into the sweats, but finally it did and he was presentable, then ::BAMF:: he was in the kitchen.

After a thorough search, he decided that there were no cookies left in the entire mansion... unless they were in Andrew's room. Rather than startle them with his teleport, he decided to walk to Andrew's room to visit with whoever was watching them tonight. And maybe get some cookies while he

was there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt gently knocked on the door, barely loud enough to be heard. After a moment, the door opened and Marie stepped out into the hallway.

"What's going on Kurt?" Marie asked with concern.

"I could not sleep. I thought I would come to see how zey are doing." Kurt said sheepishly.

"Scott was having a nightmare but Andrew took care of it. Do you want to come in and sit with me?" Marie asked, trying not to let the hope show in her voice. Watching the two men holding each other so tenderly had sparked a feeling of loneliness in her and companionship sounded like a wonderful idea.

"I would like that." Kurt said with a smile and Marie led the way back into the room.

Kurt noticed the two men holding each other and cast a questioning look at Marie.

"That's how Andrew got rid of Scott's nightmare." Marie said fondly.

"To have such a friend, it is a rare thing." Kurt said as he looked at the contentment on Andrew and Scott's sleeping faces.

Marie nodded in agreement and sat silently, just watching.

Kurt saw the cookies on the table and moved to get some. When he returned to his chair Marie looked at him, considering for a moment and then a conspiratorial look came over her face. "You came for the cookies, didn't you?" She asked with barely contained mirth.

Kurt thought about denying it but one look into Marie's amused eyes told him not to bother.

"Yah. But I vas concerned about them also." Kurt said, casting a glance toward Scott and Andrew.

Marie gave a knowing 'Yeah, right.' look but said nothing and continued to watch the two sleeping men.



### *[Chapter 3: What you think you know...]*

Hank made his way to the kitchen for a much needed cup of coffee. He normally didn't indulge in the drink because it tended to make him nervous and edgy but something deep within him told him that nervous and edgy would be appropriate for the coming day.

Hank turned his attention to the bone weary figure of Rogue entering the kitchen.

"How are our patients this morning?" Hank asked, knowing that if they were other than fine, he would have been summoned during the night.

"Scott had a nightmare, but Andrew calmed him. Tara was exactly right when she suggested that we put them together." Marie said as she nudged him out of the way to get her own cup of coffee.

"Shouldn't you be getting some sleep?" Hank asked as he watched her prepare a cup with an impressive amount of sugar and cream before adding a splash of coffee.

"I have some things I need to do first. Did you sleep well?" She asked with interest.

"Yes, after the myriad of emotional events yesterday, I was able to sleep quite soundly." Hank said as he began to sip his black coffee and made a wince at the strength of the brew.

Noticing his reaction to the coffee, she said, "I think Logan made the coffee before he took his turn watching the guys."

"I assumed as much. Logan's healing factor may make him virtually indestructible, but this coffee could be a danger even to him." Hank said, pouring half his coffee down the sink and diluting it with water.

"I think he uses equal parts grounds and water when he makes it." Marie said and took a seat at the kitchen table.

Bobby made his way into the kitchen and went directly to the coffee maker. Logan and Marie recognized the zombie like state that he was in as he failed to notice that they were in the room.

One sip of coffee snapped him out of his trance-state. "Holy mother of God!" he gasped. He walked to the sink and performed the same dilution ritual that Hank had just done. "Someone needs to show Logan how to make coffee before he kills someone." Bobby muttered and made his way to the table.

Hank and Marie shared a glance and the three sat in silence, waiting for the effects of the caffeine to be felt.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew awoke to find Scott cradled against his chest and holding him tenderly. He looked up to see Logan watching them with a barely interested expression.

Then, as Andrew became more awake and aware, he noticed that he had a raging hard-on and was 'pitching a tent' right in front of Logan. Embarrassed, he tried to turn his body to conceal the erection.

"Don't worry 'bout it kid." Logan said with quiet gruffness. "Just means the equipment is working. Nothin that don't happen to all of us."

Andrew heard the unembarrassed tone in Logan's voice and noticed the casual way that he nursed his large mug of coffee and decided that if Logan wasn't bothered, he wasn't either.

Scott shifted and snuffled against Andrew's shoulder. Without thinking, Andrew automatically reached to the bedside stand and grabbed Scott's glasses.

As Scott raised his head, he felt his glasses pressed into his hand. After putting them on and looking around, Scott said, "Andrew?" in confusion.

"Yeah, you had a nightmare so I came over to help you out. How'd you sleep?" Andrew asked in a casual tone.

"Uh, fine, I guess..." Scott said, a little disoriented.

Then he focused his attention on Logan, "Um, good morning Logan... I, uh, need to..." Scott trailed off, embarrassed.

"C'mon, One-Eye. That's why I'm on morning watch instead of the women." Logan said with a smirk.

Scott nodded and fought his way out from under the covers and to the bathroom with Logan's help.

Andrew watched in fond amusement as Scott tried to conceal his morning wood from Logan.

After a few moments, Logan returned with Scott and asked, "You need to go too? I mean, while I'm up?"

Andrew nodded and took his turn at the bathroom. When he returned, he automatically went back to Scott's bed, not even thinking of returning to

his own.

"How you two feeling?" Logan asked, trying to make some sort of conversation.

"Good, much stronger." Scott said as Andrew nodded in agreement.

"That's good to hear. The whole place is turned on it's ear with you two holed-up here." Logan said then took another drink from his mug.

"How do you mean?" Andrew asked, not knowing how their being out of action would effect the normal operation of things besides disrupting class schedules a little.

"All the kids are worried 'bout you two. They can't think about their studies or talk about anything else. Between telling them that you two are okay and having the other guy down in MedLab, the rest of us are spread pretty thin." Logan said in an uncharacteristic monologue.

"Why don't we have our regular class time up here? I mean, the discussion part of the class. All we have to do is sit around and talk... that's all we're doing anyway. We don't even need to get out of bed, just bring in some chairs and they'll see that we're fine." Andrew suggested.

Logan and Scott thought about it and realized that it would probably be a solution to many problems at once.

"I'll ask the Doc if it's okay. If he signs off on it, we'll have your afternoon classes up here today." Logan said decisively.

Then he got a mischievous look and said, "But you two might want to get into separate beds before they get here or they'll have something else to distract them."

Andrew and Scott looked at each other and shared a mutual blush. "It's not like..." Andrew started as Scott said, "We aren't..."

"I know." Logan said with a smile and tapped his nose. "I can smell it when someone's got the hots. I was just saying that you two might not want that type of speculation on top of everything else that's going on." Logan said informatively.

Scott got an impish grin and said, "Maybe we could just stay like this and let them think what they want?"

Andrew noticed Scott's playful look and mock-considered for a moment, "Hmm, that WOULD give them something to gossip about to take their minds off recent events." Andrew said jokingly.

Logan and Scott shared a momentary serious look. An uncomfortable silence ensued that Andrew didn't understand. Finally Logan broke the silence by saying, "They've all been pretty shook up since the school was attacked..."

"...and with the loss of Jean..." Scott added with a pained voice.

"...and now you two being up here..." Logan continued.

Andrew finally saw what they were getting at and decided to put a stop to it. "It would be a lie. Guys, as much as it could help, it could also blow up in our faces. Nothing good will come out of lying to the children." Andrew said with certainty.

"It wouldn't be a lie... just misdirection. Are you ashamed of the thought of being seen as my partner?" Scott asked, not knowing if he really wanted to hear the answer.

"First, misdirection is another word for lie. Second, I am not embarrassed by the idea of being thought of as your partner. I would be proud... if it were true. But as long as it's a lie, I won't be any part of it." Andrew said, then realized what he just admitted.

"Need more coffee. Be right back." Logan said quickly and left the room.

Scott and Andrew didn't even notice that Logan had left... in fact they were barely aware that he had been there to begin with.

A long moment of silence fell between the two men before Scott quietly asked, "Really?"

Feigning ignorance, Andrew answered, "Really, I won't be a party to a lie."

Andrew squirmed under Scott's icy stare, which was interesting since he couldn't see Scott's eyes, but nonetheless, he knew that Scott was staring at him... and that it was icy. Finally he relented. "Really. I like you Scott, and if we got together I'd be proud to have you as my partner."

Scott turned his gaze forward and stared at the opposite wall, lost in thought. [And how do I feel? He's my friend, but could we be more to each other? Should we? Would it ruin everything if we tried?]

"Scott, stop it." Andrew whispered.

Scott snapped out of his thoughts and asked, "Stop what?"

"Stop trying to think what you should do. This isn't about thinking, it's about feeling. Will you tell me how you feel?" Andrew asked, needing to know.

"I don't know what I'm feeling, I know that I like you but I've never thought about you that way and I just don't know..." Scott started.

"That's all I need to know." Andrew said with a smile.

Scott raised an eyebrow that prompted Andrew to continue.

"Scott, it's occurred to me. But I haven't thought about it seriously. You haven't thought about it at all. So it's not going to happen... now. Let's just leave the possibility open for the future and go back to the way things have been." Andrew asked with a note of pleading in his voice.

"We can't." Scott said sadly.

"We can't?" Andrew asked in confirmation.

"We can't go back, we can't pretend. It won't work. Like it or not, everything's changed." Scott said and put his arm around Andrew to hold him close.

Andrew thought about Scott's words and realized that he was right. "So where do we go from here?" he asked bravely.

"I don't know, what do you want to do?" Scott asked as he held Andrew and looked off into the distance.

"You're my friend, and I don't want to lose that. I've never cared about anyone as much as I do for you. So whatever we decide to do, we have to keep at least that much." Andrew said into Scott's shoulder.

"I agree. Holding you like this, being able to share my thoughts and feelings is something that I wouldn't want to give up either, but the other part..." Scott trailed off.

"...the sex?" Andrew asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, the sex. I don't think I'm ready for that. I don't have a problem with the idea, but..." He trailed off again.

"...but you're not ready. It's too soon after Jean. It's too soon for us." Andrew said in a whisper.

"Yeah." Scott said and went silent.

After long moments of contemplation, Andrew came to a decision.

Pulling out of Scott's embrace, he turned to look at his face and said, "Let's keep it like this for a while. I don't know what we'll call this but it feels like we're just where we need to be."

"So are we friends, or boyfriends, or... what?" Scott asked carefully.

"Why do we need to label it?" Andrew asked, moving back to Scott's shoulder for comfort.

"Because I need to know the boundaries of what we're doing... I wouldn't want to hurt you... or be hurt... because one of us thought this was something more or less than it is." Scott said, having difficulty putting the feelings into words.

"Then let's discuss what we want this to be... I mean, we want to be together but we don't want sex... are we agreed on that?" Andrew asked, trying to establish a foundation for the conversation.

"Yes. But I want to keep the cuddling." Scott said seriously.

"Oh yeah, gotta keep that." Andrew agreed.

"What about... the sleeping arrangements?" Scott asked carefully.

"It feels right to me to share your bed... I mean, if you want me to." Andrew said haltingly, afraid of rejection.

"Last night, I slept the entire night. I haven't been able to do that since..." Scott trailed off, not needing to say her name.

"So we share a bed. What do we tell people? I mean, since we're not really doing it." Andrew asked carefully.

"We'll tell them that we're together. I don't know when we'll get to the rest. But I guess it will happen or it won't... time will tell. Till then it's no one's business what we do or don't do in our bedroom." Scott said and shifted Andrew back onto his shoulder.

"Our bedroom?" Andrew asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, want to move in with me?" Scott asked with a smile.

"Why don't you move in with me? We are pretty much moved in here already, we just need to lose the extra bed." Andrew said and snuggled against Scott's chest.

"I'll talk to Logan about that when he gets back... he's been gone a long time. Do you think the coffee killed him?" Scott asked jokingly.

"If anything could..." Andrew answered and trailed off.

"I heard that." Logan said as he entered the room.

"Were you eavesdropping?" Scott asked, half seriously.

Logan looked at Scott with a 'get serious' expression on his face until Scott finally said, "Not your style. Sorry Logan, I wasn't thinking."

"Yeah." Logan said and took his seat.

A long silence ensued to be broken by Andrew asking, "What's going on downstairs?"

"Gang's just waking up. Hank was down there. He said that he'll check you two out in a little while and if you're okay, you can have two classes up here this afternoon." Logan said and took a drink of his coffee.

"Good. Do you think you could get the guys to take the other bed out of the room for us? We won't be needing it anymore." Scott asked with a smile.

"I'll talk to 'em when I get my next cup of coffee." Logan said without showing a hint of approval or disapproval.

"Do you think anyone will have a problem with us being together?" Andrew asked with a bit of worry.

"I don't think so, but if they do, they'll just have to deal with it. I don't live my life to please anyone but me." Scott answered seriously.

"Since when?" Logan asked, quite genuinely.

Scott thought about Logan's question and realized that he was right. He had been living his life to the specifications and expectations of others since he had been at the mansion. He had never realized it, but he did what was expected and his own wishes didn't ever enter into it... because he didn't really have any. Even while he was with Jean, he just followed her lead and let things happen. [So what changed?] he thought. Then he realized that his new hopes and dreams for the future could be traced back to one event. Meeting Andrew. "Since Andrew, I guess." Scott finally answered with a smile.

"Good work kid." Logan said and took another drink of coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

Orroro made her way into the kitchen and straight to the coffee maker.

"Wait!" Hank said as she took a sip of the coffee.

Orroro lowered her cup and lifted an eyebrow in question at Hank.

"Logan made the coffee this morning. It's a little..."

"...lethal." Bobby finished for Hank.

Orroro looked at the men at the table and said seriously, "Nonsense. Logan is the only one here who knows how to make a decent cup of coffee." And to prove her point, she took a deep drink and allowed the look of appreciation to show on her face.

The two men stared in wonder at Orroro drinking the foul brew. "Bravest thing I've ever seen." Hank muttered in astonishment as Bobby said, "She must have adamantium in her stomach."

Orroro cast a disapproving look at the two, then let it fall away as she proceeded to the table.

"Who is with our guest this morning?" Hank asked and took a sip of his diluted coffee.

"Peter is sitting with him for a short while. I needed a break, but I will be returning soon. I promised him that I would be there when he woke up." Storm said and took another drink.

"He woke up then? How is he?" Hank asked with interest.

"Confused, disbelieving. The same as any of us would be if we woke up in an alternate dimension." Storm said from a place of deep thought.

"Yes, I suppose it would be disorienting." Hank said absently.

"Hank, I have a matter to discuss with you privately. Do you have a moment?" Storm said vaguely.

"Of course, Orroro." Hank said and got up from his chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hank, I'm concerned about your niece." Orroro said quietly, trying to find a delicate way to let him know about Tara's problem.

"What concerns you Orroro? Did she say something while I was attending to our guest?" Hank asked, taking a seat in the otherwise deserted common room.

"No, she said nothing. But I just get a feeling from her, she needs help desperately and is too shy to ask for it." Storm said, pacing in front of Hank.

"She called me for help, that is how she came to be here." Hank said, his own worry beginning to rise.

"Is there anything I can do? I don't know what her problem is, but I feel compelled to help if I can." Orroro said with compassion in her voice.



"I don't actually know what the problem is. She called me yesterday nearly hysterical. Andrew opened a portal to her dorm and then we were summoned back here before I could ask her what the problem is." Hank said, shifting in his chair.

"Whatever her problem is, I believe the root of it can be found in her sketchbook." Orroro said as she fought the vivid image from returning to her mind.

"What about her sketchbook?" Hank asked in worry.

"You need to see her pictures for yourself. I believe that they hold the key to her problem, whatever it may be." Orroro said.

"Very well, I will go now to speak with her, would you come with me?" Hank asked as he got up from his chair.

"Of course." Orroro said as she followed Hank from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hank knocked on Tara's door and said, "Tara, may Orroro and I come in and speak with you for a moment?"

"Am I late? I... I thought you said 9:00." Tara said from behind the closed door.

"No, you're not late. We just wanted to speak with you for a moment." Orroro said comfortingly.

Finally the door opened. Hank and Orroro walked in to find Tara dressed in a nightgown covered by a robe that she had pulled so tight that the fabric was in danger of tearing.

Noticing the sketchbook on the table inside the door, Orroro said, "Please, relax Tara. I was talking to your Uncle this morning and mentioned your sketches. We just came up to look at them."

A look of panic flashed across Tara's face, then she cast her gaze to the floor and nodded nervously.

Orroro took the sketchbook to Hank and handed it to him whispering, "I was only able to endure two of her pictures. She said they were from her dreams."

Hank looked at the book as Storm turned away. She couldn't bear the scenes of pain and carnage they depicted.

She heard him turn three pages before closing the book.

"What... what is she seeing?" Hank asked outloud, as much to himself as to Orroro.

"Demons... perhaps she has some mutant ability to see across dimensions, or some supernatural clairvoyant ability. Regardless, I know of only one person in the mansion who has experience with demons and other dimensions." Orroro said as she turned to look into Hank's worried face.

"First we need to tell the Professor everything. If he agrees, we'll ask Andrew to look at the pictures and identify the demons that she is seeing. That may at least give us a place to start to help her." Hank said and looked at Tara sitting on the edge of the bed, hugging herself tightly and rocking. If she had been making a sound, both Hank and Orroro knew that it would have been a toneless humming.

"Tara, I'll see you at 9:00 in the MedLab. Please try to relax." Hank said in a quiet voice that was nearly a whisper.

"Let's hurry." Hank said quietly to Orroro, and they left the room to talk with the Professor.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a conversation with the Professor, they decided that Andrew would be their best source of information about demons and even though the inquiry might be distressing to him, it shouldn't be harmful to his health.

"Come in." Scott answered when he heard the knock on the door.

"We need for Andrew to look at some pictures to identify some demons for us." the Professor said with a little worry.

"What else? You wouldn't all be here and looking so worried if you just wanted me to look at some pictures." Andrew said suspiciously.

"There's more but at this point, we just need to identify the demons in these pictures." the Professor said with authority.

Andrew nodded in compliance and accepted the sketchbook from the Professor.

He was shocked when he saw the first picture but after a moment, a look of recognition came over his face. Then he turned the page and looked briefly at the next picture, then the next. Tears started running down his cheeks but he continued from picture to picture until he had finished the entire book.

Scott had looked at the first picture and turned away in revulsion. When he

would glance back, he would see another scene of such violence and horror that he would turn away again. Finally, when Andrew had finished and closed the book he pulled him close to offer silent support.

The others in the room watched silently as the two men unashamedly held and comforted each other. Finally Logan said, "So kid, did you recognize the demons?"

"Who drew these?" Andrew asked as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"I'd rather not..."

"Who?" Andrew demanded as he interrupted the Professor.

"Tara." Hank said quietly.

"Shit." Andrew whispered then closed his eyes and thought for a moment. When he opened them, he had a determined look.

"I need to discuss this with the Professor privately. Please trust me when I say that you'll be better off if you don't know what I'm about to tell him and leave it at that." Andrew said seriously.

Orroro nodded and left the room, followed by Logan.

"She is my niece, I feel that I have a right to know what is going on." Hank said to both Andrew and the Professor.

"Hank, you trust in the Professor's judgment don't you?" Andrew asked, staring him straight in the eyes.

"Yes, of course." Hank said, surprised by the strength in Andrew's stare.

"Then trust him to know what is best in this situation. I'm going to tell him what I know, and he will decide what is best for each of those involved." Andrew said vaguely.

Hank decided that he would put his trust in the Professor's wisdom. He left the room with one last glance over his shoulder.

#### **[Chapter 4: Facades with Consequences]**

The door closed and the Professor turned his gaze on Andrew and Scott.

"What is the great mystery that you couldn't share with Orroro and Hank?" The Professor asked.

"Did you look at the pictures?" Andrew asked in response.

"No, when Hank and Orroro told me what they contained, we came directly to you. Do you know which demons she's seeing?" The Professor asked, becoming impatient.

"Yeah, the worst kind." Andrew said with pain in his voice. Scott immediately put his arm around Andrew to offer support and comfort.

"Please Andrew, just tell me. What are the demons?" The Professor said with exasperation.

"Her father, maybe her brother... probably both." Andrew said and turned to hold onto Scott, the tears streaking down his face again.

"Are you sure?" The Professor asked from a place of shock.

Andrew lifted the sketchbook and handed it to the Professor.

The Professor opened the book and recognized the beast from the glimpse he had picked up from Hank's mind. He looked closely at it and moved on to the next picture... and the next. Finally he realized that he had looked at all the pictures and was just sitting silently. Had he seen them before Andrew's insights, he might have thought they were demons too... but now he knew... these scenes of horror weren't of a demonic, supernatural or even mutant origin. They were incest, rape and years of abuse.

"How? How did you know?" Scott asked with a trembling voice, praying that he was wrong.

Andrew held Scott closer as he realized what Scott was thinking and said, "Scott, it wasn't me. Someone that I knew went through that, I saw his pictures and recognized the same things in these. Shhh... It didn't happen to me."

Scott nodded and gave Andrew a squeeze to let him know that he heard.

"That's why I didn't want the others to know. Tara is about to collapse in on herself as it is. She doesn't need a bunch of people knowing these things about her." Andrew said seriously.

Charles couldn't help but agree, then he thought to ask, "Why would she

allow others to see the pictures if they are about something so private?"

"I don't think she knows what they're about. These pictures are so abstracted, that they are just introducing the idea of these types of things happening to someone... not her. Being caused by something... not her father. I think they are graphic representations of her feelings, pains and traumas. I think there is a part of Tara that is trying to get her to deal, while another part is in complete denial... or ignorance." Andrew said as he was trying to figure it out.

"Then on some level, she is trying to heal. At least there is some hope in all of this. Thank you Andrew for respecting her privacy and anticipating her wishes." The Professor said while at the same time trying to consider how he was going to deal with the situation.

"Professor, there is something I think you should know..." Andrew said and trailed off, trying to think of the best way to say it.

"What is it Andrew?" the Professor asked hesitantly, he didn't know how many more revelations he could take.

"I knew Tara in my home universe. We weren't close or anything, but I knew her and knew a lot about her. And when she was murdered... let's just say I feel some responsibility for her death, even though I didn't kill her. She was Willow's lover. When she died, Willow went insane with grief and nearly destroyed the world. I think that's when the first evil was able to gain a foothold in her mind and plant the parasitic evil that she spread to all the slayers and Scoobies." Andrew said and went silent, waiting for a reaction.

They sat in silence for a few minutes until Charles finally said, "I don't know how much bearing that has on our current situation, but it does explain a great many things I had been wondering about. I will need some time to consider the best course of action in regards to Tara's well-being." The Professor said with a look of concentration on his face.

"Professor, I need to be a part of her recovery if it is possible." Andrew said quietly.

"It won't be necessary to..." The Professor began to say but Andrew interrupted.

"I stood by and allowed things to happen before, things that resulted in the other Tara's death. This is my chance to make amends, even if she doesn't know it. Please Professor, I've been carrying the guilt of this for a year. That if I had done something, anything, Tara would still be alive and my world would be a much better place. I know this can't make up for everything, but it's something I can do to make up for it a little." Andrew pleaded to

the Professor.

"If there is some part you can play in her recovery, I will be sure to call on your assistance. At this stage that is the most I can offer." The Professor said seriously.

"It's all I'm asking for Professor. Thank you for understanding." Andrew said tiredly and laid back against Scott's side.

"Are you sure that you two are ready for this stage of your relationship?"

"Professor, what you see right here is all there is. We are a couple but this is as intimate as we have become, or plan to become in the near future. So yes, I think we are ready for this." Scott said as he held Andrew close.

"I see. Andrew looks like he could use some rest so I'll be leaving you now. Do you think you'll be up to our regular session this afternoon?" The Professor asked with a smile.

Andrew nodded and Scott said, "Yes, I think that would be fine. We're just going to rest until then, it's been an emotional morning."

Andrew gave a big nod of agreement and rested his head back onto Scott's chest.

The Professor left the room, a moment later Piotr entered.

"I will be watching over you for a while. Do you need anything?" Piotr asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott awoke to the friendly face of Orroro.

"Good morning Stormy." Scott said sleepily.

"Good morning Scott. Are you awake enough to answer a serious question for me?" She asked quietly.

Concerned by the serious tone of her voice as much as her words, he came fully awake and responded, "Sure, what do you want to know?"

"You've never lied to me Scott, and I need you to tell me the honest truth. If I release you from the restraints, will you try to harm yourself?" She asked, looking at him with pleading.

"Honest huh? Well then, honestly... I promise that I won't try to hurt myself while I'm with you. I can't promise that if I'm left with my own thoughts..." Scott trailed off.

"Thank you for being honest Scott. I will release you and take you to talk

with some people. You will not be left alone." Storm said seriously.

"The spirit is willing but the body can barely move." Scott said with a tired grin.

Orroro smiled and walked out of the room. A moment later she returned with a large, buff man in a lab coat.

"This is Dr. Hank McCoy. He is the one who performed surgery on you and is currently in charge of your physical well being. Hank, this is Scott, and he has promised not to cause himself an injury. And I would like to take him to visit with Scott and Andrew." Orroro said in introduction as she began to undo his restraints.

After the restraints were released, Hank lifted Scott into a waiting wheelchair. There was a much needed trip to the bathroom, for which Scott was greatly appreciative. Then, Orroro gave Hank a smile of thanks and pushed the wheelchair out of the MedLab.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott looked in wonder around the mansion that was so familiar and yet so different. There were twice as many children here as at his own mansion, and they all seemed so... carefree.

After taking a circuitous route through the mansion, they ended up at Scott and Andrew's door.

Storm knocked quietly and waited.

Piotr opened the door and whispered, "They are sleeping. Perhaps you could come back?"

"Peter, we don't have to speak to them. Scott just needs to see his other self." Orroro said gently.

Piotr nodded his head and moved out of the doorway, allowing entrance.

Scott was filled with apprehension as he was pushed into the room. He didn't know how to feel about seeing himself, but when they were finally in the room, all he could do was stare wistfully at the sleeping man who was so much like himself holding another man protectively in his arms.

Scott awoke to the sounds of movement. Automatically, he reached beside the bed and picked up his glasses. After looking around he said with a smile, "How am I feeling this morning?"

"I'd say you're feeling better than I am. Since I slept in restraints and you...." he finished, making a sweeping motion with his bandaged arm,

indicating the bed and Andrew in it.

"I'll give you that one." Scott said from the bed with a big smile.

"Scott?" Orroro said and they both turned their attention to her with identical looks of question.

"That one." She said, indicating the one in the bed. "I was wondering if you would mind if this Scott spent some time here today?"

"I don't mind at all. But I think we're going to have to do something about the name thing before it causes a problem." The Scott in the bed chuckled.

"I could always use my middle name." The Scott in the wheelchair said calmly.

"You want to use it? Go right ahead. I always hated it so you can keep it." Scott in the bed said a little too loudly and woke Andrew.

"Great, then you can call me Alan. He can be Scott, and we'll only have to worry about telling the two of us apart by sight." Alan said from the wheelchair.

"Alan? You got Scott Alan? That's a pretty good middle name." Scott said in surprise.

"What's your middle name?" Alan asked curiously.

"Linus." Scott said with a sour look.

"Scott Linus Summers? What were your parents thinking?" Alan asked with a laugh.

"Dad said it came to him while he was reading the Sunday Paper." Scott said, continuing the sour look.

"It looks like you have another brother." Andrew said cheerfully to Scott.

"Another brother?" Alan asked, confused.

"Yeah, first Alex and now you." Scott said seriously.

"Well, I was an only child, but I always wanted a brother... I guess this means I have two brothers now." Alan said with a smile.

"Alan, would you mind if I leave you here for a while. I am quite fatigued. If you need anything, I'm sure Peter would be happy to get it for you." Orroro said tiredly.

"Yeah Stormy, I'll be fine here. Don't worry, I won't do anything stupid." Alan



said with a sheepish smile.

"You gentlemen have a good day, I will join you again at dinner." She said and left the room.

"God, I do love that woman." Alan said with a smile.

"We all do." Scott said with an identical smile.

"So I guess the first thing I should do is welcome you to our universe... except that I've only lived here for a few weeks so I'm probably not the one who should be doing that." Andrew babbled himself to a stop.

"So you're not from here either?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"No, I accidentally opened a doorway to this dimension, and everyone was so nice, I decided to stay." Andrew said, determined to make a long story short.

"I can't say as I blame you. From what little I've seen, this universe is a lot better than mine too." Alan said with a serious look coming over his face.

Recognizing the darkening look on Alan's face, Andrew decided that it was time to act. "I hate to interrupt the impending brood, but you look awfully uncomfortable in that chair... Scott, do you think that if we scooted over just a little that there would be room for your brother in here with us?" Andrew asked with a grin.

Scott looked at the bed, down at Alan, and back at the bed again. "I think we can just manage it. What do you say brother, care to join us?"

Alan was amazed by the open playfulness of his other self... no... his brother. A surge of emotion welled up within him and felt like it seized his throat. Unable to speak, for fear that a sob would escape, he just nodded enthusiastically.

"Piotr, would you mind helping my brother into the bed?" Scott asked with a smile.

"I would not mind at all, but if Alex shows up, he can get into the bed himself." Piotr said with uncharacteristic mirth and helped Alan out of the wheelchair.

With a few minutes of shifting and scooting, the three men found comfortable positions in the bed.

"The class is gonna flip when they see this." Andrew said with a smile from between the two identical men.

Scott gave a laugh as he imagined the looks on their faces. The laugh seemed to be contagious as first Andrew and finally Alan gave into it and all three were eventually laughing themselves silly.

Piotr decided that there must be something funny about him sitting and watching them because every so often one of the men would look at him and break up laughing again.

Eventually all the laughter died out and Andrew shifted and threw an arm around Alan's shoulder. "Welcome to the family, Alan."

"Family?" Alan questioned.

"Yeah, You're Scott's brother, I'm Scott's boyfriend. So that makes me your boyfriend-in-law.

Andrew gave Alan a brotherly hug and held it for a good long while.

The three sat silently for a few minutes, just absorbing the feeling of family when the moment was broken by a knock on the door.

"Come in." Scott called automatically.

"Breakfast." Kurt said as he entered the room pushing a cart of food.

"What the hell?" Alan asked, staring at Kurt.

"Well, that's better than my first reaction." Andrew said with a smile.

"Alan Summers, I would like you to meet Kurt Wagner, known to many as the Amazing Nightcrawler. Kurt, I would like for you to meet Alan Summers, my counterpart from a neighboring dimension and my recently adopted brother." Scott said formally before ending in a smile.

"Nice to meet you, and Andrew was quite right. Your reaction was much better than his." Kurt said with an impish smile as he began to serve breakfast with Piotr's help.

"What did you do Andrew?" Alan asked suspiciously.

"I tried to hit him." Andrew mumbled, trying to underplay the event.

"He screamed 'Scott! It's a demon! Get out of here!' and tried to punch Kurt in the face." Scott said with a laugh as Andrew groaned and shrunk back in embarrassment.

"Really?" Alan asked in astonishment. Andrew seemed too small to fight and too timid to attack a demon.

Andrew nodded and said, "Where I come from, there are demons attacking

all the time. Kurt teleported into the room and I reacted before I could think."

"And your instinct was to protect my brother?" Alan asked, liking the sound of 'brother' a little more each time he said it.

"Yeah, it was. And that was my... second? Yeah, second day in this universe." Andrew said, remembering it fondly.

"Yes my brother, I've been meaning to ask... if Andrew arrived a few weeks ago... how long have you two been a couple?" Alan asked as he accepted a tray of food from Kurt.

"Oh, we've been together... I guess it's going on.... two hours now." Scott said with a smile.

"Seriously? Am I interrupting something by being here?" Alan said, thinking he was intruding in the worst possible way.

"No. We are recovering from injuries just like you. We are in this bed to rest, nothing more. We are sharing the bed because we like to be close, that's it..." Scott said before Andrew interrupted, "...And if we didn't want you here, I'm sure you know Scott well enough to tell when he's being made to do something that he doesn't want to. I mean, that look isn't hard to miss." Andrew said with a laugh as he accepted his own tray of food.

"Hey!" Scott and Alan said in offense, simultaneously.

"Stereo." Andrew chuckled.

Scott accepted his food from Piotr and began to eat. Alan and Andrew soon followed his example.

"Mmm. Good waffles." Alan said through a mouthful.

"Bobby insisted on making waffles for you since you liked them so much last time." Kurt said with a smile.

"Bobby? Drake?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, he's a student here." Andrew confirmed.

"He and John joined up with Magneto in my universe." Alan said with pain in his voice.

"Only John joined here. Bobby saved many lives when the mansion was raided last month." Scott said seriously.

Alan just sat silently thinking about the similarities and differences in the two universes as he continued to eat,.

"Scott, do you think we could leave the other bed in here for Alan? I mean, it's not like we'll be doing anything to keep him awake." Andrew asked in a whisper.

"If the Professor thinks he'll be okay here, I think it would be a great idea." Scott replied.

"Kurt, could you do me a favor?" Scott asked politely and motioned Kurt to come close.

"Would you ask the Professor if it would be okay if Alan stayed in the spare bed in this room?" Scott asked quietly.

"Vy don't you ask him for yourself?" Kurt asked, out of curiosity.

"We aren't allowed to use telepathy till Hank says so." Scott said with a sour look.

//Herr Professor, Scott wants to know if the other Scott can stay in the spare bed in their room.// Kurt asked the Professor telepathically.

//That would be fine Kurt. How is he?// The Professor asked with concern.

//Vy don't you just look unt see?// Kurt asked, not understanding.

//Because I won't violate his privacy like that. I will not contact his mind without his permission.// The Professor said with determination.

//I understand. Oh, and they have changed his name to Alan. I suppose it was confusing.// Kurt added with a giggle.

//Yes, it would be..// The Professor thought back with a responding smile.

"Herr Professor says it is fine." Kurt said quietly to Scott.

"Alan, do you see that bed over there?" Scott asked seriously.

"Yeah?" Alan answered, taken back by the serious tone in Scott's voice.

"You want to sleep there tonight? I mean, since we're all recovering. It'll be easier on everyone to have us all in one place." Scott said in his team leader voice.

"And we both want you to be here. The Professor said it's okay. It'll be fun. Kinda like a sleep-over." Andrew said with a big smile that couldn't be anything but genuine.

Alan stopped eating and thought about it. His brother and 'boyfriend-in-law' were inviting him to stay in their bedroom because they wanted him there. These two obviously cared about him and weren't just being polite.

"Yeah, I'd like that." Alan said with emotion showing through his voice.

"Good. Kurt, will you tell Logan not to bother with moving the spare bed out? He was going to see to it." Scott asked quietly.

"Yah, would you like it if Peter unt I moved some of your things from your room into here?" Kurt asked with a smile.

Scott looked at Andrew, waiting for him to answer.

"Scott, it's your room too. And yes, I want your things moved in. If for no other reason than to get your brother out of that hospital gown and into something comfortable." Andrew said with exasperation.

Scott nodded at Kurt who was gathering the breakfast dishes.

"So tell me about Alex." Alan said to Scott as he leaned back on the stack of pillows at the head of the bed.

## *[Chapter 5: Facsimiles of Acquaintances]*

Hank knocked on the door and was bid to enter by a chorus of voices.

He walked in to find all three of his patients in one bed, happily chatting.

"Gentlemen, I see that you have turned my bedrest order to your own advantage." Hank said with a smile.

"Scott got lonely during the night, so I came over to keep him company. And when Alan showed up this morning, he needed a place to lay down and it would be unbrotherly to make him lay all the way over there in the other bed, so..." Andrew said with a shrug.

"Alan?" Hank asked in inquiry.

Alan raised a bandaged arm to indicate his presence.

"Of course, I suppose that is less confusing. How are all of you feeling today?" Hank asked, deciding to get down to business.

'Good', 'Fine', and 'Okay' were the responses from the bed.

Hank went about his scanning while thinking how these three seemed to bring out the best qualities in each other.

"Scott and Andrew, I think you should be fine to conduct this afternoons classes, but I caution you to listen to your bodies. If you start feeling weak or tired, just dismiss the class and rest. The students will understand and your health is of the utmost importance right now." Hank warned.

"Alan, you are doing well also. You seem to be happy enough here, so if no one objects, I'll leave you here for a while and I'll see to finding you a room for the night..." Hank said but was interrupted by Andrew.

"Don't bother Hank, it's all taken care of. Scott and I will be sharing this bed and Alan will get the other one. The Professor already said it's okay." Andrew said happily.

"If we shifted the furniture a bit, we could fit another bed in here." Hank said speculatively.

Realizing that he was missing the obvious, Scott interjected, "Andrew and I would be sharing a bed if you put four of them in here."

"Oh, um, well..." Hank said, just a bit shocked then stood silently for a moment to process this new information.

"I think you broke him." Andrew said in a mock whisper to Scott.

"Maybe he needs a week of bedrest, that seems to cure about anything." Alan said with a smile.

"He was being obtuse. What was I supposed to do?" Scott said defensively.

After another moment of silence, Scott asked, "Hank, is this going to be a problem?"

Hank shook himself out of his thoughts and said, "No, no problem. I am just concerned by the timing of your decision. I mean, I would hate for you to feel differently when you are healed."

"Hank, don't worry. We aren't jumping into anything we aren't ready for, and we aren't just feeling sorry for each other because we were hurt." Andrew said seriously.

"Personally, I think every prospective couple should be forced to spend a week in each others company like this before they become official. It would solve a lot of problems before they started." Alan said honestly.

Hank considered the words and sighed in resignation. "I will trust you to know what you're doing. But watch out for these two Alan, they might corrupt you with their hedonistic ways." Hank said as he gathered his equipment, making ready to leave.

"Hedonistic? Me?" Scott asked, his eyebrows showing his surprise.

"Compared to three weeks ago, yes." Hank said seriously.

Andrew thought about the Scott he had met in Arizona. "Yep." Andrew said, agreeing with Hank.

"I can see it." Alan said, just to tease his brother.

"You weren't even here three weeks ago. So how would you know?" Scott said in mock anger.

"From what I've been told, I *am* what you were three weeks ago." Alan said simply.

The room exploded in a moment of silence as everyone felt the enormity of what Alan had just said.

"Yeah. I guess you are." Scott said seriously.

"Were." Andrew corrected.

Andrew saw Alan's questioning look and turned to see the duplicate expression on Scott's face.

"You were what Scott was three weeks ago, when you came into this room. You were alone. The color had faded from your world and held nothing but a repetition of reminders of what you had lost." Andrew said with dark eyes, then he smiled.

"Now you have a brother, and a friend. You know you can talk to Scott about what you're feeling because he can understand better than anyone in either universe. And I have been here to help him through it, and I'll help you just the same. So you're not like that anymore and you don't ever have to be that way again." Andrew said and gave Alan a squeeze.

"Isn't he something? I love it when he does that psychoanalysis thing." Scott said with a tender smile.

Alan sat stunned. [Not alone. Someone who understands. Someone who cares. Family. Friend.]

Finally Alan nodded and said, "You're right Andrew, I have family, friends, and someone who understands what I'm feeling. What more could anyone ask for?"

Andrew looked first to Scott, then to Alan before saying one word in a whisper, "Cookies."

Scott immediately perked up at that and said, "Yeah, I could really go for some cookies too."

"Actually cookies sound like a good idea." Alan said with a smile.

Piotr and Hank just shook their heads at the antics of the three.

"I'll be leaving you gentlemen now, call if you need anything." Hank said to the three.

"I will see if Logan bought any cookies when he went to the store, we are out here." Piotr said and followed Hank out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott, Andrew, Alan, and Piotr were enjoying a snack of cookies and milk, when they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in." Scott said around his mouthful of cookie.

"Scott, I needed some advice..." Bobby started, then fell into silence at the surreal picture of Scott, Andrew, and Alan in the bed enjoying cookies and milk.

"Bobby, this one is Scott." Andrew said, pointing with his left hand to Scott



at his right side. "And this one is Alan." pointing with his right hand to Alan at his left side.

"Okay." Bobby said slowly, then remembered why he came.

"I guess I can ask all of you... You know that I've been seeing Marie, but because of her mutation, we can't..." Bobby trailed off, trying to find the correct word.

"Be intimate?" Andrew said simply.

"Yeah." Bobby said shyly. "This morning, she said that she wanted us to become closer, and I don't know what to do."

"Bobby. I think she probably means emotionally closer." Scott said hesitantly.

"Yeah, like sharing your thoughts and feelings." Andrew chimed in.

"Letting her into the places that you have kept protected. The 'off-limits' places that you avoid talking about." Alan said thoughtfully.

Bobby considered the men's words and nodded.

"Bobby, it's a scary thing to do. To let someone know you so completely." Andrew said seriously.

"But it's the way that adult relationships work. She is your girlfriend now, but once you do this, she will be your best friend too. You'll know each other better than anyone else." Scott said with equal seriousness.

"And as scary as that is, it can be wonderful to have someone that you can tell anything and get help, or understanding... or just comfort." Alan said with a distant pained look in his eyes.

Bobby considered the words and began to realize the enormity of what they were saying.

"Just make sure that you're both ready for this. If you both decide you are, then understand that this is a commitment. You can't take it back, you are trusting and being trusted. It's very serious." Andrew said and received nods of agreement from Scott and Alan.

Bobby thought about it and finally said, "I think I understand. I need some time to think about it and then I'll talk with Marie... thanks guys."

"Good luck Bobby." Scott said as he watched Bobby leave the room.

"I hope they get it right." Andrew said in a near whisper.

"They're so young, it might be tough." Alan said, then realized that he and Gene had been about the same age when they first became involved.

Scott had the same realization about Jean and said, "I think they'll be fine."

At that declaration, the men all went back to their cookies and milk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hank knocked on the Professor's door hesitantly. He had been expecting to be summoned by the Professor to discuss what Andrew had told him, but the call never came.

//Come in Hank.// the Professor called.

"Professor, I'm assuming you know why I'm here." Hank said quietly.

"Yes, and I've been considering what is the correct thing to do in this situation." The Professor said and moved his chair from behind his desk. Once he was before Hank, he indicated for Hank to sit in a chair.

"Will you tell me what's going on?" Hank asked seriously.

"No. I realize that as Tara's uncle you feel some responsibility to her and want to help her. But my sharing this information would be a violation of her privacy and could ultimately cause her harm. I am going to talk with her. In time she may wish to tell you herself, or give her permission for me to tell you. But until then, I cannot discuss the matter any further than I have." The Professor said with certainty.

"How am I supposed to help her if I don't know what the problem is?" Hank asked, having difficulty believing that the Professor wouldn't tell him about his niece.

"Listen when she comes to talk to you, support her, let her know that she is important, special and loved. Give her distance when that is what she needs and be there when she needs to be held. That is all I can tell you for now. Once I've had a chance to talk to her, I may have other advice to give." The Professor said calmly.

"I don't like this Charles, but as Andrew so eloquently pointed out earlier, I trust your judgment. So I'll go along with you, for now." Hank said with a hint of menace in his voice.

"Please be patient, my friend. This may take some time to sort out, but I do have reason to hope." Charles said vaguely.

Hank nodded and said, "Thank you for helping her, Charles." before he left the room.

[Ah, for the good old days when I just had to worry about keeping the curriculum interesting for the students.] Charles thought as he returned to his desk.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in." Andrew called as he thought, [Why don't we just leave the thing open?]

"Professor?" Alan asked in wonder.

Emma looked behind her to see if Charles was following her, when she realized that he was addressing her.

"Good morning Emma, what brings you here?" Scott asked.

She had a surprised look on her face and Scott finally realized that no one had told her what was going on.

"I'm sorry, where are my manners. Emma Frost, this is Lee Andrew Wells, also known as Portal, and that handsome fellow is Alan Summers, my doppelgänger from an alternate dimension and my newest brother." Scott said with a smile.

The look of confusion only increased at Scott's introduction.

"Professor Frost, if you would like, you could just scan my mind to get the whole story." Alan said with a gentle smile.

Emma was taken aback at the friendly and cooperative attitude that this man had toward her. The original Scott would be more likely to hit her with an optic blast than submit to a telepathic scan.

"Very well." She said and walked to Alan's side of the bed. She gently laid a hand on his forehead and closed her eyes, trying to be as gentle as possible.

The images that flooded her mind were horrific. The world this man came from was on the verge of declaring war on all mutants and trying to wipe them out. She saw her counterpart as one of the few examples of decency in this man's life. As she finished, she saw this day's events and how he had found a sort of peace that he had only briefly known in his home universe.

"I see. Welcome to our universe." She said with genuine affection for this man.

"So Emma, what brings you here?" Scott asked curiously.

"Ororo called this morning and said that you had been injured. She asked if I could please come and talk to you... I suppose she meant Alan. I have to say that I was intrigued by her request, but I have never known Ororo to act impulsively or foolishly. So I came to see if I could help." Emma said honestly.

"Thank you Professor." Alan said sincerely.

"Alan, I am not your Professor, she is in your home universe. Please call me Emma. From my scan of your mind, I am here to convince you that this isn't some sort of trick or lie. Therefore, I am going to ask that one of you gentlemen submit to a telepathic scan to verify the things that Alan has been told." Emma said professionally.

Scott and Andrew looked at her disbelievingly.

Finally Andrew said, "Dr. McCoy said no telepathy for one week, but if he says it's okay, you can scan me."

Emma cast her telepathy first to Professor Xavier and then to Dr. McCoy. Having received permission, she said, "Both Charles and Hank have given permission provided that the scan isn't invasive."

Andrew was a little nervous, but nodded to let her know that he was ready.

She opened the link to Andrew's mind and was assaulted by visions of carnage, vampires, magic, demons, rejection, ridicule, and finally the peace he found in this place.

"You might have mentioned that you weren't from this dimension either." Emma said, collecting herself after the surreal images.

"I didn't even think of that." Andrew said timidly.

"Scott, I hate to ask, but I need to verify the story with someone from this dimension. Andrew's experiences deviate so far from what I consider the norm, that I can't verify that they are natural. I don't have a frame of reference to follow as I would in this universe." Emma explained.

Scott considered her request for only a moment before realizing that it was to help his brother. Of course he would do it.

"Go ahead Emma, if you think it will help." Scott said with a serene smile.

Emma was a little surprised by his easy capitulation but proceeded as quickly and gently as she could. The images and feelings of fear and pain and loss washed over her. An abyss of depression wrapped around her, then released at the memory of Andrew arriving and becoming part of his life.

She looked carefully at certain details, then gently withdrew from Scott's mind.

"Alan, I am happy to say that I can verify the things that you have been told are true. I have looked into Scott's mind and there is no deception, coercion, or telepathic alteration of any kind. To the best of his knowledge, everything they have told you is the honest truth." Emma said aloud.

//and you are truly lucky to have found these two, they honestly care for you as part of their own family.// She sent privately, to let him know that their feelings were real.

"Thank you Prof... Emma." Alan said with a smile.

"I'm happy to do it. But I do have to return to my own school now. Sean is a good man, but the students can talk him into almost anything." Emma said with a fond smile as she turned to leave.

//Thank you for coming Emma. Feel free to visit again.// Alan sent privately with an emotional undercurrent of admiration and respect.

//I may just do that Alan. Stay close to these two, they will light your path out of the darkness.// Emma sent in response before allowing the link to fall silent.

## *[Chapter 6: The History of What Might Have Been]*

After a peaceful nap, the trio was awakened by the Professor entering the room.

A tranquil smile fell across Charles' face as he looked at the three men contentedly cuddled together.

Andrew was the first to notice him and said, "Is it time for our session already?"

"Yes, if you are feeling up to it."

"Yeah, we're fine, just catching a little nap between emotional scenes." Scott said as he put on his glasses.

Alan had tensed at the sound of the Professor's voice, but forced himself to remember that this wasn't the beast from his home universe. He put on his glasses and looked at the Professor.

"Today I'd like to do something different. With all of you recovering and the emotional scenes that you've been through the past twenty-four hours, I thought we could just visit today. And I have some information that may be of interest to Andrew." the Professor said pleasantly.

"Sounds good to me. What do you have for me?" Andrew asked impatiently.

"I did some checking into the people we met from your home dimension and a few others that you mentioned. I have found their counterparts in this dimension." the Professor said nonchalantly.

"Why?" Andrew asked genuinely.

"To satisfy your curiosity, perhaps to avoid another situation of you running into someone unexpectedly like with Tara." Charles said without further detail.

"Okay, I can see that... what did you find out?" Andrew asked, suddenly curious.

"Scott and Alan, do either of you know about a cousin Hank Summers who is currently living in Nevada?" the Professor asked vaguely.

Scott shook his head 'no' as Alan said, "Yeah, he's my father's, brother's son. I think I met him once, kind of a dickhead as I remember."

"Oh yeah, cousin dickhead. I remember him now. Haven't thought about him in years." Scott said with a smile.

The Professor smiled and said, "That's Buffy's father. Our universe's Buffy is living in Los Angeles with her on-again/off-again boyfriend, Pike."

"Is she the slayer?" Andrew asked quietly.

"No, she's just a normal girl living a normal life." Charles said with a smile.

"Willow Rosenberg is currently a student at UCLA studying to become a marine biologist."

"UCLA? I wonder if Tara has met her there?" Andrew said, thinking out loud.

At Alan's questioning look Andrew explained, "In my universe Willow and Tara were a couple, they were awesome together, I can't help but think that they are probably meant to be together in this universe too."

"What about Xander?" Scott asked after a moment of silence.

"Alexandria Harris-Harmon is a cashier at Wal-Mart in Sacramento, she is married to her childhood sweetheart Jesse. She is known to her friends as Xandria."

"Xander is a girl?" Scott asked incredulously.

"Yes, there are subtle differences like that among the universes." Charles said with a smile.

"What about Dawn?" Andrew asked, suspecting he knew the answer.

Charles looked at a list in his hands and said, "Dawn doesn't exist in this universe. Another variation I suppose."

"Maybe not, she wasn't born, she is an interdimensional key made into human form by priests. Her existence started at the age of fifteen." Andrew said, throwing the room into silence.

"Your world is really different." Alan said with his eyebrows trying to reach his hairline.

"You have no idea." Andrew said, then thought to ask, "Did you find any information on Angelus, William the Bloody, or Anyanka?"

"Actually yes, historical references only. Apparently Angelus and William the Bloody along with three others... Penn, Drucilla and Darla were called the Scourge of Europe. They carved a bloody path across two continents before meeting their end in St. Petersburg, Russia." Charles said and handed some articles to Alan who in turn passed them to Andrew.

"You knew them?" Alan asked, not understanding this connection at all.

"Yeah, well at least Angelus and William the Bloody. William was later known as Spike in my world. He was really okay for a vampire." Andrew said with a sad smile.

Alan and Scott both sat silently taking in that comment.

"What about Anyanka?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

"Anyanka is only known in legend, the patron of scorned women." Charles said, passing another article.

Alan accepted the article from the Professor and began to read it. "You've got to be kidding." Alan muttered as he looked up from the article. Then he noticed that he was receiving an angry glare from Andrew.

"She might have been a vengeance demon, but she was my friend before she died." Andrew said with hurt in his voice.

"Really?" Scott asked.

"Yeah, Anyanka and Halfrak were totally cool with me, there was a month when they were nicer to me than any human in my life." Andrew said sadly.

"Halfrak?" Scott asked quietly.

"Yeah, Hallie was the patron of children and avenger of lost innocence. Anyway, they're both dead now." Andrew said and looked to the Professor for another topic.

The Professor decided that the next two might be a little difficult for Andrew but he needed to know these truths to deal with them. "Warren is in prison, probably for the rest of his life. He was convicted of murdering his girlfriend."

Andrew thought about that and concluded that if the same thing had happened in his universe, the Tara there would still be alive. So Andrew finally looked at the Professor and nodded to go on.

"Jonathan committed suicide in his senior year of high school." Charles said quietly.

Andrew thought about that and remembered hearing the story about how Buffy had stopped his Jonathan from doing the same.

"Blew his head off with a high powered rifle?" Andrew asked without emotion.

"Yes." The Professor responded.

"What about Faith, Rona, Caridad, Vy, Kennedy... how did they turn out?"



Andrew asked, wanting to hear some good news.

"They're all fine, they're just normal girls living normal lives... except Faith." Charles said, waiting for Andrew to look at him.

Finally Andrew gave into his curiosity and gave the Professor a look, encouraging him to continue.

"Apparently Faith wrestles alligators, and makes quite a good living doing it." Charles said with a smile.

"I can see that..." Andrew said with a chuckle.

"So can I..." Scott said with his own smile.

"I wish I could." Alan said looking at each of the men in the room.

They all waited in silence for a few moments before Andrew finally asked the big question. "What about me? Is there another me in this universe?"

"Not anymore. He was beaten to death by his father fifteen years ago in San Diego, California." Charles said quietly.

Scott and Alan simultaneously hugged Andrew as he sat stunned at the words.

"And how *exactly* is this less emotional than our regular therapy session?" Scott asked the Professor with anger in his voice.

Andrew felt the warmth and comfort from Scott and Alan. He decided to let the Professor off the hook.

"Thank you for telling me Professor, I had always wondered why my father left us when I was five. Now I can hold on to the belief that he did it to protect me from him." Andrew said and gave each of his bedpartners a squeeze to let them know he was okay.

"So I guess all this means that there are no vampires, slayers, or demons in this world." Andrew finally said, to break the oppressive silence.

"Not exactly. I found some obscure references and followed them up with Cerebro. There is one vampire slayer, and apparently there are a few vampires and demons in this world though I couldn't tell you where to find them." Charles said simply.

"What is the name of the current slayer?" Andrew asked, sure that he would know her, since he had either met or studied about every slayer in the past three decades.

"Her name is Kendra... and her watcher is Rupert Giles." Charles said,

waiting for further questions.

"Oh, I remember reading about her. She didn't last very long on the hellmouth, less than a year I think. She was an active slayer about... four years ago?" Andrew said, then smiled. "I'm glad that somewhere she is getting another chance, from all accounts, she was a good slayer, she was taken by surprise by a traitorous watcher."

"I can see why you wanted to stay in this dimension now. Yours sounds like more of a warzone than mine." Alan said disbelievably.

"When I'm better, I could take you there for a visit. I think you'd like it, actually. I mean in a touristy way. I could take you to see the Cleveland hellmouth, we could visit a demon bar and meet some of the local demons, maybe even fight a fledgling vampire or two." Andrew said with a smile.

"I think I'll pass on the hellmouth tour, but thank you for offering." Alan said with his own smile.

"Is there anything any of you would like to talk about while we have this time together?" Charles asked seriously.

"Yes, I needed to ask you something." Andrew said shyly.

"And what would that be?" Charles asked.

"My power isn't like yours and Scott's, mine builds up and if I don't use it, it slips out and opens any dimensional vortex in the area... at random. Which means that anyplace that a vortex has been opened in the past month could open without warning." Andrew said sheepishly.

"So you're saying that you need to do something to use up some of your power or you'll be opening vortices throughout the building?" Charles asked in confirmation.

"I might be opening vortices throughout the state or country. My range seems to extend to the Rocky Mountains now." Andrew said with a little pride behind his timid smile.

"What do you propose to use up your power?" Charles asked, knowing that Andrew had something in mind.

"I was thinking of checking in with Buffy and the others. I have a trace portal in the mirror over there so it wouldn't take much effort to open." Andrew said with a smile.

"And how long do you think it will take for you to dissipate your excess power?" Charles asked, realizing that Andrew was just wanting to talk to his

friends in the other dimension.

"Five or ten minutes each day should keep me from losing control." Andrew said with a smile.

"I will ask Dr. McCoy to join us and you can dissipate your power now. Then, if Hank and I deem it safe, you will be allowed to use your power for ten minutes each day... for safety's sake." the Professor said indulgently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hank arrived in the room to find Scott and Alan talking.

"...I think we should get in touch with cousin Dickhead and let him know that we're twins now." Scott said fully.

"And that you need a place for you two and your boyfriend to stay for a few weeks." Andrew added with a chuckle.

Scott burst into laughter, imagining the look on cousin Dickhead's face when he heard that.

"Gentlemen, I believe that I was summoned so I could supervise Andrew opening a portal to his home dimension." Hank said professionally.

"Yeah Hank, pull up a chair and I'll open it right here so I can introduce everyone to Alan." Andrew said with excitement.

"Very well, but do not exert yourself, you are still recovering from overusing your power as well as the stroke." Hank warned.

"Hank, can we please call it something else? I mean, I know that technically it was a stroke, but it sounds like I'm all brain damaged and stuff." Andrew asked in a pleading voice.

"I'm afraid that I can't call it anything else because it was a stroke... and there was brain damage... and it could happen again if you're not careful. Just because you didn't lose control of half your body or become a vegetable doesn't mean that you won't if there is a next time. It. Could. Kill. You." Hank said seriously with a trace of anger in his voice.

Andrew sobered at Hank's words and nodded his head. "Point taken, I'll be careful." Andrew said in a small voice.

"However, I agree with Charles that this is a practical way to dissipate your power, So you may proceed when ready." Hank said in a friendlier voice.

Andrew let a tendril of power slip free to see the unseen and located the vortex trace in the mirror. With almost no effort, he relocated the vortex

trace in front of the bed.

He took a cleansing breath and let loose his power and let the vortex form in front of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The scene before the men was chaos. Buffy was fighting a black insectoid creature while Caridad and Rona were double-teaming a troll. Dawn stood in battle stance with a sword, defending someone who was crumpled on the floor behind her.

"Professor, isn't there anything we can do to help them?" Andrew said with worry.

The Professor considered carefully for a moment then said, "Alan, blast the bug. Scott, get the other one. Andrew, can you make this portal bigger, so they can get through?"

Immediately Scott and Alan let their blasts loose as Andrew made the portal six feet across and reaching the floor.

Buffy and the others turned and smiled in relief at the sight of the vortex in their living room.

"Thank the Goddess!" Willow said as she entered the view of the portal from the other side of Dawn.

"Are you guys alright now?" Andrew asked with worry.

"Xander needs help. A thoth demon cast a spell on him to enhance his 'demon magnet' power. He's attracting every demon in the Midwest." Buffy said with worry.

"Can't Willow reverse the spell like last time?" Andrew asked, noticing that the crumpled form that Dawn had been protecting was the battered and bloody Xander.

"No. The last time the spell created an unnatural state that I could reverse. This demon enhanced what he already had." Willow said with worry for Xander.

"And we've been so busy fighting that we haven't been able to find a counter spell..." Buffy was interrupted as a large gelatinous mass made it's way into the room.

"Professor, can we bring him here? They won't be able to keep those things away from him forever." Andrew said with worry.

"I quite agree. Buffy, if you bring Xander through the portal, the demons shouldn't be attracted by him any longer and you will have time to find a counter-spell, correct?" The Professor called through the portal.

"Sounds right, we need to hurry. Jell-O boy doesn't seem to respond to brute force." Buffy screamed as she and the other slayers continued to hack and slash at the giant pile of snot.

"Creo Ignem Corvus," Andrew called and made a gesture to produce a large flaming bird. He released the bird and it flew through the vortex and hit the slimy thing dead center.

The monster began to howl in pain. Alan and Scott took the hint and each loosed an optic blast at the gooey mess.

In less than a minute the pile of sludge exploded and if it weren't so serious, the sight of all the slayers standing drenched in goo would have been funny.

"Get Xander through the portal now!" the Professor commanded.

"Dawn, go with Xander, he can't walk by himself." Buffy commanded.

"But you need my help." Dawn protested.

"You'll help us most by getting Xander out of here." Buffy said as the building shook.

"Hurry! I don't know what that is, but it's going to get us all if you don't get out of here now!!!" Buffy screamed and picked up her scythe.

Dawn knelt down and put her head under Xander's arm. With great effort, she helped him to a standing position and walked him through the portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as Dawn stepped through the portal Andrew yelled out, "I'll check in with you at noon tomorrow."

Seeing Buffy nod in confirmation, Andrew withdrew his power and closed the portal.

Dawn was in shock. For the first time in days she heard silence. Then she took in her surroundings and noticed that Andrew was in bed with identical twins.

"Way to go Andrew." She said with a big genuine smile.

Hank immediately rushed over to Xander and took him from Dawn. He carried Xander to the spare bed and laid him down.

"These wounds are pretty bad. He looks like he's been beaten constantly all day." Hank commented as he began stripping off clothes and assessing damage.

"Two and a half, actually. That's how long he's been attracting demons full force." Dawn said, then noticed the blood and goo on her shirt.

"Damnit, and I just bought this shirt!" She said and tried to wipe the mess off, succeeding only in smearing it more.

"Professor, she looks to be about Kitty's size, do you think she could loan Dawn something to wear until we can get her some clothes?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Yes, of course... Dawn, Kitty is bringing you something you can change into." the Professor said pleasantly.

"Uh... thanks." Dawn said as she realized that she had just had a girly fit in front of a room full of men.

"Dawn, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend Scott, and his brother Alan." Andrew said from the bed.

"Nice to meet you, guys. Now I see why you wanted to stay in this dimension. If I find a pair of studs like that for me, I'm not going back either." Dawn said with a smile as the door opened.

"Kitty asked me to bring this up to you. She said she was working on something for class." Tara said quietly.

"Tara?" Dawn said and went pale. A moment later she was hugging Tara for all she was worth. Blood, goo and all.

Tara stood stiffly as Dawn held her and began to cry.

Andrew cast a worried look at the Professor who decided he would break another one of his rules.

//Let's see what happens. I want to protect Tara too, but this might actually work out to help her.// the Professor sent to Andrew.

//How Professor? Dawn will tell Tara about the other Tara's life and I can't see how that could be any help to her at all, given the problems that she is having already.//

//Think about how learning about your other self made you feel about your father. Perhaps some benefit will come of this too, maybe just as a distraction, or it might open her to possibilities that she hadn't considered before.//

//I guess so, but if it doesn't go well, be available to help pick up the pieces.// Andrew thought with worry.

Scott noticed the look of concentration on Andrew's face and finally said, "You're using telepathy. No cookies for you."

"But he started it." Andrew said in a whine, pointing at the Professor.

Scott arched an eyebrow at the Professor accusingly, a moment later Alan mirrored his brother's accusatory expression.

"No cookies for me either, I suppose." the Professor finally said and, looking properly chastised, made his way around the bed to Hank and Xander.

"Dawn, this isn't the Tara that you knew. She is Hank's niece and comes from this dimension." Andrew said loudly enough for Dawn to hear.

"S... Sorry Tara. It's just when I saw you... and I missed you so much... Oh Goddess, it's good to see you again." Dawn said with tears in her eyes.

"It's okay." Tara said with a shy smile.

"I'm Dawn. I don't know how much you know about my world, but I want to tell you everything... I mean, if you want to hear about it." Dawn stammered, hoping that Tara wanted to know.

Tara enthusiastically nodded yes and to the surprise of the men in the bed... she smiled a full, joyful smile.

"Where can we go to talk, I've never been here before?" Dawn asked with excitement.

"Why don't I take you to my room where you can get cleaned up, then you can tell me about your world." Tara said with fascination.

A moment later the stunned men finally realized that the women had left the room.

"Did you see that smile?" Scott asked in wonder.

"I didn't even know she had teeth." Alan said in equal wonder.

"Professor? Is that what you had in mind?" Andrew asked, still stunned.

"Not exactly, but it'll do." the Professor said as he watched Hank working on Xander.

"How is Xander, Doc?" Andrew asked, not able to see anything but Hank's back.

Without looking up Hank said, "I will need to get him to the MedLab to be sure, but I think he is just severely battered, he probably needs..."

"...A Week Of Bedrest." the three men in the bed chorused as one.

At that Hank looked up and over at the bed full of men. Seeing the humor in it he said, "I suppose we're going to need a bigger bed."

"He get's in on your side. We don't get along." Scott said to Alan.

"Really? I've got to hear this story. What did you do, o brother mine?" Alan asked with a big smile.

"I was fighting him when Andrew was hit by lightning, I got impatient and hit him full in the chest with an optic blast. Knocked him about fifteen feet back and into the side of a bus." Scott said gravely.

"That would explain this recent scarring on his chest. You wouldn't happen to know what happened to his eye would you?" Hank asked curiously.

"A minion of the first evil gouged it out... with his thumb I think." Andrew said from the bed.

"What about these scars on his neck?" Hank asked curiously.

"Right or left side?" Andrew asked.

"Left." Hank said, then turned Xander's head to see another set of scars on the other side.

"Vampire. I think the left side was done by Angelus, the right side was done by Dracula." Andrew said and noticed the bag of cookies sitting by Alan, just out of his reach.

"How about this circular scar on his abdomen?" Hank asked, amazed by the injuries on this man.

"Does it look about the size of a peppermint patty?" Andrew asked as he tried to reach the cookies without Alan noticing.

"Yes, that's the one." Hank said, amused by Andrew's method of measurement.

"That was from the last Thoth demon that cast a spell on him. It split him into two people." Andrew said and finally was able to snag the cookies. Just when he thought he had them, Alan took the cookies from his hand and shook his head 'no'.

"We will be having lunch any minute, besides you heard Scott. You used telepathy, no cookies for you." Alan said and sat the cookies on the floor



beside the bed.

"What about these scars on his left side?" Hank asked in amazement.

"Why don't you wait for him to wake up and ask him? We only compared scars once, and he won by a long shot. I think he said those on his side came from when he was possessed by a hyena, but you really need to ask him about that." Andrew said, irritated by not having any cookies.

"Very well, I will take Xander down to the MedLab to do a few tests, and will no doubt be bringing him back up within the hour." Hank said as he lifted Xander into the wheelchair that Alan had used earlier.

"Are you going to move him in too? Cause if you are, we're going to need another bed." Alan called out to Hank as he pushed Xander out of the room followed by the Professor.

"I'll see what I can do." the Professor said and closed the door behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a few minutes the door opened and Jubilee came in pushing the food cart.

"Jubilee! When did you get back?" Scott asked with excitement. Alan and Andrew shared an 'I dunno' expression and settled in to listen.

"I rode up with Emma. She said I could stay a few days, since I have a room here and all. And I've just been waiting till I could get a chance to come in and visit you guys. You need a revolving door on this room." She said as she started filling plates.

Andrew and Alan nodded in agreement with her statement.

"Jubilee, this is Andrew, my boyfriend who is also known as Portal, and this is my brother Alan." Scott said proudly.

"I thought your brother's name was Alex." Jubilee said as she passed the first plate to Alan.

"I have a brother Alex, he's in Hawaii, Alan is actually my other self from a neighboring dimension, who Andrew brought here..." Scott began but was interrupted.

"...got it. Brother. And boyfriend... hmmm... seems like Mr. S has loosened up in the month since I left Xavier's." Jubilee said and passed another plate to Alan, which he passed to Andrew.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. What about you? Found anyone at the

Massachusetts Institute that I should know about?" Scott asked with genuine interest.

"No one special. I keep looking, but the Gen X guys aren't that interesting." Jubilee said.

"Jubilation, listen to me. When you do find someone who is special, I want you to bring him here to meet me. The man who captures your heart must meet some exacting standards." Scott said with a caring smile.

"Well, I can see the standards you set." She said, looking at Andrew and Alan, "And that's quite a bit to live up to."

Scott beamed at the implied compliment and said, "Only the best for you."

"Now eat your food before it gets cold." Jubilee said as she started putting the serving trays away.

"Jubilee?" Andrew asked hesitantly.

Jubilee looked at him in question.

"Could you leave an extra plate for Xander. Hank said he would be back from MedLab within the hour, and he could probably use a good meal." Andrew asked shyly.

"Sure, Xander? I don't think I know him." Jubilee said curiously.

"You wouldn't. He's from my home dimension. He doesn't exist in this world." Andrew said easily.

"Huh?" Jubilee said, trying to make sense of that one.

"Not important, new guy, was beat up for two and a half days straight, will be back in a few minutes, will probably be hungry." Scott said, putting the story in a nutshell for Jubilee.

"You always were the best at summarizing Mr. S." Jubilee said with a laugh.

"That's why I'm the teacher." Scott said with a smile then continued, "Now sit down and tell me how things are at the new school."

\* \* \* \* \*

As Scott and Jubilee were discussing the events since Jubilee decided to go to the Gen X school, Alan decided to ask Andrew about something that was bothering him.

"What was that thing you did with the flaming bird? I thought opening doorways was your mutant ability."

"That's not a mutant ability, it was magic. I studied the black arts for a few years when I was in high school. I still remember one or two spells. My friends and I were going to be big bad guys and fight the slayer." Andrew replied, a bit ashamed.

"Why?" Alan asked, genuinely curious.

"You know, I can't even tell you now. The only thing I can think of is that we were stupid kids wanting attention." Andrew said and crossed his arms over his chest, hugging himself.

Alan noticed the movement and put an arm around Andrew's shoulders to pull him close.

Andrew leaned into the comforting embrace for a moment before saying, "It still hurts when I think about how things were back then."

"Tell me about it. Maybe if you share it, it won't hurt as much." Alan said sensing that Andrew needed to unburden his soul.

"Warren ended up killing his girlfriend with a robot that he created... that's when the whole playing at being bad guys thing stopped being fun. I should have done something then, I could see that Warren was messed up but I just went along with his plans. Eventually he killed Tara, that's what made Willow go insane and try to destroy the world..." Andrew said and turned to lay his head against Alan's chest.

Scott looked over at the movement and saw Andrew cuddled against Alan and on the verge of tears. Alan looked at Scott with a hesitant expression and Scott gave a smile to let him know that it was okay. For a moment Scott looked within himself to see if he felt any jealousy at the scene before him and decided that he didn't, he only felt happy that Alan could provide Andrew comfort if he needed it.

"Then Angelo started..." Jubilee began and Scott turned his full attention back to her, knowing that Andrew would be fine in Alan's care.

"What about Jonathan?" Alan asked carefully, sensing that the worst was yet to come.

"I killed him." Andrew said in a whisper.

Alan immediately bent his head and placed a kiss on the top of Andrew's head, then said, "Tell me about it."

Andrew pulled back in surprise at Alan's reaction and looked at his face to gauge his emotions. There wasn't any accusation, disgust, or horror, only concern. He put his head back on Alan's chest and said, "The first evil had

tried to trick me and coerce me into killing him as a sacrifice to open the hellmouth. When that failed, it finally assumed control of my body and did it for me. I could see and feel everything but I couldn't stop it. He was my best friend and I killed him." Andrew said in a whisper as he started to cry.

Alan began to rub Andrew's back and started a slight rocking to comfort the crying man in his arms. He thought about telling Andrew that it was alright, and that he wasn't to blame. But he knew that they would be meaningless words to Andrew.

A few minutes later, Andrew quieted and seemed to fall asleep in Alan's arms. Alan looked up to see Jubilee and Scott watching him with expressions of tenderness on their faces.

Alan carefully made a shushing motion and laid back to sleep.

Scott and Jubilee went back to their talk in hushed whispers until she had caught him up on the past months events in her life.

"So what about you Mr. S?" Jubilee asked, sparing a glance at the sleeping forms of Andrew and Alan.

"Me? The story is too long and complicated to tell right now, but suffice it to say, that I have a boyfriend who cares about me and a brother who understands me. I have the feeling that I am exactly where I need to be at this point in my life. It's really hard to explain." Scott said with serenity showing through his voice.

"Please try." Jubilee asked in fascination. It had only been a few months that she had been able to think of Scott as a person as opposed to a teacher. Now he was talking to her like an adult, and she felt that what he was about to describe was something that she might one day want to have in her own life. Not the boyfriend/brother combination, but the sense of contentment.

Scott thought about her request and noticed the uncharacteristic look of adult concentration as she waited for his next words.

"It's difficult but I'll try... Andrew is smart, and caring. He is honest to a degree that can be off-putting if you don't know him. On the outside he seems timid, but inside, where it matters, he is one of the bravest men I have ever met. I envy his ability to see past the masks that people wear and understand what drives them." Scott said and felt tears forming in his eyes.

"Alan is more difficult to describe. He looks just like me, but inside he is really different. He and I share a few of the same characteristics but we

are actually very different people... and I like him. He is a genuinely good person, and those can be hard to find in this world... or any other I suppose." Scott said with a smile.

"Put it all together, and I have everything I could ever ask for. I don't know if I believe in a supreme being but if there is a God up there somewhere, he has blessed me beyond what anyone deserves." Scott said and noticed that a tear had escaped down his cheek.

"Wow." Jubilee said without thinking.

Scott gave a little chuckle and said, "Yeah, 'Wow' pretty much sums it all up. And you say that I'm good at summarizing."

"I'll come back and talk later. You could probably use some rest before your class and I need to get these dishes downstairs." Jubilee said and got up to leave.

"Thanks for the talk Jubilation. If you hadn't asked me to put it into words, I might not have consciously realized just how lucky I am." Scott said and laid back to get a bit of rest as Jubilee had suggested.

"Anytime Mr. S. Thanks for not treating me like a kid. I know I'm not ready for what you have, but now I think I'll have an idea of what I'm looking for when I am." She said with a smile, then tilted her head and rethought her words to see if they made any sense at all.

Scott smiled tenderly and nodded to convey that he understood her meaning.

A moment later she pushed the food cart out of the room, leaving a plate of food under a cover on the table for Xander.

## *[Chapter 7: The Other Cheek]*

When the door opened, Alan awoke and put on his glasses. He looked up in time to see Dr. McCoy pushing Xander into the room in a wheelchair.

The expression on Xander's face was classic shock when he saw the three men in the bed. Alan decided it was his turn to explain.

"Hello Xander, I'm Alan. I'm from another dimension like you. You know Andrew, and from what I've heard, you've made the acquaintance of my brother Scott under less than favorable circumstances." Alan said with a smile.

"Uh, hi. Do I want to know why Andrew is sleeping on your chest?" Xander asked with a puzzled expression.

"Probably not." Alan said simply as Hank moved Xander to the spare bed.

"I told you already, I can walk." Xander snapped at Hank as he tried to help Xander out of the wheelchair.

Hank put his hands up in a surrender motion as Xander got out of the wheelchair and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Please, try to take it easy. You need time to heal." Hank said shortly as he moved the wheelchair out of the way.

"Where is your caregiver?" Hank asked of Alan.

Alan responded with a shrug.

"I will talk to Tara and find out who is supposed to be on duty." Hank said absently.

"Tara?" Xander asked cautiously.

"Yes, my niece. She is coordinating the volunteer schedule for caregivers for those recovering in this room." Hank said and prepared to leave the annoying man with Alan.

"I used to know someone named Tara... I just thought..." Xander said as Hank left the room.

"Yeah, it's her. But she's from this universe. There are doubles of a lot of people here." Alan said, relaxing back on his pillows and stroking Andrew's back absently.

"Is that what you are?" Xander asked, looking at Scott.

"Yeah. I'm just here for medical treatment, like you I guess." Alan said, still

not knowing if he liked this guy or not.

"Well, it wasn't my idea to be here." Xander said sourly.

"You're welcome." Alan said coldly, now he knew.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Xander asked in offense.

"It means that Andrew risked his life to rescue you. He is recovering from a stroke, but when you and your friends were attacked, he used his powers to create a portal to rescue you. Scott is recovering from a coma, but he used his optic blasts to kill monsters so you could escape. Neither of them have the strength to walk across the room on their own but they both used their powers to help you." Alan said in a low tone, so as not to wake Andrew or Scott.

"Sorry. But what am I supposed to do?" Xander asked, becoming more aware of his situation.

"You have a choice, you can either sit there like a self-involved asshole and bitch about being rescued against your will, or.. You can go over to that table and enjoy the meal that Andrew was kind enough to ask Jubilee to leave for you." Alan said with an expression of hardness.

"Um. Okay." Xander said and stiffly made his way over to the table to eat the meal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander ate in silence with his back toward Alan and thought about the things that Alan had said.

Andrew and Scott had risked their lives to help him escape his own dimension, it didn't escape his notice that Alan had bandages on his arms and was confined to the bed too. That probably meant that he used his abilities and risked his life too.

The food was probably very good, but Xander could barely force himself to eat it. He felt like such a jerk for his self-centered attitude... but how could he make it right?

There was a knock on the door and a moment later a young girl poked her head in.

"Are you guys still up to having class this afternoon?" Kitty asked from the doorway.

"Yeah, just give us a minute." Alan said and smiled at Kitty.

Kitty nodded and stepped back out, closing the door.

Alan gently shook Andrew awake and whispered, "It's time for the afternoon class, are you up to it?"

Andrew looked around and noticed Xander eating his meal. He scooted himself up and said, "Yeah... thanks Alan... I mean, for before."

Alan pulled Andrew close to himself and said, "You'd do the same for me. I'm glad to be able to give something back."

Andrew smiled and gave Alan a kiss on the cheek before turning to wake Scott.

"Time for class Scott." Andrew whispered and his heart melted to see the rumped, little boy quality that Scott had as he first awoke.

Scott looked around the room and saw Xander eating his meal. "Hello Xander. Did anyone tell you about the classes we will be having today?"

Xander forced a pleasant expression on his face and turned to face the three in the bed.

"Nope, no one said a word." Xander said with a semi-goofy grin on his face.

Andrew noticed the falseness of Xander's mood, but decided that now wasn't the time to deal with that.

"We are going to have two classes, about eight students each in here today, since we're confined to the bed. You are welcomed to stay and observe or you can leave and come back when the classes are over." Scott said without any hint of malice.

"I'll stay. Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way." Xander said and made his way back to the spare bed.

"You don't have to do that. This class is a discussion, you can join in if you feel like it." Andrew said as he was trying to make himself presentable for the class.

"Ready yet?" Kitty asked, half phased through the door.

"Yeah, come in." Scott said, noticing the astounded look on Xander's face at Kitty's ability.

The door opened and eight students filed in, carrying chairs. Kitty walked back out into the hallway and came in with a box.

"A few of us have been working on this for a while, and when you got hurt, we decided to finish it and give it to you as a 'get well' gift." Kitty said and



presented the box to Scott.

Surprised by the weight of it, Scott took the box and handed it to Andrew, so they could both work to open it. Alan joined in and all three of the men worked on opening the very tightly wrapped gift.

Andrew was stunned. In his lap sat a miniature version of the elevator that he had described his second day in this universe.

"It's exactly the way I pictured it." Andrew said in wonder.

"Artie wrote down just about everything you said that day, so we used his notes, Bobby's drawings and everyone else's help to put it together." Kitty said with pride.

"It's fantastic. Thank you all." Scott said with a swell of pride at the initiative his students were showing.

"It works, go ahead and turn the big wheel." Artie said excitedly.

Andrew did as he was told and the platform raised up as he kept the wheel turning with the treadles.

"What is it?" Xander asked, amazed by the little machine.

"Who wants to explain how this machine works to Xander?" Scott asked in his teacher voice.

All the students raised their hands and finally Scott chose Artie to explain the principle behind the machine as well as how it worked.

Alan and Xander were amazed by the level of knowledge that Artie demonstrated while explaining the machine. When he was finally finished, Scott said, "Very good Artie. Xander? Alan? Do you have any questions for the students about this machine?"

"Yeah. You may have already said this but... where's the ramp?" Xander asked, looking at the machine from different angles.

The discussion was on in full force after that. A knock at the door finally ended the discussion when it turned out to be the next class waiting to come in. All the students gathered their things quickly and ran out of the room since they were late for their next class.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn was getting herself cleaned up as Tara reflected on the things that Dawn had told her. They had talked for nearly two hours about the other Tara and someone named Willow.

Dawn had gone into great detail about how wonderful the relationship was... and wasn't. Apparently, Dawn paid more attention than those around her knew, or they wouldn't say so much around her. She knew what problems Willow and Tara had had in their relationship and what had finally broken them up.

Tara thought about the fact that Willow used magic to manipulate the mind of someone she claimed to love. She didn't know every detail of their circumstances, but some things are just wrong, and manipulating your lover's mind so she won't leave you is on the list.

When Dawn emerged from the bathroom, fresh and filled with energy, Tara couldn't help but smile. Dawn's openness to life was refreshing after all the seriousness of her own life.

"That shower felt wonderful, thank you again for letting me use it. What do you want to do now?" Dawn asked, plopping herself down on the bed next to Tara.

"You mentioned that you did some magic, I was a little curious about that." Tara responded gently.

"Well, there is magick and then there is magic. The stuff that Willow does is really hard-core. She does the magick with a 'k'. The few times that I tried to do that kind of magick... things went wrong. And it felt wrong. That's kind of what led me to the magic that I practice. Nothing will work right or feel right if you are working against your nature and I'm not meant to use that kind of magick."

"Tell me about what kind of magic you do." Tara asked with fascination.

"I do elemental magic. It's not very glamorous, but it isn't nearly as dangerous as Willow's magick. If you wanted, we could go outside and I could show you some things?" Dawn asked with an imploring look.

"Sure, you can borrow a jacket if you want, the autumn nights can get a little cold." Tara said as she went to the closet.

She emerged with two coats and handed one to Dawn.

"Thanks." Dawn said as she put it on and pulled her long hair out of the back with a little tug and flip of her head.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the last student left the room, all four men laid back exhausted. There was a knock on the door and Scott finally said, "Come in." without lifting his head from his pillow.

"I'm here to sit with you." An unfamiliar voice said.

"Warren?" Alan asked in disbelief.

Scott sat up and saw Warren standing in the doorway, his white wings barely clearing the doorframe.

"What brings you back here?" Scott asked with a smile.

"Orroro called and said that you were hurt and she thought you would like a visit. When I got here, Bobby asked me to take his shift taking care of you so he could talk with his girlfriend." Warren said and made his way into the room.

"Introductions?" Andrew asked quietly.

"Sorry, Warren, this is Andrew, my boyfriend, also known as Portal. Next to him is Alan, my brother from the dimension next door and in the other bed is Xander, demon magnet extraordinaire. Guys, this is Warren Worthington the third, also known as Angel." Scott said.

"Nothing like the Angel we know, eh Xander?" Andrew said with a smile.

"Not even close." Xander said, happy to be included in the conversation.

"You know an Angel?" Alan asked cautiously, knowing that they knew demons, so why not?

"Yeah, Buffy's Ex. He's a 250 year old master vampire cursed with a soul." Xander said absently.

"She dated a vampire?" Alan asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, I don't know what she was thinking." Xander said with a shrug.

"Don't you? I mean, I think you would know given your track record." Andrew said playfully.

"And what is wrong with my track record?" Xander asked defensively.

"From what I've heard, you dated an Incan mummy, a human-sized praying mantis, Cordelia the half-demon seer, and Anyanka the vengeance demon." Andrew said informatively.

"Well, Impata, the mummy, only wanted to suck the life force out of me, I didn't actually date the praying mantis, she just wanted me to fertilize her eggs before she bit my head off. Cordelia didn't become a demon till after I dated her and Anyanka stopped being a demon before I dated her." Xander said ending weakly.

"And you've had sex with Dracula, Spike and Faith. Or was I misinformed?" Andrew said with a laugh.

"Who told you about that?" Xander asked, blushing furiously.

"Anyanka and Halfrak told me all kinds of stories about you... you Viking." Andrew said and broke into giggles.

"Well... well... What about your track record?" Xander retorted.

"What about it? I may be a virgin, but I'm in bed with two gorgeous guys. One of these days we'll be ready to go all the way and I'm looking forward to it." Andrew said with certainty.

Scott, Alan and Warren sat in shock as the two discussed their personal matters so openly.

"Andrew, are you thinking of having a ménage à trois with Scott and Alan?" Warren asked in disbelief.

Andrew thought about what he had said and how it sounded. Then he looked at Scott and Alan's interested looks.

"We haven't talked about it, but if it were to happen, I think it would be a wonderful relationship for all three of us." Andrew said honestly.

Scott and Alan looked at Andrew, then at each other. Alan was the first to break into a smile, soon followed by Scott. Andrew noticed the by-play and said, "We are recovering, NOTHING is going to happen until Hank gives the okay."

Scott and Alan immediately broke into identical pouts. Andrew looked at them both and said, "Okay, nothing below the waist is going to happen until Hank gives the okay."

Scott and Alan each moved in to give Andrew a kiss on the cheek and then snuggled close on each side.

"Are they always like this?" Warren asked, not believing that this was Scott, the tight-assed, control freak, leader he had known for years.

"I arrived just before you did. But Andrew used to be shy and timid." Xander said to Warren, moving from his bed to a chair beside Warren.

"I got better." Andrew said from the bed then wriggled under a twin assault of nuzzling on his neck.

"So all that was true? I mean vampires and demons?" Warren asked Xander, ignoring the three playful men in the bed.

"Vampires, demons, trolls, ghosts, witches, a cyber-frankenstein monster, a hell-god and more apocalypses than I can count." Xander said resigned.

"How do you survive in a world like that?" Warren asked with interest.

"It kills most people all of a sudden, it's been killing me a little at a time... a piece at a time... for years. This last battle took my eye." Xander said sadly.

"How did that happen?" Warren asked softly.

"A bad guy caught me and gouged my eye out." Xander said with a pained expression.

"I'm sorry." Warren said gently.

"Why? I lost my eye defending the people I care about... given the same situation, I'd do it again. I don't have any regrets, I guess I'm just tired of the fighting. I mean, I've been fighting constantly for seven years, I'm just wondering... when is it enough?" Xander said with an old voice.

"Why do you have to keep fighting?" Warren asked, recognizing the pain in this man's life.

"At the moment, I have a spell on me that attracts any demon within a thousand miles. But besides that, I've always been with Buffy, helping her, I guess I don't know any other way."

"Who is Buffy?" Warren asked with interest.

"The Vampire Slayer." Xander answered offhandedly.

"What's that?"

"The one girl in all the world given the power and strength to kill vampires and various other demons." Xander answered automatically.

"What would you do if you weren't helping Buffy?"

"I... I don't know. I've been fighting so long, I don't know what I'd do if the fighting ended." Xander said in a small voice.

"Would you like to find out?" Warren asked hesitantly.

"How?" Xander asked in confusion.

"When Scott was introducing us he didn't mention that I'm verrrrrrrry rich." Warren said with a glowing smile.

"What are you saying?" Xander asked, even more confused.

"I'm saying that,, I think I could find a job for you in my company. It would be a real job and you would either sink or swim on your own merits, but I could give you the chance if you're interested." Warren said seriously.

"Why are you doing this?" Xander asked, more in wonderment than suspicion.

"Let me answer your question with a question. If I were a weary, battle-fatigued man that you encountered and you had the ability to change my life so I didn't have to fight anymore, would you do it?" Warren asked, honestly wanting an answer.

"Yeah, I guess I would." Xander said in realization.

"That's why. I have a feeling that all you need is to let the fighting end and start a new chapter in your life. And I trust my instincts about people, I'm willing to give you a chance to prove yourself." Warren said in a business-like tone.

"Thanks." Xander said in astonishment.

"It looks like you have some healing to do first, and you'll probably want to get rid of that pesky spell." Warren said with a smile.

"Yeah, but after that, I'll think about working for you... I'm having trouble even imagining my life without slayers and patrols. I'll need to think about it, but thanks for giving me a chance." Xander said with a real smile.

"No problem. The Professor and Orroro know how to get in touch with me if you do decide to take me up on my offer.

Xander smiled again and looked over at the bed. The three men were asleep cuddled together.

"They do look kind of good together." Xander said with a wistful smile.

"They do at that." Warren said and watched the three sleeping.

## **[Chapter 8: The Other Shoe]**

//Xander, would you be willing to watch over Scott, Alan and Andrew for a while? We have a situation developing and need every combat capable X-man in the hanger immediately.// The Professor sent to Xander telepathically.

//Uh... sure Professor. Is it something I can help with?// Xander responded, trying to get used to talking without talking.

//This is where you can help the most. Hank will remain in the building to attend to the children, if there are any problems you can call on his help.// The Professor sent with an undercurrent of impatience.

//I'll take care of them. Go do what you need to do.// Xander sent and felt the telepathic link go silent.

A moment later Warren got up and left the room, nearly at a run.

Xander looked over at the bed where the three men were sleeping soundly, both Scott and Alan resting their heads on Andrew's chest.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Tara and Dawn were walking from the mansion, Dawn spotted a wooded area and said, "Let's go over there."

Tara followed and within a few moments they found themselves in a clearing among several large trees.

Dawn picked up a fallen leaf and it began to jiggle and shake in her hand, a moment later it hovered above her open palm. Dawn looked at Tara, then with a smile, she tilted her palm toward Tara and the leaf gently floated toward Tara and hovered before her.

"Put out your hand." Dawn said, still smiling.

Tara raised her hand, palm out and the leaf gently made its way down and came to rest.

Tara looked at the leaf, then at Dawn. She felt that she should be freaked out, or at least a little dubious about what she was experiencing, but somehow, she couldn't make herself feel anything but joy at the wonder of the new world opening up before her.

"Would you like to try something?" Dawn asked as she made a gesture and five leaves began to flutter and dance around them.

"Sure, you did say that nothing bad could happen, didn't you?" Tara asked in

confirmation.

"Not exactly. It's magic, just like the elements that power it, it isn't good or evil... it just is. For example, fire is a good thing, without it our civilization would probably still be living in caves and eating raw foods. Fire by itself isn't evil, but it can be put to some evil uses... same thing with magic." Dawn finished with a shrug.

"Then why is Willow addicted to magick and you aren't?" Tara asked, truly interested.

"Because the type of magick that she uses needs the power of blood, pain, suffering and demons. It is flashy, it promises easy answers to your problems. The thing is that the solution that you get from magick is usually worse than the original problem. When the new problem emerges, it's just a little easier to call on magick to solve it, and so on, and so on, until you're addicted to the power and every problem has to be solved using magick." Dawn said with an introspective look.

"And how is your magic different?" Tara asked, and sat down under the largest tree at the edge of the clearing.

Dawn sat to join her and said, "First, it doesn't make life that much easier. There are little things that you can do, but all life's big problems are still there and you still have to deal with them. If you understand the basis of elemental magic, then you respect the natural order and use your magic when it will benefit the world around you. It's not like hunting vampires or demons, but it's important to me."

"I don't really understand." Tara said, looking Dawn straight in the eyes.

"Well, if a forest fire were heading this way, I could use my magic to divert the fire away from here and protect the mansion. It would be possible for me to stop the fire completely, but that would interfere with the cycle of growth, death, and rebirth in the area. Does that make any sense?" Dawn asked carefully.

"Yes, but how would you divert the fire? I mean, how would you do something big like that?" Tara asked, back to fascination.

"My strongest element is air, so I would probably use an air spell to change the wind direction away from the mansion in all directions. The surrounding area would experience the same thing that it would have if I weren't here but the mansion would be spared." Dawn said simply.

"Could I learn something?" Tara asked with excitement.

"Sure, but I have to warn you that what I'm going to show you won't be



flashy, but it will be real, and the truth. Do you still want to learn?" Dawn asked in warning.

Tara nodded enthusiastically.

Dawn looked around and pointed to a place in the middle of the clearing. "Stand there and relax. I'm going to talk you through a very basic blessing that uses visualization. It will get you familiar with the basics before we try anything substantial.

Tara took her place and nodded to let Dawn know she was ready.

"Face toward the north." Dawn said, and noticed Tara looking around, obviously not knowing which way was north.

"Since the sun is setting, that would be west, turn so your left shoulder is toward the setting sun." Dawn said with a fond smile.

"Now put out your hand at arms length, palm up. Look at that point in the air and lower your hand. Still focusing on the point where it was, picture something that means home and growth, you don't have to tell me what it is, but do you have it?" Dawn asked professionally.

"I have it, I just don't understand it." Tara said in a nervous voice.

"Do you mind telling me what it is?" Dawn asked, hoping she could help.

"When you said family and growing, the first thing that came to my mind was my sketchbook." Tara said, full of confusion.

"Don't worry about it. The subconscious has it's reasons and we may never understand why it chooses one thing over another, but since it did, go with it. Just visualize your sketchbook in front of you at arms length. When you have the picture firmly made, let me know." Dawn said in a quiet tone so as not to distract Tara from her visualization.

"Okay, I can see it." Tara said more calmly.

"Now you're going to turn to face the east, but when you do, the sketchbook is going to remain pointing toward the north, and even though you aren't looking at it, it is still there." Dawn said, trying to help Tara focus.

Tara stood still for a moment then haltingly turned herself to face the east. Dawn waited before saying, "Now we are going to do the same thing, at a point in front of you, an arms length away, visualize something that means love and hope.

Tara immediately had a flash of her old blue teddy bear when the words

were spoken. A gentle smile fell across her face as she saw the blue teddy bear form before her mind's eye.

Dawn noticed the smile and could easily tell when Tara was finished.

"Now do like you did before, To the north you have Tara's Earth, to the East you have Tara's water, now it is time to find Tara's fire, turn and visualize safety and comfort." Dawn said, not needing to be so careful now that Tara was getting used to the practice.

Tara saw a plate of her grandmother's cookies appear before her and could even smell them just coming out of the oven.

Dawn gave Tara a moment to become comfortable with the image before saying, "Now you're going to turn to the west and find Tara's air, what makes your heart flutter with excitement, what is your passion?"

Before Tara's mind's eye, the sinewy form of Dawn stood; She was dressed in a brown and green diaphanous gown. There was a wreath of leaves in her hair and a dozen small leaves were swirling around her in a continuous whirlwind.

Tara was surprised by the image, but before she could give it any thought, Dawn said, "Now, remembering that the image to the north is still there; you can turn to face it again. Take a moment to be aware of all four of your elements then let me know when you're ready for the next step." Dawn said professionally, getting the sense that something very important was happening.

Tara did as instructed and without moving to look, could see each of her four elements around her. She nodded her head to let Dawn know she was ready.

"Now focus on a point at the soles of your feet. What you are creating is a representation, not the literal object. You need to come up with a representation of Tara's body. Something that expresses how you feel about your physical appearance and the image you believe other people hold of you."

Tara immediately thought of a pile of worms writhing in filth. She was about to try to make another image when she remembered what Dawn had said about the sketchbook, 'just go with it'.

"Now, drawing a line from north to south and from east to west will cause the lines to cross at one point, that point is Tara's heart. Her emotional center. Is her heart full or empty? Made of cold stone or warmth?"

Tara saw the image form of a stone bowl, filled with water. She accepted

the image and went back through the other five points to reestablish them once again.

"Now, at a point above the top of your head, visualize Tara's spirit,. The representation of mind, who you want to be, what you want to do, the hopes and dreams for the future." Dawn said fascinated at the emotions that had been crossing Tara's expressive face.

Tara saw a white wolf facing into the wind and looking with peaceful intensity into the distance. She held on to that image for a moment, then went back through the other six one more time to make sure all her visualizations were strong.

"Good, now you've finished the hard part, the next step is to invoke the power to create the sphere of protection. Are you ready for the spell?" Dawn asked carefully, noticing that Tara was completely open and unguarded. The sight was something that she had never seen before... and it was beautiful.

"I'm ready, what do I have to do?" Tara asked calmly.

"Normally, you would say the words of the spell, but it will work just as well if I say the words and you listen carefully to them. Picture as much as you can of the spell in your mind as I say the words. If you feel led to say anything, you can join in or take over, this isn't a strict ritual." Dawn said seriously.

"I'm ready." Tara said and went through the seven visualizations again.

"Facing the north, we call upon the archangel Michael to lend his power and will to nurture Tara's Earth. Send guidance to heal her wounds and strengthen her being."

"Facing the East, we call upon the archangel Uriel to lend his soothing voice to comfort Tara's Water. Lead her to the path that she may find contentment and know peace."

"Facing the South, we call upon the archangel Gabriel to lend his strength to defend Tara's Fire. Hold her close, shield her from harm and repel any attack in accordance with the natural laws."

"Facing the West, we call upon the archangel Rafael to lend his passion to inspire Tara's Air. Lift her up to see the possibilities and encourage her to reach for new heights."

"Facing the north and feeling beneath, We call upon Freyja, Norse Goddess of beauty, to lend your wisdom to the aid of Tara's body. Let nothing unreal remain in the image she carries, and help her recognize the beauty before

her."

"Facing the North and feeling within, we call upon Astarte, the Phoenician Goddess of Love to lend your caring to the aid of Tara's heart. Help her to embrace her desires and embrace her passions. Lead her to make wise decisions that will benefit her heart."

"Facing the North and feeling above, we call upon Saint Brigid of Ireland, patron of dedication to lend your will to the aid of Tara's spirit. Please stir the hopes and dreams within her, give her the wisdom to know which dreams to follow and the dedication to follow them."

"So let it be."

"So let it be."

"So let it be."

Dawn finally went silent and closed her eyes, needing a quiet moment to collect herself.

Tara could feel all kinds of new sensations, all of them pleasurable and making her feel more alive than she could ever remember being. She seemed aware of every cell in her body, every molecule of air touching her skin. She could feel the energy and life in the world around her.

Slowly Tara opened her eyes and was mystified. "Dawn." She whispered in awe.

Dawn opened her eyes and saw Tara looking around in wonder. The action seemed strange until she remembered the third or fourth time she performed a spell and was able to see the magic. She closed her eyes again and willed herself to be able to see the magic around her. When she opened her eyes again, she was in awe of Tara. She had a perfect sphere around her body, six of the points she had created were a part of the sphere and the remaining point, her heart, was the sphere's exact center.

Dawn followed Tara's gaze to the trees before them and was astonished at the beauty as the life and magic trickled through the trees.

"Tara, close your eyes and remember what the world looked like before the spell. You'll be able to see the world of magic again anytime you want, just remember this feeling and it will come back to you again." Dawn said reassuringly.

Tara did as she was told and looked around herself to see the mundane world that she was so familiar with.

"That was incredible. Can we do something else, or is it too late?" Tara asked brimming over with energy.

"Which of your elemental points was the strongest, there should have been one that was brighter and clearer than any of the others." Dawn asked, needing to know which element they would be working with.

"The East, Water." Tara said confidently.

"Good, then do you know of any water around here that we can use to try another spell?" Dawn asked; amazed by the transformation that had come over Tara in the short time that they had been acquainted.

"Right this way. There is a pond not too far from here, I can see it from my bedroom window." Tara said with a smile, leading the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott awoke and put on his glasses.

"Where did our caretaker go?" he asked in a sleepy voice.

"He got called away... they all did." Xander said seriously.

"What's going on?" Scott asked, now fully awake.

"The Professor didn't tell me anything except that every combat capable X-man was being called into action... which leaves us out." Xander said sourly.

"How long ago did this happen?" Scott asked as he pulled himself up to a sitting position.

"About three hours. Hank stopped by once to check on you three, he's watching over the children while the others are gone."

There was a gentle knock on the door and Xander groaned as he got off the chair to go answer it.

"Can we come in?" Artie asked shyly.

"Alan and Andrew are sleeping. You can come visit later." Xander said softly.

"We won't be noisy. Clarissa was kinda scared with everyone being gone and wanted to be with Mr. Summers." Artie said timidly. Xander had no doubt that Artie was also scared by the tone of pleading in his voice.

"Come in, but remember that you promised to be quiet." Xander said and moved back from the door.

Dawn followed Tara and eventually they ended up at a small pond.

"Before we can do an actual spell, you will need to focus on the water. It may seem strange at first, but it will get easier. Just look into the water, then see it through magical eyes like you were doing before." Dawn said and stepped back a little.

Tara thought about what Dawn said and knelt at the edge of the pond and looked into the water. She closed her eyes briefly and remembered the feeling of seeing with magic. When she opened her eyes again she gasped at the beauty before her.

"Can you see it?" Dawn asked in a near whisper.

"Yes." Tara said in wonder.

"Now look at your own hand and see the power that is in you." Dawn said, looking at the scene with her own magical vision.

Tara looked at her hand and could see a yellow glow coming about an inch out from it.

"Now reach out and join your aura with that of the pond. Just imagine it happening and will it to be so." Dawn said with a smile at Tara's look of wonder.

Tara reached out and her yellow glow seemed to stretch out to touch the glow of the water. When her glowing tendril touched the water's aura, Tara could feel energy, calmness, coolness, serenity and peace flowing into her as her aura became lighter and lighter.

"Now separate yourself from the pond. Resist the urge to take power from it and just leave it as you found it." Dawn said in warning.

Tara heeded the words. She closed her eyes and looked back to Dawn with her regular vision.

"It was wonderful. I feel lighter." Tara said happily.

"Good, that's exactly what was supposed to happen. There's one more spell I would like to show you but it might be difficult.." Dawn said as she made her way back to Tara's side.

"Let's try it, I feel like I could do anything tonight." Tara said with a confident smile.

"Good. Look into the water with your magical sight and look into the

patterns. If anything looks familiar, just say what comes into your mind." Dawn said and sat on the ground, making herself comfortable.

Tara did as she was told and looked at the ever-changing patterns, then she saw something that looked familiar.

"Andrew." She said, trying to concentrate on that image in the pool.

"Don't try to capture one frozen image, you are going to see thought, movement, emotion, as well as literal images." Dawn said and waited for Tara to put the pieces together.

"How do I recognize what a thought or feeling looks like?" Tara asked honestly.

"Just the same way you saw Andrew. You will look at the images and say the first thing that comes into your mind. If you stop to think about them, you will lose the thread of what's happening and have to start over again.

Tara nodded and looked back into the water.

"Andrew."

"Pain."

"Betrayal."

"Grief... loss... oh God." Tara said and looked away in horror.

"Tara, when were you looking at?" Dawn asked carefully.

"What do you mean?" Tara asked shakily.

"What you were doing is called scrying, or remote viewing. You have the ability to see what is happening or what may happen." Dawn said with caution.

Tara looked back into the water and focused her mind on the shifting patterns. A moment later she turned back to Dawn with tears in her eyes and said, "Later tonight, Oh God Dawn, we've got to stop it."

"Think about what you're saying." Dawn said with warning.

"I'm saying that we've got to stop Scott from betraying Andrew." Tara said, not understanding Dawn's reluctance.

"Scott is the forest, his betrayal is the fire and Andrew is the mansion. If we try to put out the fire, or stop the betrayal, we interfere with the natural order. The best thing we can do is protect Andrew." Dawn said with certainty.

"How?" Tara asked in confusion.

"When a person is hurt, they need to be comforted. Let's provide some comfort for Andrew. Let's make him feel special. Let him know that we care for him. I know that I owe him at least that much after what I put him through the past year." Dawn said from a dark place of memory.

"But we can't do it right away, we'll give him a few hours to digest what's happened, or will happen. In fact, it will probably be best if we don't approach him till tomorrow. Then we'll surprise him. If we try to distract him too soon, he won't be able to deal with the trauma. The trick is to be there when he's been able to deal with what he can but before he starts to brood and become depressed." Dawn said, back to her cheerful self.

Tara thought about Dawn's words and finally asked, "Do you happen to know what kinds of things Andrew like's?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Alan awoke and put on his glasses. When he looked around he noticed that there were eight children in the room. Four of them were on the spare bed, three of them were sitting together on the floor whispering and the last was sitting on Xander's lap, asleep.

"What's going on?" Alan asked in a whisper as he pulled himself into a sitting position.

"The X-men got called into action. Some of the children were worried and wanted to stay up here with us." Scott said quietly.

"What are they fighting?" Alan asked with worry.

"I don't know. Xander and Hank weren't told anything except that every combat capable X-man was needed. They've been gone for about five hours." Scott said with a voice filled with worry.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. Andrew awoke at the sound as two more children were admitted. A young girl, Rachel, had obviously been crying. Andrew saw this and motioned for her to come to the bed. She climbed up and he hugged her.

"What's going on?" He asked with worry at the sight of all the children in the room.

"The X-men were mobilized about five hours ago, the children are worried." Alan said as another child climbed onto the bed.

Within minutes there were six children in the bed with Scott, Andrew and



Alan. All that could be heard was the sound of breathing as each of the children was being soothed.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later found all the adults awake and all the children asleep.

Andrew finally asked, "Do you think we can get Hank to check on them? I'm really starting to get worried."

Then they heard movement in the hall as the Professor's voice was saying, "You can't go in there."

The door flew open with a crack and every one in the room was jolted awake.

A moment later the only sound that could be heard was Scott's shaking voice.

"Jean?"

## *[Chapter 9: Twisting the Knife]*

Jean looked in confusion at Scott, then crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

"How?" Scott asked in wonder as the Professor entered the room and said, "Get her to the MedLab immediately.

"Professor?" Scott asked as Piotr easily picked up Jean's limp form and carried her from the room.

"Scott, I promise I'll explain everything soon, but for now we must secure her before she wakes up and does more damage."

With that declaration, the Professor turned and left the room.

Andrew hesitantly put an arm around Scott's shoulder, only to have it shrugged off.

"I can't, if Jean's alive... I just can't." Scott said in a lost voice.

Andrew felt as if a knife had pierced his soul. Some part of his mind registered a pair of arms come around him and he instinctively fell into the embrace.

Silent tears began to fall as Alan rocked him gently and rubbed his back.

Eventually Andrew calmed and pulled away from Alan's embrace. He turned to look at Alan's face and asked in a shaking voice, "Am I a substitute for Gene too?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott fought his way out of the bed and tried to make his way to the door on shaking legs.

"Where are you going?" Alan asked, as he watched his brother struggle for his footing.

"I've got to go to Jean." Scott said with determination in his voice.

Andrew cast a sad look toward Xander who gave one sharp nod and grabbed the wheelchair.

"How about I give you a ride?" Xander said with false enthusiasm as he brought the wheelchair up behind Scott.

Scott stopped, shocked for a moment before sitting down in the wheelchair and saying, "Thanks Xander."

Alan decided that there were too many little ears about for what he

needed to say and announced to the room, "Everyone back to their own rooms now. It's time for bed."

The children reluctantly gathered what things they had brought and slowly trooped out of the room.

When they were finally alone, Alan said seriously, "You are not a substitute for Gene. I don't know how I'll ever convince you of that, but if it takes twenty years of trying, that's what I'll do."

Andrew sat and thought about the words, wanting to believe them but finally said, "You don't have to say that Alan, it hurt at first but it always does when someone leaves... they always leave."

Alan thought about that for a moment. 'They always leave'... his father, his mother, his friends Warren and Jonathan, his friends Anya and Hallie. They always leave. Andrew didn't need him to debate the point right now or to be given promises that he would believe to be lies, so Alan said, "Then let's share the time we have right now."

Andrew nodded his head into Alan's chest and just held on tighter.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What happened to her Professor? How is she alive?" Scott asked from Jean's bedside.

"From what I've been able to determine from my telepathic scans, a force known as the Phoenix was searching for a physical form to use so it could protect it's homeworld."

"When Jean used her telekinetic abilities to save us, it was attracted to the power and took possession of her body. In the past month, it has been working to save the Shi'ir homeworld. Now that its mission is complete, it has no purpose, so Jean was able to influence it to return to earth."

"But the Phoenix is nearly all instinct, and Jean is unable to control the tremendous power, so when she arrived, there was much destruction."

"We were able to subdue her, but not before many lives were lost and much damage was caused. Bobby, Marie, and Kurt were injured in the battle, and I have nearly depleted my own energy by using telepathic assaults."

"So what are we going to do now?"

"We are going to suppress her power and try to strengthen Jean so she can control the Phoenix. If we can do that, she will be the most powerful mutant on the planet. If we can't..."

"When can I talk to her?"

"Not for a while, we will keep her sedated for a bit so we can heal and develop defenses."

"I need to stay with her."

There was a moment of silence before the Professor asked, "What about Andrew?"

"He'll understand, he knows me better than I know myself." Scott said with a neutral tone.

"He deserves an explanation. Don't let Jean's arrival destroy your friendship." The Professor pleaded.

"It may be too late for that..."

"Isn't Andrew worth the effort to at least try?" the Professor asked, amazed that Scott could be so unfeeling toward someone who cared so deeply for him.

Silence fell across the room as Scott ignored the Professor's question. Both the Professor and Scott turned at the noise when Xander tried to leave the room discreetly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander gently knocked on the bedroom door and peeked inside before entering.

"This is your room too Xander, you can come in without knocking." Alan said as he held Andrew.

"Just common courtesy, guys." Xander said, surprising Alan and Andrew by not making a wise-assed remark.

"How are things with Scott?" Andrew asked bravely.

"The Professor is explaining what happened to Jean... I would tell you but most of it didn't make sense to me. It sounded like she was possessed, but maybe that's just me reflecting my own experiences." Xander said with a tired smile.

Xander made his way to the spare bed when Andrew said, "Why don't you join us over here? It's easier to talk when we're all in the same place."

"Okay... but I need to get in on Alan's side of the bed. It would be too much like I'm taking Scott's place if I... literally took his place." Xander said ending with a shrug.

Andrew and Alan scooted over and let Xander into the bed.

Silence filled the room for a few minutes until Andrew finally said, "I don't think I want to be here anymore."

"I'm sure if you asked the Professor, he could set you up in another room." Alan said helpfully.

"I mean this universe." Andrew whispered.

Alan took Andrew by the shoulders and turned him so he could face him. "Andrew, I haven't said it before, because I thought it was too soon, but now I have to... I love you. I want to stay with you. And I don't care which universe you decide to make your home, I want to be there with you."

"You can't, you don't even know me..." Andrew began before Alan interrupted.

"I can, I do, and I know you well enough to know that you are the man I want to spend my life with... but it's too soon for that type of commitment, so..." Alan trailed off in thought.

"So?" Andrew asked, not daring to believe that this could be happening.

"...so to prove to you, to me, to everyone around us that this isn't a rebound thing from Gene for me, or from Scott for you, let's plan a commitment ceremony one year from tomorrow. A year and a day is a standard waiting period as I recall. That will give us both time to understand our feelings and really get to know each other. And plenty of time to change our minds if either of us decide that this is a mistake. So..." Alan trailed off, this time in fun.

"So?" Andrew asked with a grin.

"So, Lee Andrew Wells, will you do me the great honor of becoming my life partner one year from tomorrow?" Alan asked as he took Andrew's hands in his own.

"Yes." Andrew said shyly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander sat in shock for a few moments before saying, "Congratulations guys."

Alan looked over at Xander's shocked expression and asked, "Xander, would you please stand as a witness at our ceremony. There are traditionally two witnesses."

"I won't even be in this dimension in one year." Xander said.

"Well, I happen to know someone who can take care of that." Alan said with a smile.

"By then we may not be living in this dimension either, but whatever dimension we end up in, we'll stay in touch and come to get you to witness our ceremony." Andrew said, looking happy.

Xander thought about it for just a moment before saying, "I'd be proud to be your witness. But considering the history between me and Andrew, and the way Alan and I started out, I'm kinda surprised that you would choose me."

"Well, I understand that what happened before was the malignant evil thingie that we all had going on, so all that stuff is forgiven. As far as Alan..."

"...I told you exactly what I thought, when I thought it. And I gave you a choice." Alan said with a gentle teasing smile.

"To either sit there like a self-involved asshole or enjoy the meal that Andrew asked Jubilee to leave for me." Xander said from memory.

"And you chose to eat the meal. That was enough to tell me that you *did* care about Andrew and Scott." Alan said with finality.

"Well, thanks guys. I thought I had made an enemy of everyone here within five minutes of waking up." Xander said sheepishly.

"You've gone out of your way to be helpful and haven't said one word against us since you've been here. The first impressions might not have been the best, but we're past that." Alan said with a smile.

"And now that you've got all that evil stuff out of you, I wouldn't mind getting to know you. You've got to admit, we never really tried to be friends before." Andrew said simply.

"Yeah, I'd like that Andrew. I think I'm going to go back to my bed and rest for a while. You guys should think about doing the same, it's really late." Xander said as he got out of the bed.

"Um, before you go... Could you help me to the bathroom?" Andrew said shyly.

"Sure. C'mon buddy."

## *[Chapter 10: Insubstantial Assurances]*

Hank was exhausted. He had worked all night treating Bobby, Marie and Kurt's injuries.

"Good morning Hank, how are our patients this morning?" Orroro said pleasantly.

"They are all fine. Marie and Bobby will be released when they wake up. Kurt will need to stay in bed until he has recovered from his concussion. Jean is going to remain sedated until we can devise a way to contain or at least dampen her power... and Scott is in the next bed, so he can be near her.

"What about Andrew?" Storm asked, speaking her private thought aloud more than asking Hank

"I don't know. Scott seems to be completely focused on Jean. I tried to talk to him about Andrew, but he wouldn't hear me."

"How could he do that to Andrew?" Storm said in dismay.

"I can't explain it either, but it is going to devastate him when he finds out." Hank said, shaking his head.

"Then he doesn't know?" Orroro asked, with wide eyes.

"No. The Professor said that Xander was here when Scott made his feelings known, but I don't think he would tell Andrew about what he heard."

Storm nodded and came to a decision.

"I'll go and talk to Andrew now. As much as I want to protect him, he deserves to know the truth of the matter." Storm said with certainty.

"There is always the chance that Scott will change his mind..." Hank began.

"...if he does, then he deserves to deal with the fallout of his actions. Keeping Andrew in ignorance may prevent some immediate pain, but will only cause long term problems." Storm said with certainty.

"You're right, of course." Hank said in resigned acceptance.

"You look like you could use some sleep." Orroro said in worry.

"The Professor is sleeping now, when he awakes, he will tend to our patients and I will get some rest.

"Good, it will serve no purpose for you to work yourself to exhaustion." Orroro said as she prepared to leave.

"It would serve one purpose, Andrew and Alan would get a good laugh if I were confined to bed for a week." Hank said with a tired smile.

Orroro gave a gentle nod as she left the MedLab.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a quiet knock on the door. Xander made his way from the bed to the door, more easily than the previous day.

"Good morning Xander, do you mind if I come in? I need to speak to Andrew." Storm asked politely.

"Andrew and Alan are both asleep, but you are welcomed to come in and sit with me if you like. Have we been introduced?" Xander asked politely.

"I don't think so, my name is Orroro Munroe." Storm said gently.

"Oh, I've heard your name, I just don't think we've met face to face before except..."

"...when I hit you with lightning." Storm said with a smile.

Xander led her into the room and they sat at the table.

"How is Andrew?" She asked, letting her concern show through her voice.

"He was deeply hurt but Alan and I talked with him and he's going to be alright." Xander said calmly, feeling that it wasn't his place to announce Alan and Andrew's engagement.

"So you told him what you overheard in MedLab?" Orroro asked in surprise.

"I didn't have to. Andrew understands Scott better than Scott understands himself. He saw the rejection for what it was. I don't know if they'll be able to salvage anything from this, but if there is going to be any chance, Scott needs to talk to Andrew. If it were me, I would have given up on him already, but you know Andrew..."

"...yes, he is kind and forgiving. I pray that they can work this out. They are so good for each other." Storm said sadly.

"It's not going to happen." Andrew said sleepily from the bed.

"What?" Xander said in surprise.

"Scott made his choice. And I didn't realize it before but Scott seems to focus all his attention on one relationship, to the neglect of all others." Andrew said with a pained voice.



Xander and Orroro sat in stunned silence.

"While I was the focus of his attentions, I believed that his lack of other close relationships had to do with his need for people to see him as strong and capable despite the loss of Jean... but that doesn't explain why he didn't develop close relationships with other people while Jean was alive..." Andrew said as he was figuring it out.

"I'm not like that am I?" Alan asked in a sleepy voice.

"No, from what I saw of you and Emma, I don't think you're that way at all. Good morning, love." Andrew said and gave Alan a brief gentle kiss.

The shock of that action registered on Storm's face. Xander noticed and said, "Guys, I didn't think it was my place to tell your news. But it looks like Orroro could use some explanation."

"Oh, sorry Orroro, I thought Xander would have told you to keep you from worrying about me." Andrew said with a smile.

"Tell me what?" Orroro asked in true confusion.

"That Andrew and I are engaged to become life partners one year from today." Alan said happily.

Storm sat and digested that information for a minute as the three men watched, awaiting her reaction.

"Why now?" Was Storm's choice of first question.

"Actually, I was going to wait until I was more sure of my feelings before asking, but last night Andrew needed to know that I loved him, and I needed for him to know, so I told him. And the commitment ceremony is just a way of proving that I'm serious, something more tangible than the words. But I *do* realize that this emotional time may be influencing my decisions, so that's why we're waiting for a year, to make sure that what we're feeling is real." Alan said while snuggling against Andrew's side.

"Then allow me to offer my congratulations and blessings for your impending union." Orroro said with a pleased smile.

"Thank you." Both Alan and Andrew said while snuggling closer.

"What about Scott? I mean, it feels like there is unfinished business between you." Orroro said, trying to pin down the source of her uneasiness.

"Actually, I don't think there is. He chose Jean and rejected me. We both know it. If he stays true to form, he will focus all his attention entirely on her until she is better. Once she is, he might make some token effort to

patch things up between us but there will be a distance between us, we'll be colleagues, not friends. On the other hand, he may just decide to avoid all contact." Andrew said in speculation.

"While you're predicting the future, how is my relationship with my brother going to progress?" Alan asked bravely.

"Since I've never seen him interact with Alex, I can only guess. I think that you will be closer to him than I will, but not by much. I don't see him doing anything more brotherly than maybe remembering you on your birthday and introducing you as his brother when meeting new people. And with us being engaged, he may decide to avoid contact with you too." Andrew said sadly.

"That is horrible. Do you really believe this to be true?" Orroro gasped.

"Yes. But you've known Scott much longer than either of us, do you think that I am misreading the situation?" Andrew asked steadily.

Orroro thought about Scott's relationships with people other than Jean, or lack thereof. Finally she admitted, "I can understand your analysis of his behavior, but I have to believe that he will behave better than that."

"Then let's see what he does. If I'm right, he won't come up here, call, or even send a message to me until after he has had time to talk with Jean." Andrew said in a cold voice.

Alan noticed Andrew's retreat into emotionlessness and whispered into his ear. Andrew blushed and smiled as he turned his attention back to Orroro and Xander.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence Andrew said, "Xander is going to be one of our witnesses at the ceremony."

"Have you decided on the other witness yet?" Xander asked, glad to have a new topic of conversation.

"I have an idea, but we haven't discussed it." Andrew said as he shifted his position so he could lay his head on Alan's chest.

"Who do you have in mind, love?" Alan asked, enjoying Andrew's closeness.

"Professor Frost." Andrew said as he snuffled.

"I thought she would perform the ceremony. Who did you have in mind for that?" Alan asked while changing position to better accommodate Andrew.

"Professor Xavier, I mean, we have a year to convince Professor Frost that he isn't the enemy." Andrew said with a smile.

"True enough... I really need to let Professor Frost know what happened." Alan said, voicing a worry he had had since the previous day.

"I've thought about that too. Maybe Orroro could talk the Professor into letting me open a little portal, just so you can tell her what's going on." Andrew said hopefully.

"I don't know how receptive Charles would be to such an idea." Orroro said dubiously.

"Try asking him how he would feel if one of the X-men were missing, and there was blood on his bedroom floor and a broken window." Andrew said simply.

"That might convince him. It isn't going to hurt you to open this doorway will it?" Orroro asked in concern.

"Not at all, Alan's dimension is almost right on top of this one. Before I learned to control my power, his is one of the dimensions that I would accidentally look in on. It's actually a lot easier than opening a portal to my home dimension." Andrew said honestly.

"Then I will talk to Charles now, I believe it would be best for those in your home dimension to know that you are well." Orroro said as she got up to leave.

The three men watched as she left the room.

"What now?" Xander asked, not knowing what to do.

"Let's enjoy a crisis free moment before we contact Alan's home dimension. I feel like I've been on a rollercoaster since day before yesterday." Andrew said honestly.

Alan and Xander couldn't help but nod in agreement.

"Any guess on how Professor Frost is going to react when she hears the news?" Andrew asked playfully.

"My guess is 'no reaction'. She is a wonderful woman, and a good friend, but she doesn't display her emotions obviously to those around her. That's part of what makes her reputation as a cold-hearted bitch." Alan said simply.

"Ooo, I think Xander may be falling in love again." Andrew said in a playful tone.

"What?" Xander asked with raised eyebrows.

"Well, have you ever met a cold-hearted bitch that you weren't attracted

to?" Andrew said, enjoying the chance to tease Xander.

"Well... I... No, I guess I haven't. What does that say about me?" Xander asked in confusion.

Realizing that he had hit a nerve with Xander, Andrew said honestly, "Not what you might think. I think you just like strong, self-assured women. Any woman who speaks her mind and is self-confident tends to be labeled as a bitch. It actually says a lot about you that you want an equal as a partner rather than some shy, demure doormat who will bend to your every whim."

"Uh... thanks?" Xander said in confusion, trying to decide if he was being insulted or complimented.

Andrew laughed at Xander's confused state and said, "Don't worry Xan, all I'm saying is that you like a person rather than an empty headed pretty face. Let me put it this way, did you think Harmony was attractive?"

"Harmony Kendall? Are you kidding? I couldn't stand to be in the same room with that ditz. Personally, I think that was how Spike got his soul restored. He endured a relationship with Harmony and he built up so much good karma that as a result, his soul was restored to balance the forces of nature."

"Well Harmony was pretty, why didn't you find her attractive?" Andrew asked, trying to lead Xander to his point.

"Because she was an airhead. What would you do with her other than sex? You couldn't talk to her because she only talked about fashion and gossip. You couldn't go out and do anything with her because she never shut up. She was lazy, conceited and mean spirited. What was there to like?" Xander said in exasperation.

Silence fell over the room as Xander put the pieces together. Alan finally broke the silence by saying, "Don't you just love it when he does that?"

A smile of comprehension finally covered Xander's face and he asked, "How do you do that?"

"It must be another mutant ability." Andrew said with a shrug and a grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Orroro approached the bedroom door to find it standing open.

She knocked on the doorframe and the three men looked up as one.

"We decided to leave it open so Xander wouldn't have to keep getting up to answer it. If yesterday was any indication, we should probably be selling

tickets at the door." Alan said happily.

"And we could use that money to help pay for our ceremony. The catering bill alone is going to kill us." Andrew said in mock worry.

"Why will your catering bill be high?" Orroro asked, despite herself.

"We'll probably be inviting the Scoobies, the Slayers and the X-men from two universes. And we don't want to be cheap on the food... there is no worse way to start out your life together than with the bitching of everyone you know ringing in your ears about how nasty the crab puffs are." Andrew said, trying to look serious.

Orroro finally understood that the men were just being playful and said, "Charles gave his approval for you to contact Alan's home dimension. On the provision that you don't exert yourself."

"Why don't you stay here with us while I contact them. I mean, the more familiar faces that they see, the more likely they will be to believe your story." Andrew said before Alan added, "Orroro being here will go a long way toward helping her to believe our story. My Orroro has been in Africa for nearly a year."

"Everyone ready?" Andrew asked as he sat up straighter in the bed.

Nods from everyone convinced him that it was time.

He cast his awareness toward his target dimension and began searching for Emma Frost.

It only took a few moments for him to locate her in her office. She looked up at the point where he formed the portal before it had begun to form.

The golden haze formed into a swirling vortex and soon there was a three-foot vortex hovering before the occupants of the bed looking out into Professor Frost's office.

"Hello Professor." Alan said calmly.

"Scott? It's good to see that you aren't hurt. We've all been quite concerned." Emma said conversationally.

"I am fine. After Gene's death, I... um... did something stupid." Alan said with a blush of embarrassment.

Professor Frost only responded with a raised eyebrow of inquiry.

Alan raised his arms and showed the bandages.

Emma nodded in understanding. Then she asked, "So where are you?"

"I'm in a neighboring dimension. Andrew... Professor Frost, this is Andrew, he found me near death and brought me here to save my life." Alan said timidly.

"Hello Professor Frost." Andrew said quietly.

"Hello Andrew, thank you for saving Scott, he is very important to a lot of people here." She said without a hint of emotion showing through her look or voice.

"I just wanted to let you know that I am alive and well. I have been ordered to stay in bed for a week until I am healed." Alan said, with a bit more confidence.

"You must admit that this is quite a bit to take on faith Scott, do you think that you can provide me some sort of proof to verify your claim?" Professor Frost said professionally.

"Ororo, could you come here and say hello to Professor Frost?" Alan said to Storm who was still outside the view of the portal.

Storm moved into view and said, "Hello Professor Frost, from what Alan has said, you can verify the location of my other self in your dimension to corroborate his story."

"Alan?" Professor Frost questioned.

"Yes, that is what we call your Scott, since we have one of our own." Ororo said with a gentle smile.

"May I ask, why you didn't have him here to verify your story?" Professor Frost inquired.

"Because he is at the bedside of his injured fiancée, Jean Grey." Alan said with a pained voice.

"I see." Professor Frost said and cast a glance toward Xander.

"Oh, Professor Frost, this is Xander. He is a visitor from yet another dimension." Alan said formally.

Emma nodded in introduction and asked, "Then you will fully recover?"

"Yes, I just need to take time for the wounds to heal and I will be fine... There is one other thing I need to tell you." Alan said with nervousness in his voice.

Emma again prompted him to continue with her eyebrow.

"Andrew and I have become involved, we are planning a commitment

ceremony in one year." Alan said with the fear showing through his voice.

The Professor betrayed her shock for an instant before saying, "You have only been gone for three days and are very emotionally unstable, as evidenced by your suicide attempt. Are you sure this is a wise course of action?"

"That's why we're waiting for a year. I love Andrew completely, but I have enough sense to realize that this is not the time for me to be making life-altering decisions. Please be happy for me Professor." Alan said in a pleading tone.

"I will do this for you, Scott. I will reserve judgment until I have had a chance to get to know Andrew. It may not be a blessing as such, but it is not disapproval by any means." Professor Frost said in a voice that might almost be considered tender.

"Thank you Professor, that is all I can ask. As soon as Andrew and I are released by our doctor, we will probably be returning to your dimension." Alan said seriously.

"How did Andrew come to find you?" The Professor asked curiously.

"Andrew has the ability to open interdimensional portals, apparently my... suicide attempt... had the effect of throwing my counterpart in this universe into a coma. When Andrew came to help, he was able to see what was happening to me and... he saved me." Alan said in wonder, giving it voice for the first time.

"So our Scott was in a coma, Alan was near death from blood loss, and Andrew had a stroke from overusing his mutant ability. That is why we haven't contacted you sooner, Andrew has been recovering as well." Orroro said informatively.

Professor Frost nodded in acceptance when Alan said, "I'll check back with you in the next day or so, I just wanted for you to let everyone know that I am well and not to worry. How are things there?"

"Much the same as when you left, however the news of you being alive and recovering will be a much needed morale boost. Everyone is becoming weary of the fight." Emma said and nearly looked tired.

"How are Remy and Warren?" Alan asked quietly.

"Warren seems to be recovering well, but Remy is inconsolable. I don't know what else to do for him." Emma said, this time actually betraying worry for an instant in her expression.

"Would you mind if I were to talk to him next time we contact your dimension?" Alan asked with his own worry showing.

"No, I don't know that it will help, but I don't see how it could cause any harm. And doing something is preferable to doing nothing, which is all we have left to try with Remy." Emma said in an uncharacteristic ramble.

"Please let him know that I may be calling on him. We'd better close the portal now, Andrew still has to contact his home dimension later this morning." Alan said with a grim smile.

"Be well my friend." Emma said as Andrew withdrew his power from the portal.



## *[Chapter 11: Dealing with the Devil]*

Storm made her way out of Alan and Andrew's room and down to the kitchen. Logan, obviously enjoying a cup of coffee, greeted her.

She smiled to herself and went to the coffeepot and poured a cup for herself. Orroro seated herself then took a deep drink from her mug before saying, "Good morning Logan. How does this morning find you?"

"Helluva thing, Jean's alive, one-eye ditched the kid, half the kids in the place saw Jean keel over last night. It ain't barely daylight and we've had a full day already." He said and took a drink of his own coffee.

"How did you know about Scott and Andrew?" she asked with worry. She didn't want her friends to be hurt by gossip and speculation.

"I overhear things sometimes, can't help it, I got good ears. Don't worry, no one else knows, and I won't tell." Logan said seriously.

"Thank you my friend. I know the whole story will inevitably come out, but I can hope that the time will be delayed as long as possible to give everyone time to deal with their new situations." Storm said and took another drink, enjoying a decent cup of coffee.

"Don't seem to be much for us to do but just hold it together till the dust settles." Logan said and leaned back in his chair.

"That might be the hardest thing to do right now." Orroro said and sat her coffee on the table.

"I know you want to fix everything, but it don't work that way. We just have to hang around till someone needs us." Logan said, looking Orroro right in the eyes.

Orroro nodded and silence fell over the kitchen.

Logan got a contemplative look on his face which turned to resolve. Finally he said, "I'm gonna be out of town for a few days and I need to keep it quiet."

"Of course, where will you be?" Orroro dared to ask.

"I just thought of something I can do. Someone needs my help... she just don't know to ask for it." Logan said and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Classes were canceled for the day due to the overwhelming lack of teachers.

Andrew, Alan and Xander were surprised by the lack of visitors and enjoyed a morning of napping and conversation.

Finally it was noon and Andrew opened the portal to his home dimension.

"Hi Buff, how are things at slayer central?" Xander asked, noticing that there was still damage in the living room.

"It's fine. When you left, the demon feeding frenzy seemed to stop. How are you doing there? Any demon problems?" She asked pleasantly.

"Not a one. Have you had any luck finding a spell to get rid of the demon beacon?" Xander asked with his goofy smile, the one that had curiously been absent for most of the past twenty-four hours.

Buffy nodded and said, "Yeah, Willow has a spell that she thinks will work, she's ready to try it if you are."

"Sure, come on. Let's give it a try." Xander said as Andrew opened the portal to the floor so Willow could come through.

A moment later Xander, Andrew and Alan were watching as Willow cast the circle and prepared for the ceremony.

Buffy walked through the portal and asked, "Where's Dawn?"

"With Tara, I guess." Xander said before an 'Oh Shit!' expression fell across his face.

"Tara?" Willow asked, suddenly gone pale.

"Yeah, there is a Tara in this dimension. She's here visiting her uncle Hank. Willow, she's not the same Tara you knew, she is a completely different person than the one you knew." Andrew said, trying to deflect Willow's probable reaction.

"I need to see her." Willow said, putting on her resolved face.

"Fine, can we get Xander's demon magnet demagnetized first? I'd go to get Dawn now but Alan and I are both confined to bed for a few more days." Andrew said with some tiredness showing through his voice.

"Love, do you need to close the portal and relax?" Alan immediately asked in a soothing tone.

"No, I'll be fine, but the sooner we're done, the better." Andrew responded quietly.

"What happened?" Buffy asked, just noticing that the men were in bed.

"Stroke." Xander said, pointing at Andrew. "Blood Loss, non-vampire." He said pointing at Alan.

"I guess you're in a hurry." Buffy said as she watched Willow finish the preparations.

"And you wouldn't be?" Xander asked Buffy seriously.

"Point taken." Buffy said as Willow began the chanting.

Long minutes later Xander was standing in the center of a circle while Willow was chanting and stopping occasionally to throw little pinches of ground herbs at him.

Alan was watching in bafflement as Andrew was following the spell, considering how she was affecting the balance of forces.

Finally, the spell was finished and there was no outward difference.

"Did it work?" asked Xander seriously.

"Rona, Caridad, bring it in." Buffy called through the portal.

The two slayers came into the room carrying something that looked like a cross between a deformed pitbull and a dead goat. The stench of decay filled the room as the slayers struggled with the bound beast.

They sat the demon before Xander and everyone looked on to see its reaction.

The beast did nothing but struggle against the ropes that were binding it. It made no move toward Xander, and didn't seem to notice him in the room.

Confident that the spell had worked, Willow said, "It looks like our work here is done. Where's Tara?"

Caridad and Rona dragged the struggling demon back through the portal as Xander moved to open a window.

Andrew threw a disgusted look toward Willow before casting his mind about to find Tara and Dawn.

He was surprised to find them about ten feet from the bedroom door and rapidly approaching.

Andrew pointed at the bedroom door as Dawn knocked.

"Come in." Alan said, wondering when the thing got closed again.

Dawn and Tara entered the room.

Willow ran for Tara but Dawn got in the way.

"She's not the Tara you remember. She is a completely different person." Dawn said strongly.

Willow ignored her and made her way to Tara.

Tara endured a hug and kiss without betraying a hint of emotion.

Willow finally noticed and said, "Don't worry Tara, we were meant to be together, I'll protect you and you'll never have to worry about anything again."

"Willow, I'm not her. I don't know you. Please don't touch me. Leave. Me. Alone." Tara said firmly.

Everyone in the room but Dawn was astonished at the confidence in Tara's voice. Dawn just beamed at the strength Tara had just displayed. True, the blessing and joining with the water element did give her a boost of confidence and power, but the strength of will to say those words came from Tara herself.

"You can't mean that, baby. I love you and now that you're back, we can be together forever." Willow said, sure that she could make Tara see it.

"No." Tara said and crossed her arms over her chest.

Willow said, "You just need to spend some time with me and you'll love me again. I know it."

"No." Tara said with firmness.

Willow began chanting in some ancient language that Andrew didn't even know. When Buffy and Dawn realized what Willow was doing they ran to stop her but Willow just raised a hand and they froze in place.

Her eyes and hair had turned black and her skin became veiny. Xander moved to stop her but with a flick of her wrist he was knocked into the opposite wall.

As she uttered the last syllable, a blue flash erupted from Tara and Willow stood stunned before she fell to the floor, unmoving... unknowing... unthinking...

Dawn and Buffy were released from Willow's hold. Dawn made her way to Tara as Buffy made her way to Willow. Andrew and Alan struggled out of bed and made their way to Xander.

Buffy tried to revive Willow, but she wouldn't snap out of whatever trance

state she was in. Finally Buffy asked, "What did you do to her?"

"I did it. I performed a blessing on Tara last night to protect her." Dawn said to Buffy and Tara.

"But what did you do to her? I can't wake her up." Buffy said with extreme worry.

"I invoked the protection of Gabriel in accordance with the natural laws." Dawn said and led Tara to a chair, she wasn't looking so good.

"What does that mean?" Buffy asked, cradling Willow against her bosom.

"It means that whatever Willow was trying to do to Tara with that spell, came back to her three-fold." Andrew said as he helped Xander up onto the bed.

"She was going to make me her zombie?" Tara asked in horror.

"Something like that. She had a problem, she used magick to solve it. I don't know what that spell was she was chanting." Dawn said seriously.

Andrew got comfortable in his bed and said, "I don't know either, I don't even recognize the language she was using."

"So what are we going to do with her now?" Buffy asked in a helpless near-whisper.

"Wait for the spell to wear off and hope that she learned a lesson from this." Dawn said simply.

Buffy looked with anger at the uncaring attitude of her sister.

"Willow took care of you and all but adopted you when I died. Is this how you repay the kindness that she's shown you over the years?" Buffy raved.

"The Willow who did those things was wonderful and I loved her a lot. She's gone, she's been disappearing, a little at a time for the past six years. That woman isn't the same person. She uses magick to hurt people. Look around you Buffy, how many people have been hurt by her magick? How many times has she nearly killed one of us or all of us? The old Willow cared about her friends and would never do anything to put them in danger. Willow the witch gets what she wants with magick. She doesn't have to work for anything anymore." Dawn said, her anger turning to anguish.

"I think I would've liked Willow before she was a witch. She sounds like a really nice person." Tara said in comfort to Dawn.

"Yeah, she was the best. Smart, happy, and always fun to be around... I

miss her." Dawn said and turned to cry on Tara's shoulder.

"I wish we could make her like she was before she was a witch." Tara said absently while comforting Dawn.

"Done." Willow said in a dark raspy voice. She still had her black hair, black eyes and veiny skin, then a flash of light engulfed her, transforming her into her red headed, blue eyed old self.

## *[Chapter 12: Slippery Slopes]*

"What the hell was that?" Alan asked as Willow got up from the floor and looked around.

"It was a vengeance demon's spell, the power of the wish." Xander said with a trace of anger creeping into his voice.

"Willow was a vengeance demon?" Andrew asked in surprise.

"I remember that D'Hoffryn tried to recruit her when she did the 'will be done' spell that made Xander a demon magnet the last time." Buffy said while staring at Willow.

"And made you want to marry Spike." Xander threw in.

"She must have gone back to Arashmahal and accepted his offer." Dawn said quietly.

"So what about the malignant evil thing, if she was a vengeance demon, why was she affected too?" Buffy asked the group.

"Her vengeance demon would feed the parasitic evil, making it stronger, but her demon nature would keep her from going insane... otherwise she would have been the first to go mad." Andrew said as he figured it out.

"How could she have hidden it from us?" Buffy asked, noticing that Willow was becoming more aware of her surroundings, like she was waking up from a dream.

"She didn't hide it. We just all assumed that she was acting out of grief and her magick addiction. That's why we couldn't get her back to normal after the parasitic evil thingie was cleansed out of her. She is a demon, or was a demon. Tara's wish made her like she was before she became a witch, so now she's fully human." Dawn said in speculation as she was leading Tara to sit on the spare bed.

"Guys? Where are we?" Willow asked with a lost little voice.

"It's a long story Wills, we're in upstate New York in a parallel dimension." Xander said, taking a seat next to Tara and Dawn on the bed.

"God, what happened to you Xander? Why are you wearing an eyepatch?" Willow asked in worry.

"I'll tell you later Will, you guys better get back to slayer central. I think Andrew needs to rest." Xander said as he noticed that Andrew was getting paler.

Buffy looked at Andrew and without a word went through the portal. She led Willow who was just looking around and trying to make sense of things.

"You coming?" Buffy asked of Dawn.

"I'd like to stay here for a while." Dawn said and moved a little closer to Tara. Buffy's eyes widened in comprehension.

Buffy finally asked, "How about you Xander?"

"I have some unfinished business here." Xander said plainly.

"Noon tomorrow?" Buffy asked of Andrew.

Andrew nodded and waved before withdrawing power from the portal.

"You okay love?" Alan asked Andrew, looking into his eyes, searching for the truth.

"I guess I'm not as recovered as I thought. Two portals in one day really wore me out." Andrew said with a tired smile.

"Then why don't you get some rest? We'll get out of here and leave you to it." Dawn said and rose from the bed.

"Wait, one question before you go." Alan said quickly.

Dawn looked at Alan, prompting him to ask the question.

"Why did you cast the protection spell on Tara? I mean, did you know that Willow was going to do that?"

Dawn got a peaceful smile and said, "I had no idea that Willow would act that way. I was showing Tara some basic spells and thought a blessing and protection spell would be a good thing to have... isn't it pretty?"

Andrew realized what she was talking about and willed himself to see the magical world.

"It's beautiful... a perfect sphere... it's so light, how did you get it so light?" Andrew asked, amazed by the beautiful, powerful magic.

"After the blessing, Dawn showed me how to touch the water element." Tara said serenely.

"Whatever you did worked perfectly. Even if you didn't mean to do it, thank you for bringing the old Willow back to us." Xander said with a smile.

"Xander, could I talk to you for a minute?" Dawn asked and dragged him away, leaving Tara to face Andrew and Alan alone.



"So how are you doing Tara?" Andrew asked uncomfortably.

"Great." Tara said with a look of peace.

"That whole thing with Willow didn't bother you did it?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No, I mean it shook me up a little while it was happening, but now I'm fine, especially since it worked out okay." Tara said with a smile.

"Good, I'm glad you weren't bothered." Andrew said honestly.

"So you knew the other Tara?" Tara asked bravely.

"A little, I never sat down and talked to her like I'm doing with you now. I didn't really hang around with that group back then." Andrew said shyly.

"Then you're the person that I want to ask. The others loved her, they may only be remembering the good things. Can you tell me, what was she really like?" Tara asked with her old shyness showing.

Andrew smiled and said, "My world would be a much happier and better place if she were still alive there. Now that she's gone, it's like one of the stars went out and the night is just a little bit darker and the day is just a little dimmer."

"That's a lot to live up to." Tara said with worry.

"Do you know what she did to make her so special?" Andrew asked seriously.

Tara shook her head.

"She loved the people around her. Her witchy powers weren't all mega and scary like Willow's, her fighting skills weren't great like Buffy's or even as good as Xander's, but she loved each of them and their lives were better because of it. And when she was gone, they were diminished." Andrew said and snuggled into Alan's side.

"Then they're always going to think of me as her, aren't they?" Tara asked, a little afraid.

"Maybe not." Alan said softly.

Tara looked at him in question.

"Scott and I are doubles, like you and the other Tara. If anyone was going to live in someone's shadow, it should be me. But no one has treated me like 'the other Scott'. I had to change my name to keep things from becoming confusing, but besides that, no one has treated me like my twin or tried to force me to behave like him." Alan explained peacefully.

"How can I get them to see me as me?" She asked, sounding a little more confident.

"What you did today went a long way toward proving that you are your own person. Tell me something, unless I'm being too personal, are you worried about this because you're afraid Dawn might see you as the other Tara?" Andrew asked carefully.

"No. I know that Dawn sees me as myself, it's the others that I'm worried about. If I'm going to be around Dawn, I'm going to be around them and I don't want that kind of pressure." Tara said seriously.

"Don't worry about the others, their lives are full of other things to worry about. The only people who matter are you and Dawn, as long as you're fine, the others can deal." Andrew said with confidence.

Tara smiled and walked over to the bed to give Andrew a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks Andrew, I'm really glad we got some time to talk."

"Any time Tara, and I mean that. No matter what you need to talk about, or when you need to talk about it, I am here for you." Andrew said seriously, looking her in the eyes.

Tara smiled sweetly and said, "Thanks, I didn't know when I came here that I was going to be making so many friends."

"Count me in on that too." Alan said with a determined look.

Tara looked at him in question.

"Andrew and I are planning to become life-partners one year from today. I realize that he will have friends of his own and so will I, but we will also have friends as a couple. If you'd be willing, I'd like for you to be our friend." Alan said timidly, knowing that he sounded needy.

"I already think of you as a friend Alan. I just didn't know about the couple thing." Tara said softly.

The door opened. Xander and Dawn walked in smiling to find Tara standing by Andrew and Alan's bed.

"You ready to go? These guys need some sleep and we've got things to do." Dawn said with excitement.

Tara got a big, loving smile and said, "Ready when you are, sweet dreams guys."

Xander watched as the girls left the room.

"So what did you need to stay in this universe for, if you don't mind my asking." Alan asked of Xander.

Xander ducked his head and quietly said, "To take care of you guys."

"You don't have to do that for us Xan, we've got a mansion full of people who can walk us to the bathroom." Andrew said in a playful tone.

"I just want to, okay? It's hard for me to explain but, I don't have a lot of guy friends and being here with you two, I dunno, I'm just not ready for it to end." Xander said weakly.

"Got it Xan. And we enjoy you being here too. Just as long as you aren't doing this out of some warped sense of duty and obligation, we're happy to have you here with us." Andrew said with a smile.

"Besides, it's like we were just telling Tara, we each have our own friends, but a select few are going to be 'our' friends, and you Alexander are on that list." Alan said in a commanding voice.

"Thanks guys, you don't know what it means to me to be accepted after everything that's gone on." Xander said tiredly.

"Then sit down and let's have some buddy time." Andrew said with a laugh.

"Buddy time?" Xander asked dubiously.

"Yeah, guys hanging out, talking, teasing, ragging on each other. We got 'Y' chromosomes, let's use 'em." Alan said happily.

"But aren't you guys gay?" Xander asked in honest confusion.

"Well yeah, but we're still guys. I mean, just because I love a man doesn't mean that I suddenly have 'fantastic' ideas for interior design or something like that." Andrew said with a disturbing flamboyance on the word fantastic that made Alan and Xander both laugh.

"So how do we start buddy time?" Xander asked as he laid back across the foot of the bed.

"I don't know... I guess we do like we've been doing. Talk about whatever junk we feel like." Andrew said.

"Do you think Dawn and Tara are going to get together?" Xander asked without getting up from his laying position.

"Possibly, it could go either way at this point. They might end up as friends or lovers." Andrew said with confidence.

"You don't know? Is your psychoanalytical mutant ability failing you?" Alan

asked in a teasing tone.

"No. I can still read you like a book mister, But Dawn and Tara have to decide what they mean to each other. I think both of them want to become lovers, but it will all depend on whether one of them has the guts to come out and say it." Andrew said simply.

"What about Willow, you get any readings from her?" Xander asked curiously as he propped himself up on an elbow.

"Willow was too out of it to send any readings, but Buffy was protective enough that she might have more than a passing interest in Willow." Andrew said speculatively.

"No way! Buffy the Vampire Layer, going for a woman, not just a woman but a fully human woman? I don't see that happening." Xander said somewhat cattily.

"What do you mean?" Alan asked, genuinely interested.

"I mean Buffy's first boyfriend was Angel, the 250 year old master vampire I was telling you about. Her second was Riley, an enhanced human 'super-soldier', the next Spike, Angelus' 125 year old childe or grand-childe depending on who you talk to. For Buffy to give up on men, AND demons would be quite a lifestyle change." Andrew said with a grin.

"Actually, she had a human boyfriend before Angel, his name was Pike." Xander interjected.

"That's who the Buffy in this universe is dating." Andrew said off-handedly.

"How do you know that?" Xander asked suspiciously.

"After I met Tara, the Professor decided to find the counterparts in this dimension of all the slayers and Scoobies." Andrew said and snuggled against Alan again.

"So what am I like in this dimension?" Xander asked curiously.

"You aren't exactly here. Your counterpart is female. Alexandria Harris-Harmon." Alan said as he put his arm around Andrew to snuggle him closer.

"Harmon? As in Jesse Harmon?" Xander asked, growing pale.

"Yeah, the Professor said that Xandria and Jesse were married, and that they had been childhood sweethearts." Alan said and noticed that Andrew had fallen asleep.

"I would really love to see him again. I mean, my friend Jesse died seven,

almost eight years ago. I would really like to see the Jesse in this universe, to see that he is alright. I've always wondered what kind of man he would have turned out to be." Xander said and turned a tear-filled gaze on Alan.

"We happen to know someone who can open portals and could probably arrange that for you, although it won't be till after he's recovered. He's exhausted from opening two portals today." Alan said with worry as he stroked Andrew's back.

"I'm sorry that I had any part in that strain. I promise I won't ask him to open another portal for me until I'm ready to leave... If I leave." Xander finished in a near-whisper.

"Are you thinking of staying?" Alan asked in surprise.

"Yes, Warren offered me a job. Just a plain old, working for a living job. And I can't even imagine what it would be like to work and go home and not have to worry about demons or go out patrolling or meet with Buffy and Willow for a Scooby meeting or research party. I don't know if I could do it. A part of me says, 'do it, you've earned a rest' while another part says, 'you'll be bored out of your skull'." Xander rambled miserably.

"I can't say I know exactly how you feel, but I've got a similar problem to face. Andrew and I want to be together but I don't know how we're going to be able to do that. I am part of a team, the X-men from my universe, and I take that commitment seriously. They are as much a part of my life as the Scoobies are of yours I suppose. It would be hard for me to think about giving up my place on their team, but I don't want Andrew to have to face the world I come from. They *kill* mutants there if they catch them. They *mutilate* mutants in the name of preserving humanity. Chances are that it will come down to a war between mutants and normals, and the mutants are horribly outnumbered and disorganized. If it comes down to war, I don't think we have a chance of winning. And I don't want to take Andrew into that." Alan said sadly.

"Then why don't you stay here?" Xander asked with honest curiosity.

"Because I don't belong here. I told myself I did, but this is Scott's universe and I don't see us getting over our problems anytime soon. Andrew isn't from here either, but somehow he made this place his home... but even he has talked about leaving. Neither of us belong here and I can't find a reason to want to stay... unless that's what Andrew wants. For him, I would do it." Alan said with certainty.

"What about my world? I mean it *is* Andrew's home dimension." Xander asked, understanding Alan's misgivings.

"From what Andrew described, there isn't much more for us there than there is in my universe. He doesn't have any family to speak of, and I don't have any that I would care to associate with. And with all the demons and vampires, we'd be in the position of having to worry for our safety every day of our lives." Alan said tiredly.

"Haven't you noticed? Every world is like that. Every world has its problems whether it's demons, evil mutants, monsters or street gangs. It's what makes life something more than a series of days where you do the same thing until you die. The struggle is the thing that makes you alive. If you don't have obstacles to overcome, how will you ever grow stronger, or smarter?" Xander said for Alan's benefit as much as his own.

"So mutant haters are obstacles for us to overcome to make us stronger. To unite us and galvanize us or to destroy us until the next, smarter, better group of mutants comes along?" Alan asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, sounds kinda inspirational doesn't it?" Xander said with a laugh.

"It makes sense in theory, but it may be too late to put it into practice in my universe." Alan said sadly.

"Then don't go there. You've got to decide what your priorities are and stick to them. What is most important? Your team or your partner? If it's your team, let Andrew know that before the commitment ceremony, I'm willing to bet that he'll want to stay by your side and will have respect for you for standing with your team. If you decide that Andrew is the priority, then act like it. Figure out what's best for him and explain why you believe as you do, chances are that Andrew will go along with you if he understands that it's what you really want." Xander explained confidently.

"How do you know all this stuff?" Alan asked in amazement.

"You try hanging around with a group of women for seven years and not pick up some relationship tips." Xander said with an exasperated expression.

"I can see that." Alan said and thought about what Xander had said.

"How about I go back to my bed and let you get some rest? You look like you could use a nap too." Xander said, looking at Andrew.

"Yeah, thanks Xan." Alan said with a fond smile.

"Sure thing, Al." Xander said with his own smile.

Alan rolled his eyes before closing them to remove his glasses.

### *[Chapter 13: The Important Things]*

Xander was the first to awake, he looked at the clock and was relieved to see that he had more than an hour before Dawn's plan would go into effect.

He got up and made his way to the bathroom where he showered and shaved. He borrowed some of Scott's baggier clothes. They probably looked loose and floppy on Scott but they were a little snug on Xander. They weren't uncomfortable or too tight so he wore them out of the bathroom.

Andrew looked up at the sound of Xander leaving the bathroom.

"Got a date?" Andrew asked in a teasing tone.

"Yeah, you were right about Emma... whoa baby, what a woman!" Xander said playfully.

"Seriously, what's up Xan?" Andrew asked.

"Well Andy, I just felt kind of nasty and gross, and felt like getting cleaned up." Xander said simply.

"You know, when you put it that way, it sounds like a good idea. But I don't know how I'll manage it, I don't think I can stand for that long in the shower." Andrew said worriedly.

"Not to worry my friend, someone had the foresight to put a shower stool in there so you don't have to stand up. If you want to have a shower, you can go in and take one sitting down. Just leave the door open so you can give a yell if you need anything." Xander said as he stripped the linens off his bed.

"Okay, I think I'm ready. Can you help me over there?" Andrew asked.

A few minutes later Andrew was showering as Xander was tidying up the room.

"Andrew?" Alan asked sleepily, groping for his glasses.

"He's taking a shower." Xander said as he ran to the bedside and handed Alan his glasses.

"Thanks Xan. What's going on?" Alan asked, noticing that the room was different.

"I cleaned up the room a little. It was starting to look a little too 'lived in'." Xander said with a smirk.

"Do you think Andrew will be okay, showering by himself?" Alan asked with worry.

"Yeah, there is a shower stool, so he doesn't have to stand. And the bathroom door is open so he can call if he needs anything." Xander said with assurance.

"Well then, I guess I need to take a shower too. Except... I don't know what to do about these bandages." Alan said, still not fully awake.

"I tell you what, when Andrew gets out I'll go ask Hank how you should shower. I need to go out and find a linen closet anyway."

"You're just full of energy this afternoon." Alan commented, somewhat sourly.

"I guess I'm finally starting to feel like my old self. The bruises may not be fading, but I'm feeling a lot better." Xander said honestly.

"I'm glad you are, I still feel like I've been stomped." Alan said with equal honesty.

"You did it to yourself, no sympathy for you." Xander said in a teasing voice.

Alan was taken aback by the blunt statement for a moment before he realized that it was Xander's teasing tone. "Come on, just a little?" Alan asked and held his finger and thumb a centimeter apart.

"Nope, Andrew and I get all the sympathy, and we're not sharing." Xander said with teasing finality.

Alan got a sly smile and said, "Andrew shares *everything* with me."

"TMI, TMI, waaaaaaay too much information." Xander said as Alan started laughing.

"I'm done." was heard from the bathroom.

Xander went in and emerged a moment later with a clean and refreshed Andrew.

When Andrew was safely back in bed, Xander announced, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott was sitting in a chair beside Jean when the Professor said, "I've got it. I think I've found a way that we can communicate with Jean without letting the Phoenix out."

With a tremble of excitement in his voice Scott said, "How long will it take?"



"Just let me administer this sedative and Jean should be able to achieve consciousness. She will be able to speak; it will suppress her telepathic and telekinetic abilities. She might be a little sluggish until I can get the dosage just right." the Professor said as he injected Jean's IV with the sedative syringe.

"Jean? Jean, can you hear me?" Scott said in a pleading tone.

"Scott?" She whispered with a dry, graveley voice.

"Do you need some water?" the Professor asked tenderly.

"Yes, hurts to talk." Jean rasped.

Scott made to get up when the Professor laid a hand on his arm and shook his head. "You are allowed to stay here as long as you don't exert yourself. I will get her some water." the Professor said in a commanding tone.

Scott nodded in acceptance and took Jean's hand into his own.

"Jean, I'm here. How are you?" Scott asked with tears in his voice.

"I feel small. What happened? Why is everything so quiet?" Jean asked with worry.

The Professor returned and raised Jean's bed to a sitting position. He held her glass as she took a long drink.

"Jean, I was so worried, I thought you were dead." Scott said through tears.

"I was, just for a moment. Then I was lost inside a greater power." Jean said with more strength.

"I'm so glad you're back. I've missed you so much... I love you." Scott finished in a tearful whisper.

"Professor, can you give us a moment?" Jean asked in a steady voice.

"Of course, I'll be just in the next room if you need me." the Professor said and left the room.

"Scott, I've seen so many things... learned so many things... I need for you to understand." Jean said with compassion.

"Tell me, I'm listening." Scott said, stroking her hand.

"Scott, I love you, but I'm not in love with you." Jean said and noticed that the stroking had stopped.

"What do you mean?" Scott said in panic.

"While I was joined with the Phoenix our mind merged with the consciousness of an entire civilization. I felt things that I had never known before, and I realized that what we had was many things but it wasn't the undying love of true lovers." She said with a pained expression.

"But I love you so much Jean, are you saying it isn't enough?" Scott asked in pained confusion.

"It's not you, it's me Scott. I'm not in love with you... or anyone at the moment. But now I know what it feels like and I'll recognize it if it comes my way." Jean said with a hint of fond remembrance falling across her face.

"Are you sure, I mean, are you sure that it isn't the Phoenix changing your feelings toward me?" Scott asked, grasping for any glimmer of hope.

"No Scott, the Phoenix isn't capable of love or hate, just duty. My feelings are my own. I know that this hurts you but I had to tell you so you could move on and not pursue me when there can't be anything between us." Jean said sadly.

"But are you sure? Couldn't you be mistaken?" Scott asked in panic again.

"No. I am sure. There is no mistake. I'll be your friend, but nothing beyond that... ever." Jean said firmly, hoping that she was getting the message across to him.

"Why are you doing this to me? What did I do? I promise I can do better." Scott said in desperation.

"Scott, this has nothing to do with anything you did or didn't do. This has to do with me, my feelings, my future, my life. You are a precious friend and I love you for that, but it wouldn't be fair to you to lead you to believe that there could ever be anything more between us. It will never happen." Jean said and closed her eyes.

"What am I going to do now?" Scott said in a small, defeated voice.

"Move on." Jean said tiredly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Professor felt wave upon wave of grief and misery flowing from the recovery room of the MedLab. He couldn't shield himself from all of it and knew what was happening. He didn't hear the words, but the emotions spoke for themselves. In these situations words tended to get in the way.

He felt the agony fading and decided to chance going into the room.

"I think she's asleep. She sounded so tired." Scott said in a daze.

"Yes, she needs the rest. I should think that she will sleep for several hours before waking again. Perhaps you should get some sleep too?" the Professor said with worry.

Scott nodded and got out of the chair and back on the bed next to Jean's.

"Why don't you go back to your room? I will call you if she wakes again." the Professor said, hoping that he could convince Scott to talk to Andrew.

"I can't. I've made such a mess of everything, I just can't face him." Scott said in despair.

"You must. Scott, waiting will not make it easier. If you do this now, I promise that it will be less painful than doing it later." the Professor reassured.

"I can't." Scott said and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander walked into the MedLab to see Professor Xavier staring into space, sitting between the sleeping forms of Jean and Scott.

"Professor, I hate to interrupt but I have a question." Xander asked in a whisper.

The Professor snapped out of his mental wandering and focused on Xander.

"How may I be of help to you Mr. Harris?" the Professor asked, his voice sounding old and tired.

"I just needed to know how Alan can take a shower with his bandages. Should he take them off and shower and rewrap or should he cover his bandages in plastic or something, like when you have a cast?" Xander asked, noticing the drawn look on the Professor's face.

The Professor made his way to a cabinet and pulled out two rolls of gauze, some tape and a tube of ointment.

"Cut off the old bandages and then he can shower. Then apply this antibiotic ointment to the wounds. There should be more than enough dressing here to rewrap his wounds." the Professor said handing the items to Xander.

"Thank you Professor." Xander said quietly and turned to leave the room.

"How is Andrew?" the Professor asked with worry.

"He's fine. He's accepted that Scott loves Jean. Alan told Andrew that he loves him and asked him to become his life partner in a ceremony one year

from today." Xander said, hoping that his news would help to alleviate some of the Professor's worry.

The Professor looked shocked for a moment. He moved his chair closer to Xander and quietly said, "I have been devoting all my attention to those in this room. Would you give your permission for a telepathic scan so I can know what I've missed."

Xander was surprised by the request, but noticing the tired look again, he couldn't help but nod in agreement.

The Professor closed his eyes and after a long moment opened them, looking relieved.

"At least something good has come of the last few days events." the Professor said, not clarifying if he meant Dawn and Tara, Willow, or Andrew and Alan.

"Will you be able to join us in a half hour?" Xander asked quietly.

"I may." the Professor said with a tired smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alan was relieved to be clean and dressed in fresh clothes. He felt somewhat human again. There was a knock on the door and he noticed that Xander looked at the clock before answering it.

"Are they ready?" Dawn's voice asked through the crack of the door.

"Yes. Did you bring them?" Xander answered in response.

"Right here." Dawn said with excitement in her voice.

Xander opened the door wide to allow Dawn and Tara entrance; each woman was pushing a wheelchair.

Alan and Andrew looked confused as the women went to opposite sides of the bed.

"We're going for a ride." Dawn announced.

Xander walked over to Andrew first and half helped, half dragged Andrew out of the bed and into the waiting wheelchair.

A minute later he was doing the same for Alan.

"Where are we going?" Andrew asked as Dawn pushed him out of the room.

"To the dining room." Dawn said as Tara followed, pushing Alan.

In the ride down in the elevator, neither woman nor Xander would answer any questions.

"I think we're being kidnapped." Andrew said, only half jokingly.

"If it were anyone else, I would be worried." Alan said with his own apprehension showing.

They made their way down the hall and into the dining room where every student in the mansion was assembled.

"SURPRISE!" they chorused and cheered.

"What?" Andrew said in astonishment.

"We decided that you two had been up there long enough and needed to be reminded that there are people down here who care about you." Dawn said to the men.

Andrew noticed that some of the children were wearing costumes, obviously homemade. There were Star Wars characters and more than one hobbit among the children.

Alan noticed the costumes and then the pictures that were covering the walls and the table. Dozens upon dozens of scenes from Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, from the children's point of view.

"This is wonderful." Andrew said amazed at all the decoration of the room.

Orroro came into the room and said, "There is more. We have planned a special dinner for the two of you. Tonight we will be enjoying a dinner of beanie weenies and roast beef, both your favorite meals." She said in triumph.

Alan felt a tear forming in his eye. He knew that most of this was for Andrew, but for them to include him in the party and make his favorite food made this so much more special that he couldn't find words to express it.

"Before we eat, you two need to come to the head of the table and receive your presents." Jubilee said and cleared children out of the way as Dawn and Tara moved the men to their position of honor.

Clarissa and Artie came up to Alan and gave him a box. "We made this for you, since you was hurt. Dawn said presents would make you feel better." Artie said with a child's blunt honesty.

Alan carefully opened the box to find a glazed green lump.

"It's a turtle." Clarissa whispered.

Given this new information, Alan could just make out a vague turtle shape, if you held it at a certain angle.

"Thank you Clarissa, thank you Artie. It's beautiful." Alan said, trying to keep his tears from falling.

"See, I told you he'd like it." Artie whispered to Clarissa smugly.

Marie and Rachel walked up next and handed a box to Andrew.

Andrew ripped the paper off the box and opened it to find a beautiful knitted sweater.

"Thank you Marie, thank you Rachel." Andrew said in wonder, then after a moment pulled it on.

"It's perfect." Andrew said as he adjusted it.

Bobby and Piotr came up next and handed a box to Alan.

The box was heavy and Alan couldn't resist the urge and ripped open the paper as Andrew had done.

"Guys, it's too much, you shouldn't have." Alan said in wonder as he looked at the Diskman and collection of CDs.

"We didn't know what kind of music you liked so we took a chance and went middle of the road, techno." Bobby said with a smile on his face.

"They are great, guys. I've been wanting to get this one, and this one is one of my all time favorites... thank you." Alan said and felt the tears escape under his glasses.

Orroro led a small boy to Andrew. Orroro and the boy handed Andrew a package that was surprisingly heavy. He opened the box to find that it contained no less than a dozen Star Wars books.

He didn't say anything for long moments as he took each book out and looked at the title and then the back to see what it was about. Finally he realized that everyone was watching him and he enthusiastically said, "Thank you, I love these, I haven't had time to sit and read for months but I love Star Wars books!"

"Ethan chose the titles, I merely paid for his selections." Orroro said with humility.

"Thank you Ethan. You picked some great titles, do you like Star Wars?" Andrew asked quietly.

Ethan nodded, uncomfortable with being the center of attention.

"If you want, maybe I could read to you sometime." Andrew offered.

Ethan enthusiastically nodded.

And the parade of people with presents continued.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara and Dawn took the tired men back to their room followed by a weary Xander.

"Thanks again, I don't know why you did it but thank you." Andrew said to the women as they entered the room.

"I told you, you needed to be reminded that there were people who cared about you down there." Dawn said simply.

"Besides, everyone needs a special day. We thought this one could be yours." Tara said warmly.

"Now you all need to get your rest. The children will be up in a little while to bring your gifts up, after we've cleaned the dining room. And Peter will be up later with some cookies and milk for you." Dawn said with a smile.

"I think they've got us figured out." Andrew said with a big grin.

"Believe it." Dawn said as she and Tara left the room.

"So that's why you had the cleaning fit this morning... and the shower." Alan said to Xander.

"Yeah, that's what Dawn was talking to me about this morning. They've been working on it since they woke up. It gave all the children something to do to help someone and made everyone feel better." Xander said as he lay down on his bed.

Andrew said excitedly, "I don't know how they pulled it all together so quickly. Some of those gifts would have taken time to make, like the sweater..."

"...and the turtle." Alan interrupted.

"Well, I happen to know that Artie made the turtle, it's the only thing he ever made of clay that didn't explode in the kiln. Clarissa did the gift wrapping." Xander said with a smile.

Alan thought about that. Artie's only surviving creation, a gift for him.

"And I think that Marie had been showing Rachel how to knit, the sweater was supposed to be for Bobby. They both wanted you to have it since it would fit you and Bobby has plenty of sweaters already." Xander said.

"How do you know all this stuff?" Alan asked curiously.

"Dawn was giving me the play by play as you were opening presents." Xander said and turned to look at the guys.

"I can't even find the words for how much this means to me." Alan said as he thought of the CD player and CDs.

"I think I understand what you mean. I felt the same way when I first got here. The only word that I could give it was 'belonging'." Andrew said quietly.

"Yeah, that's it. Just this morning I was feeling like I didn't belong anywhere, now I know that someone cares. It's an incredible feeling." Alan said in wonder.

"They're good people. Dawn and Tara are pretty special too. They organized the whole thing, they were up all night planning what to do." Xander said absently.

"And what about you? Getting us all cleaned up and taking care of us. You're a pretty special person yourself." Andrew said casting a fond look over at Xander.

"Stop. You'll make me blush, and with all my scars it just makes me look blotchy." Xander said in embarrassment.

Andrew and Alan laughed at Xander's blotchy blush. Xander responded by throwing a pillow at the two.

Moments of silence followed as all the men were digesting the festivities of the day.

Finally Alan broke the silence by saying, "What do you think of settling down in this dimension?"

"I thought we would go back to your dimension." Andrew said and turned on his side to look at Alan.

"My dimension is about to erupt into war, and I don't think one or two mutants more or less is going to effect the outcome." Alan said seriously.

Andrew looked at Alan for a long moment. Finally he said, "Go on, there's more."



Alan cast a look of exasperation at Andrew and said, "You are the most important thing in my life, more important than my position with the X-men. If we went to my dimension to live, it might not be a very long or happy life. They are on the verge of war, and I don't see the mutants winning. If I thought our being there would honestly improve their chances, it would be more difficult to make this decision... But realistically, they're probably going to die. I love you and want to protect you above all else."

"Okay, I can accept that. But are you sure about staying here? I mean, Scott is here, I know that's got to bother you." Andrew said with worry.

"Until a few hours ago I would have agreed with you. But a few things happened today to change my mind about that." Alan said with a fond smile.

"Which things?" Andrew asked, thinking that he knew but wanted to hear it anyway.

"A turtle, a CD player and a roast beef dinner." Alan said with a look of happiness.

"Don't forget about the special women behind the whole thing." Andrew said with his own happy look.

"No, I can't forget them. I can't think of any better reason to stay in a dimension than friends like them." Alan said warmly.

Andrew thought about it for a minute then said, "We need to talk to Scott. Once we get this thing with him settled one way or the other, I'll be able to say for sure if I want to stay here."

"Yes dear." Alan said indulgently.

Andrew whopped Alan with Xander's pillow and fell back laughing as Alan started to tickle his sides.

Xander watched the two in fond amusement and hoped that the impending talk with Scott would go well.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott awoke and put on his glasses to find the Professor watching him.

"What? Is something wrong?" Scott asked in a panic.

"Nothing new. You need to resolve things with Andrew. You've let this go on too long... he deserves better from you." the Professor said, letting the disapproval show in his voice.

"Don't you understand? I can't." Scott said in an uncharacteristic whine.

"Go up there and take it like a man. It would have been far easier if you had talked with him this morning. You delayed talking to him, now deal with it. Putting it off longer will not do anything but make it more difficult for both of you." the Professor said moving from disapproval to anger in his voice.

"I know you're right, I just had to give a protest before I did it anyway. Can someone give me a ride up? I don't think I can make it up there on my own." Scott said in a voice of resigned acceptance.

"Someone will be here in a moment... And Scott? Be honest." the Professor said before leaving the room.

## [Chapter 14: Across the Coals]

Xander responded to the telepathic summons from the Professor and made his way to the MedLab.

He walked in to find Scott lying on the bed.

"The Professor said you were ready for 'the talk'." Xander said as he grabbed a wheelchair and brought it to the side of the bed.

"I don't think anyone could be ready for *this* talk." Scott said as he struggled off the bed with Xander's help.

"Just do what you've got to do and get it over with. If it helps you to know this, I understand. I was engaged to be married and broke up with my bride on our wedding day." Xander said, remembering that horrible day.

"You left her at the altar?" Scott asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, and I didn't even have a former lover come back from the dead to make me do it, just a little glimpse of my future." Xander said, reliving the pain.

"I don't know why, but it does help me to know that, thanks Xander." Scott said as they left the MedLab.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander opened the door and pushed Scott into the room. He remembered that the children would be coming up to bring their presents in a little while, so he locked the door to be sure that they wouldn't be interrupted.

"Hi." Scott said, not knowing where to begin.

"Hi." Andrew said in response.

"I'm sorry I did that to you Andrew." Scott said as humiliation flooded through him.

"Did what? I need to know what it is that you're sorry for." Andrew said calmly.

"I left you. I broke up with you and went back to Jean." Scott said, mortified at the words coming out of his mouth.

"Why did you do it?" Andrew asked, still not betraying his emotions.

"I don't know." Scott mumbled.

"Wrong answer. Try again." Andrew said with hardness in his voice.

"I guess I did it because she was the center of my life for so long, and I hurt for so long, that I thought that all the pain would go away if I went back to her." Scott said with a shaking voice.

"Did it work?" Andrew asked with a hint of caring.

Scott shook his head and looked down at his folded hands.

Andrew could see that something had happened beyond what he expected. Scott wasn't just nervous or embarrassed, he was devastated.

"Scott, I'm going to tell you this, and I hope it makes it easier for you." Andrew said in prelude. "Alan and I are going to become life-partners. It hurt me when you left me to go back to Jean, but I'm okay. I know that things can't go back to the way they were between us, I think you know that too, but if there is any way to salvage something of our friendship, I'm willing to try."

Scott looked up in shock as he realized that Andrew was telling the truth. Andrew had moved on and was willing to forgive him.

"I... I don't know how." Scott said in a low, lost voice.

"Come here." Andrew said in a soft whisper.

Scott got out of his wheelchair and made his way to the bed with Xander's help.

Andrew sat up in the bed and pulled Scott to sit beside him.

Scott felt the arms come around him and hold him tight.

"Scott. Tell me what happened. I can't help if you don't tell me." Andrew said as he held Scott tight.

"She left me. She said that she wasn't in love with me and would never be in love with me." Scott said as he began to cry openly.

Andrew was stunned and realized what was about to happen.

Andrew pulled away and turned Scott to face him.

"Scott. Look at me." Andrew commanded.

"Scott, I know this hurts. You hurt me, and Jean hurt you. Now it's time to heal. Tell me, are you really sorry for the way you broke up with me?" Andrew asked seriously.

"Yes, I can't believe I could do that to you." Scott said as tears began to fall from under his glasses again.

"Then there is something you can do to make it up to me." Andrew said and waited for Scott to collect himself.

"What?" Scott asked and wiped the tears from his face.

"Promise me that you won't date anyone for one year." Andrew said strongly.

"What?" Scott asked, not understanding the statement.

"Promise me that you won't date anyone for one year. Not even handholding in the park, nothing for one full year from today. If you promise me that, I'll forgive you for how you hurt me and do whatever I can to fix our friendship." Andrew said solidly.

"I... I don't understand why, but I promise. No dates of any kind for one full year from today." Scott promised.

Andrew could hear the sincerity of the vow and pulled Scott back into the hug for a moment before saying, "I think your brother has something to say."

Scott pulled back from Andrew and looked at Alan, giving his full attention.

"You're a dick." Alan said flatly.

"Logan noticed that too." Scott said absently.

"You're still my brother and I love you. But if I ever hear about you doing something like that again, I'm gonna kick your ass." Alan said seriously.

"And I'll deserve it." Scott said honestly.

"So are we all good now?" Xander asked the group.

"Yeah, I think so." Andrew answered for everyone.

"Why don't you want me to date?" Scott asked shyly.

"When did you start dating Jean?" Andrew asked in response.

"When we were about sixteen." Scott answered in confusion.

"And you've never been 'unattached' since then, right?" Andrew asked, trying to lead Scott to figure it out for himself.

"No, except when I thought Jean was dead." Scott said, the pain of that time flooding back through him again.

"Then you need to know what it's like to be Scott, the single, individual person before you become Scott, part of a couple again. You are a great guy, but when you're part of a couple, you seem to close everyone else out

of your life but your partner. Take this year to be you. Do what you want. Make decisions for yourself. You don't have to be alone, Alan and I will be here to support you..."

"...and me." Xander chimed in.

"And Xander. And I bet a lot of other people will be there for you if you let them." Andrew said in a pleading voice.

"And remember that you have a brother here who can relate to just about anything in your life... except that stupid stunt of breaking up with Andrew... I have no idea what you were thinking there..." Alan trailed off, shaking his head.

"And you know that I've pulled a stupid stunt or two myself, so if my insights can be any help, I'm here for you too." Xander said honestly.

"And I'm here to be honest with you and tell you when I think you're being a jackass. I mean, what are friends for?" Andrew said with a smile.

"Thanks guys. I don't know how I'm going to do this being single thing. I mean, you're right, I've always been part of a couple, so I guess it's time for me to be a single and figure out who I really am." Scott said, feeling much better.

"And when you figure it out, I hope you like the person that you are as much as we do." Andrew said fondly.

"Enough mushy stuff, tell me some more about your commitment ceremony." Scott said as he made his way back to the wheelchair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara and Dawn sat in the clean dining room, exhausted. Both felt overfilled with joy at the way the day had worked out.

They had started by gathering the children and outlining the plan for them. It had been Clarissa who mentioned that Alan should have a special day too. Dawn had been unsure about that, because she didn't want to detract from Andrew's special day. But after Tara's repeated assurances and later Orroro's, Dawn finally conceded that Alan probably needed this as much as Andrew.

After that the party took on a life of its own. Getting Xander's help had been the next obstacle, but that turned out to be as easy as asking. He was at least as excited by the idea as the children.

"Is it always like this when you respect the natural order? I mean,

everything just felt so right." Tara asked with disbelief.

"No, every time is different. Sometimes you just get a feeling of peace because you know that the world is working just a little bit better because of you. Sometimes you feel renewed respect for the natural order. Every now and then you feel sad because you have to stand by and allow death or injustice to occur so the natural order can resolve the situation." Dawn finished sadly.

"How do you mean?"

"Imagine that you foresaw a purse snatching, your first instinct might be to stop the crime. But by doing that, the criminal is left to pursue another victim. If you allow the crime to happen, you can work to bring the criminal to justice, thereby preventing greater heartache. So you end up doing a service to the natural order." Dawn explained.

"Why is the first victim less important than the second?" Tara asked, truly trying to understand.

"No one has greater importance than another. But if our criminal is allowed to continue, there won't just be a second victim. There will most likely be a large number of them..."

"...which puts stress on the natural order, causing a counter force to develop, like vigilantes or rogue cops." Tara interrupted with excitement.

Dawn smiled and said, "That's exactly right. Now you see the bigger picture."

"But I still don't understand how our party served the natural order." Tara said quietly.

"Let's look at the end result." Dawn suggested.

Tara nodded.

"How do you think Andrew feels now?"

"Special, loved, wanted, like he belongs."

"How do you think he would be feeling if we did nothing?"

"Like He and Alan were alone in the world, depressed, questioning his worth."

"What about Alan?"

"The same I think."

"What about the children?"

"They were worried, bored, separated from each other, feeling powerless. But now they feel like they helped. They saw Andrew and Alan feeling better because of what they did. They were busy and united, and they were rewarded by the appreciation of Andrew and Alan."

"What about Orroro and Peter?"

"They would feel better about the guys, and the kids, and themselves, I suppose."

"Beyond that, the level of tension has gone down dramatically. They were able to do something to make things better and after being able to do nothing for so long, they jumped at the chance to do something."

"So things are less tense, people are happier, more united, and that means they will be more productive to contribute to the well-being of the community, which is the institute." Tara said as she figured it out.

"Yes, and if things are running smoothly, then the natural order is being served and there isn't anything for us to do. We just step in and fix things when they mess up." Dawn said simply.

"So we are like maintenance workers for the natural order?" Tara asked, not sure if she liked the sound of that.

"More like custodians of the universe. We try to encourage order or at least minimize the damage of chaos."

"Custodians of the Universe, I feel like I should be wearing a uniform... and maybe pushing a vacuum cleaner." Tara said with a smile.

"It's a life of service, but you've had a taste of the up-side and the down-side, what do you think?" Dawn asked, hoping that Tara wanted to continue.

"I think that I would like to live my life like this. I can't think of anything more satisfying than making the world a better place for everyone around me." Tara said with a big joyous smile.

"I need to talk to you about something... and I don't really know how to say it." Dawn said in a worried tone.

"Just tell me Dawn. I'm not as fragile as I look." Tara said with a smile.

"I know. Alright, here it is, we are from different worlds... literally. But I enjoy your company and I don't want to leave. I need to know how you feel." Dawn said with uncharacteristic hesitance.



Tara looked at Dawn's nervous movements and heard the anxiety in her voice. She took a step closer and raised her hand to Dawn's cheek. With a feather-light touch, she trailed her fingertips down Dawn's face and came to rest at the edge of her jaw. "Like this." Tara whispered and leaned in for a gentle kiss.

Dawn was shocked for an instant, then let herself fall into the sensation of the kiss. Her mind was whirling with the sensation and without knowing it, she summoned her magic vision.

She could see her aura blending with Tara's to form a symbiosis of souls. If she understood what she was seeing, this meant that when they were combined, their power was augmented. She could see the interplay of forces and understood that they energized each other and inspired each other.

She looked around her and could see Tara's protection spell and the seven symbols. She saw herself as the point of 'Tara's air' and smiled. She looked to her own protection spell and saw 'Dawn's water', the wet and voluptuous form of Tara.

"You are my water." Dawn finally said.

"And you are my air." Tara immediately responded.

Dawn pulled Tara close and held her. They stood in silence, sharing the moment and feeling the fusion of their elements and souls.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where are you staying tonight Scott?" Xander asked.

"I guess I'll be staying in MedLab until I get a bed back in my bedroom." Scott said simply.

"No need for that. You can sleep here tonight. I promise that I'll keep my hands to myself." Xander said with his innocent look firmly in place.

"Are you sure? I mean, it won't be any problem for me to sleep in MedLab and I don't want to inconvenience you." Scott said with humility.

"You can ask your brother, I tend to be a self-involved asshole, if it was a problem for me I wouldn't have offered." Xander said bluntly.

"He's right my brother, get in that bed and relax. I think we're all about ready for some sleep." Alan said as he lay back in his bed.

There was a knock on the door and Xander got up to answer it.

As expected, there was a parade of children carrying gifts. They had obviously split the load so every child in the mansion could carry something and visit.

Scott sat in wonder as the children brought gift after gift to the two men in the bed, then stood aside and waited quietly.

"Thank you, everyone." Andrew said shyly.

"Did you enjoy your party?" Artie asked impatiently.

"It was the best party I've ever had." Alan answered honestly.

"Me too." Andrew threw in, letting the truth of it show on his face.

"Ms. Munroe said you would be tired, so we can't stay. Can we come to visit tomorrow?" Artie asked bravely.

"Of course you can Artie, how would you like to help me read my Star Wars books?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"Help you? How?" Artie asked, confused.

"I was thinking that anyone who wanted to could come up here tomorrow and we could take turns reading my new Star Wars books outloud. That way everyone can enjoy them with me." Andrew said with excitement.

Smiles of agreement ran through the crowd of children and Artie finally said, "That sounds like fun. We'll see you tomorrow."

The group of children funneled out of the room and left the adults sitting in silence.

"What was that all about? What party?" Scott finally asked.

"It was a 'We know your boyfriend dumped you and we love you.' party organized by Dawn and Tara." Alan said fondly.

"Really?" Scott said, impressed by the caring action.

"Really, see all the presents, they decorated and made our favorite meals... did you eat?" Andrew finished with concern.

"I didn't remember to." Scott said as he lay back on the bed.

Silence filled the room. Scott finally raised his head and looked at the other bed to see the disapproving looks coming from Andrew and his brother, he turned to his side to see the same look coming from Xander.

"I guess this means I'm going to go get something to eat now." Scott said,

resigned to his fate.

"Jubilee will be here in a moment. I'm not restricted from telepathy and already told on you." Xander said with a smile.

"Brat." Scott said, feeling a well of emotion bubbling up within himself at the caring demonstrated by these men who had every reason to despise him.

"That reminds me, do you still have my pillow?" Xander asked the other bed's occupants casually.

Xander received a pillow in the face as a response.

"Thanks." he said in a voice filled with sarcasm.

Then he turned and whopped Scott with the pillow.

There was a knock on the door and Xander climbed over Scott to answer it.

"Dinner for Scott and a snack for everyone else." Jubilee announced as she entered the room pushing the food cart.

Everyone settled in and enjoyed their food.

## [Chapter 15: Decisions and Concessions]

Dawn and Tara left the dining room and went back to Tara's room without further conversation.

Settling on the edge of the bed, Tara finally asked, "I need to know something before we go any further."

Dawn heard the seriousness in Tara's tone and sat beside her.

"I live in California, in this dimension. You live in Cleveland in another dimension. I want to be with you, but I have to know where we're going. I can't just walk in blindly and hope it will work out." Tara said with shame in her voice.

"That makes perfect sense, what do you want to happen?" Dawn asked quietly.

"I... I don't know." Tara stammered for the first time all day.

"I think you *do* know what you want to happen, you're just afraid to ask for it." Dawn said gently.

Tara nodded nervously and finally said, "I want to go with you. The reason I'm here was because my father found me at UCLA. He wanted to take me back home. I called uncle Hank because I couldn't think of anyone else who could help me... If I went to your universe, he would never find me..." Tara trailed off in a whisper.

"If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do. Andrew will be opening the portal at noon tomorrow and we'll go to Cleveland. It may take a little getting used to, but everyone will help you till you get adjusted to living on the hellmouth." Dawn said happily.

"And you'll show me more magic?" Tara asked with a smile.

"We'll do spells together all the time." Dawn said with an answering smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Professor, we need to talk to you if you have a moment." Xander said from the doorway of the Professor's office with Alan in a wheelchair.

"How can I help you gentlemen?" The Professor asked, honestly intrigued by this combination.

"We wanted your advice... maybe your permission... to stay here in this universe." Alan said shakily.

Charles responded with a look of surprise.

"Alan, Andrew and I don't exist here, officially I mean, and we would like your help to fix that, if possible." Xander said professionally.

"And I would like to join your X-men team and stay at the mansion with Andrew." Alan said a bit shyly.

The Professor nodded as he understood Alan's motive. He had to ask, "And what would you be doing in this universe Mr. Harris?"

"Warren offered me a job, and I thought I would like to give a try at a life without fighting evil... besides the normal everyday evil of government officials and grocery clerks." Xander ended with a smile.

Charles took a moment to think about the new information.

"Very well gentlemen. I am unaccustomed to creating spurious identities so it may take some time, but I am willing to help you. In fact, I had a thought about your living arrangements Alan." The Professor said cryptically.

"What would that be?" Alan asked anxiously.

"Do you think that when you are recovered, you and Andrew would like to take over the boathouse by the lake on the far side of the property? It needs to be cleaned and furnished, but it would be a more than adequate residence for the two of you." the Professor said, hoping he liked the idea.

"I'll have to ask Andrew but I'm sure he'll love the idea... how many bedrooms does it have?" Alan asked as an afterthought.

"Two upstairs and one on the main floor. When you are both recovered, we can go to look at it." Charles said with some enthusiasm coming into his voice.

"Three bedrooms would be perfect. That way Scott and Xander can each have a room." Alan said, thinking aloud.

Xander had a fond smile as he listened to Alan automatically include him in his plans.

"Well then, pending Andrew's approval, it's decided." the Professor said with finality.

"Yes, thank you Professor." Alan said with honest respect.

"You're very welcome Alan, and I suppose I should welcome you to the X-men. However we will need to come up with a new code-name for you, we seem to have an abundance of Cyclops'." the Professor finished absently.

"Are you talking about me?" Xander asked in fun, blinking his one eye.

"Funny." Alan said flatly and the Professor even acknowledged the joke with a smile.

"I will discuss the matter with Scott, he is our Team Leader and needs to be consulted on such matters. I assume that isn't going to be a problem since you are thinking of inviting him to live with you." Charles said in confirmation.

"No problem, everything is worked out. Good night Professor, thank you for helping us." Alan said with sincerity.

"Yeah, thanks." Xander said in his most sincere voice.

"It was my pleasure gentlemen. Now, I believe you need to get back to your rest." The Professor said quietly.

"Yes, goodnight Professor." Xander said as he pushed Alan out of the room.

"Goodnight." The Professor said, amazed at the turn of events of the past days.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Uncle Hank, do you have time to talk with me for a minute?" Tara asked from his open doorway.

"Please come in Tara. I've wanted to talk to you for days, but haven't been able to find the time. How are you doing?" Hank asked sincerely.

"I'm good... great in fact. That's part of what I came to talk to you about." Tara said with a hint of nervousness in her voice.

Her self-assurance and admission of happiness surprised Hank. "Do go on." He said with a kind smile.

"I'm going to be leaving, I'm going to go with Dawn, back to her universe." Tara said, drawing on her courage to say the words.

"Why?" Hank asked with shock.

"Because we are friends, maybe more than friends, and we want to be together." Tara said, her discomfort obvious.

Hank motioned for her to take a seat and had an expression on his face that prompted her to continue.

"I called for you to help me because I found out that my father tracked me down again. He wants to take me back home to... basically be his slave."

she finished in a near whisper.

"What? What do you mean by that?" Hank asked in astonishment.

"Since mama died, he's been trying to make me take her place... and when I ran away... he keeps trying to find me and bring me back." She said with tears starting to fall.

Hank sat silently and reviewed what he knew with this new information. His years of college study in psychology came together with Tara's sketches and he suddenly knew... everything.

"A friend of mine in the admissions office called me and told me that he contacted her office and was asking questions about me. That's when I called you." Tara finished and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Hank was livid. His brother had always been dark and forceful, but Hank had never imagined that he could do something like this.

"Now I'm going to go someplace where he can never find me. And the best part is, I would want to go even if he weren't chasing me. I think I love Dawn, and I'm pretty sure that she loves me." Tara ended in a smile filled with such serenity that Hank felt a twinge in his heart.

"Tara, I didn't know about your father. I promise you that if I had, I would have done something..." Hank began.

"...It's settled now. Dawn and I will be leaving tomorrow at noon. And you helped when I asked you, when I needed you most, and I love you for that Uncle Hank." Tara said with sincerity.

Hank thought for a moment, then said, "You have my best wishes and complete support in whatever you choose to do. I hope you find every happiness with Dawn."

"Thank you Uncle Hank. I think we'll probably be visiting a lot. I've made so many friends since I've been here... more than I've ever had before. Dawn and I won't be able to stay away from everyone here for very long." Tara said with a peaceful, introspective look.

"I'll look forward to every visit. You do know that I love you, right?" Hank asked quietly.

"I know Uncle Hank, I've always known. You're the only family that I have now. The rest are dead to me." Tara said, ending in a flat tone that sounded wrong coming from her.

Hank nodded in acceptance.

"Dawn is waiting for me upstairs, I just wanted to tell you before I left. Thank you for everything, thank you for being happy for me." Tara said quietly.

Hank considered his words before saying them. "If I could have one wish for you it would be for you to find happiness. From what I see, you've done that for yourself. So I am happy for you. And if you ever have need of anything, you have only to ask."

Tara smiled and got up from her chair. Hank also stood and held open his arms to her. She gave him a big hug, then left the room without further comment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander and Alan entered the bedroom to find Scott and Andrew awake and looking concerned.

"I woke up and you weren't here." Andrew said with a little whine in his voice.

"I'll try to keep that from happening too often." Alan said with a smile. It was a good feeling to know that he was missed.

"We had to discuss a few things with the Professor. I hope you guys didn't worry too much." Xander said with a smile.

"Not exactly worried, just lonely. I've been sharing a bed for almost a week now, it just felt wrong waking up alone." Andrew said in explanation.

"As long as I have any say in the matter, you will continue to be used to it." Alan said with a happy smile.

"If you don't tell them, I will." Xander said to Alan while helping him back into bed.

"I'll do it." Alan said with mock-exasperation.

"Andrew, the Professor asked if we would like to move out to the boathouse beside the lake at the far end of the property." Alan said with joy in his voice.

"Really? Our own house?" Andrew asked happily, then as he thought about it, the joy seemed to fade from his face.

"What's wrong love?" Alan asked, noticing the abrupt change in mood.

"It's just that I don't want to leave everyone." Andrew said, looking at Xander and Scott.



"You won't have to, the boathouse has three bedrooms. One for us, one for Xander and one for Scott." Alan said, proud of himself for thinking to ask the Professor about the bedrooms.

"Really? Would you guys like to come live with us?" Andrew asked, back to full excitement.

Xander had had time to think about this already, so he answered first, "I don't know what's going to happen when I go to work for Warren. I may need to find a place near work. But until that time comes, I'd love to stay with you guys, and I can't even put into words what it means to me that you want me to."

"Better stop now Xan, you know when you get mushy you get blotchy." Andrew said in warning.

Xander nodded, then hid his face in a pillow as he felt the blush creeping up.

"What about you, my brother? Would you like to come live with us?" Alan asked bluntly.

"Um, yeah. I think I would like that a lot." Scott said with surprise in his voice.

"Good, it's all settled then. When all of us are recovered, we will move into the boathouse." Alan said in a commanding tone.

"So that means you're going to stay here." Scott said in confirmation.

"Yeah. Andrew and I like it here." Alan said happily.

"And the Professor is going to work on getting us all official identities." Xander threw into the conversation.

"Really? That's cool, I guess that means that you and Scott will 'officially' be brothers now, doesn't it?" Andrew asked Alan with a loving look on his face.

"Yeah, I guess it does, we need to make sure that he sets it up that way if it is possible." Alan said, sorry that he didn't ask the Professor when he was down there.

After a moment of silence Xander said, "He'll see what he can do. He suggests that Scott talk to Alex about it, so he can cover your story if need be."

"I need to talk to him anyway, it's been too long." Scott said to the room.

"We can do that tomorrow. Right now, it's time for sleep." Andrew said and

laid back.

"One more thing, the Professor said that if Alan was going to join the team, he was going to need a new code name, we seem to have an abundance of Cyclops'." Xander said with a smirk.

"Makes sense." Scott said, trying to think of something.

"And since you're team leader, you get to choose it." Alan said to his brother.

"I'm open to suggestions guys." Scott said to the group, drawing a blank.

"Blaster." Xander said to the room.

"No, but maybe 'Blast'. I don't like to have too many 'er' names." Scott said, considering.

"Crimson Tide." Alan said, only half seriously.

"Sounds like a feminine hygiene product." Scott said absently.

"Gemini." Andrew said from deep thought.

"Hmmm. I like that one. What do you all think?" Scott said,

"Pretty cool, mysterious." Xander said thoughtfully.

"Gemini." Alan said, wanting to hear the sound of it again to be sure. Finally he said, "I like it."

"Then it's settled. At our next group meeting I'll make the official announcement that Gemini has joined the X-men.

## *[Chapter 16: Life's a Show]*

Andrew awoke to find that Alan was already awake... and obviously worried.

"What's the matter, love?" he asked quietly.

"I was thinking about Remy. My life is going so great and he's lost everything." Alan said sadly.

Andrew sat quietly for a moment and came to a decision.

"Let's visit him this morning. I think I know what went wrong yesterday, why I got so tired."

"What was that?"

"I left the portals open, and while they stood open I was without that power." Andrew said, trying to describe the sensation.

"So what do you want to do?" asked Alan, intrigued by the possibility.

"Where do you think Remy is in the mansion?" Andrew responded with his own question.

"The MedLab, I guess." Alan answered after a moment.

"Then lets go down to the MedLab and I can phase us into your dimension like I used to do to use up my power. We would be able to be seen and heard, but not touch anything. It would take almost no power from me and we could talk to Remy." Andrew said, considering what he would have to do.

"So we would be like ghosts?"

"Yeah, it would seem like that from the other side. They'll be like ghosts to us. But this way we could visit with Remy without taking a chance of me overdoing it like yesterday." Andrew said quietly.

"I'll get the wheelchair." Xander said from the other bed.

"Good morning Xan. Sorry if our talking woke you." Alan said sincerely.

"I was awake, just laying here thinking." Xander said and tried to get out of the bed without waking Scott.

"I'm going with you." Scott said, still laying with his eyes closed.

"It's going to take a few trips to get all of you down there." Xander said to the group.

"Are you up to it Xan?" Alan asked seriously.

"Sure, I'm feeling like my old self. I'll be ready to start hauling people in just a minute.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nearly twenty minutes later found the entire group in MedLab with a surprised Hank.

"I'm just going to let a little bit of my power loose so we can see the other dimension... I used to do it all the time when I thought I was going crazy, I thought what I was seeing was hallucinations. As long as we're in the same physical space as the other dimension, I don't have to target or create portals. You can stay here with us if you're worried about it Hank." Andrew said with reassurance.

"I intend to. And Mr. Harris, I need to talk with you privately afterward." Hank said to Xander.

Andrew closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, they were glowing golden. the glow spilled across the room and the features of the room changed. The MedLab didn't look the same. It was more primitive, more rugged. There was no MRI unit and there were several more beds in the room. Professor Frost turned to see the group as they faded into being.

"Welcome gentlemen. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" She asked regally.

"We came to visit Remy. I was worried about him." Alan said, allowing his concern to show on his face.

"He's just in the next room, I'll go get him for you." Professor Frost said and left the room.

Hank began to walk across the room when Andrew said, "You don't want to do that Hank. We just appear to be here, we're still in our MedLab. If you move around, you'll run into something."

Hank stopped and went back to his original position.

Professor Frost entered the room leading the distraught form of Remy LeBeau.

"Remy, I've been worried about you." Alan said and fought the urge to run and hug the man.

"Scott? I could say the same for you, mon ami." Remy said in a tired voice.

"Professor Frost, may I have a word with you?" Hank asked and remembering where he was in relation to his own lab, made his way away from the group.

"Please call me Alan. In the dimension I've been in there is another Scott. It's just less confusing. Remy LeBeau, I'd like to introduce you to Scott, my brother from another dimension, Andrew my fiancée, and Xander my caregiver. Dr. Hank McCoy is also here, talking with Professor Frost." Alan said politely.

There was a course of 'hi' when Remy gave a small smile and said, "I'm blind, non? You need to talk one at a time for Remy to tell one from another."

"Okay, I'm Scott. It's nice to meet you Remy. Alan's told me... actually nothing about you, but he seems to like you so that's good enough for me." Scott said, ending with a smile.

"Fair enough." Remy said, turning his face toward Scott's voice.

"I'm Andrew." Andrew said shyly.

"You got you a real talker der Sc... Alan." Remy said with a teasing tone.

"Hi Remy, I'm Xander. Nice to meet you." Xander said quietly, looking at the weary, defeated man before him.

"Xander? As in Alexander, non?" Remy asked, turning to him.

"Yeah, I got the choice of Alex, Lex or Xander. This seemed to be the coolest." Xander said with a shrug.

"So, are you all mutants too?" Remy asked as he felt for and found the bed behind him and took a seat.

"All but Xander. Andrew is called Portal, and I've been renamed Gemini. Scott is Cyclops.

"But that name might fit me best." Xander said under his breath.

Remy turned to Xander and raised an eyebrow above his bandage in question.

"Xander had one of his eyes gouged out by a... demon?" Alan questioned, not remembering if he had been told exactly what had happened.

"By a priest of the first evil... but he was kind of demony with super strength and stuff." Xander said, getting more comfortable talking with Remy.

"You sound like you're talking through a tunnel, why it be like dat?" Remy asked of the group.

"Andrew is sort of projecting us here with his mutant ability. We're still in our own universe, we're just able to see and hear yours." Scott said in explanation.

"So did you see what you came to see? I be here, all dats left of me. Bout time for ole Remy to be put out to pasture." Remy said, looking more tired.

"I came to visit with you to see if I could help you." Alan said seriously, worried by Remy's attitude.

"Ain no help fo da Cajun. Nuthin left ta help." Remy said and got off the bed.

"I wouldn't say that Mr. LeBeau." Hank said from behind the group.

"What's up Hank?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"I have been talking with Professor Frost, I won't bore you with details, but suffice it to say, I may be able to restore some sight to Remy." Hank said, worried that he might be giving false hope.

"Hank? What do you mean? Is there something you can do to help Remy?" Alan asked excitedly.

"Perhaps, I would need to examine him to see if he would be a likely candidate for a live organ transplant. I had actually been looking into the possibility for Mr. Harris." Hank said professionally.

"You be sayin dat you can get Remy some new eyes?" Remy asked with excitement.

"I'm saying that I can examine you to see if it is a possibility." Hank said calmly.

"Dr. McCoy and I have discussed this and decided that, if you are willing, you may go with them to their dimension to receive the medical attention that we frankly cannot provide for you." Professor Frost said without emotion.

"While I am familiar with the theory, I have not performed the procedure myself. Therefore, I have contacted a specialist who will be at the mansion later today... that was the matter I wished to discuss with you Mr. Harris. I see no reason why he couldn't look at Mr. LeBeau while he is there." Hank said, pleased that he might be able to help these men.

Xander and Remy were both dumbstruck. Finally Andrew broke the silence

by saying, "Let's open the portal and get Remy to our universe then."

"Give me a moment to collect Remy's medical records, that should save you some work." Professor Frost said and opened a file cabinet drawer.

"Thank you Professor, I'll take good care of him." Alan said seriously before Andrew interrupted.

"We're going to fade out now, but the doorway will open in just a minute."

Professor Frost nodded as the men faded. A minute later a swirling vortex appeared before her and Alan stepped out.

"You ready to go Remy?" Alan asked with happiness showing through his voice.

"Oui." Remy said and followed as Alan led him back through the portal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara and Dawn went to the men's bedroom to find it empty. After checking the dining room and common room they made their way to the MedLab, starting to worry that something may have happened to one of them.

They entered the room just in time to see Alan emerge from a portal with a man neither of them knew.

Alan notice Tara and Dawn standing in the doorway and said, "Remy, I would like for you to meet two very lovely ladies. Tara McCoy and Dawn Summers. Ladies, I would like to introduce Remy LeBeau, also known as Gambit."

"McCoy... like the doctor, non?" Remy asked of Tara.

"He's my uncle." Tara said shyly as Remy took her hand. Rather than shake it as she had expected, he took it to his lips and kissed the back gently and reverently.

"And Dawn Summers, would you be related to Scott... Alan?" Remy asked as he took Dawn's hand and gently kissed it too.

"No, just a coincidence." She said shyly, impressed by Remy's manors.

"Actually, we are kind of related, in a round-about interdimensional way." Scott said.

Dawn looked at Scott with surprise which prompted him to continue.

"Your father is my cousin, which makes you my second cousin... if we were from the same universe." Scott finished with a confused smile.

"Close enough." Dawn said with a smile.

"Mr. LeBeau, if you would follow me, we will conduct an exam before the specialist gets here. I want to be able to provide him with all the information he might need to determine your viability as a candidate." Hank said as he took Remy's hand and put it on his elbow so he could lead him.

"We were worried when we couldn't find you guys." Dawn said, turning back to face the men.

"Alan was worried about Remy, it turned out that Hank has been trying to get Xander a new eye, and he might be able to get a couple for Remy too." Andrew said happily.

"So Remy is from Alan's universe?" Tara asked in confirmation.

"Yes, friends of humanity got a hold of him and cut his eyes out because they didn't look human." Alan said tiredly.

"Look at you on your feet, you need to get back to bed." Dawn said sourly to Alan.

"There's enough of us here, let's get them back to their room." Xander said.

"Actually, I'd really like to have breakfast with the students." Scott said as he took his own seat.

"Then we're off to the dining room." Xander said as he pushed Andrew out the door with Tara and Dawn following close behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alan, Scott, Andrew, Xander, Tara and Dawn were sharing a table, enjoying a breakfast of scrambled eggs, hashed browns and fruit when the Professor approached the group.

"Did the bedrest order fall by the wayside?" the Professor asked with amusement showing in his face.

"Yep. We decided that we needed the company of others, so we revolted." Andrew said before taking another bite of his breakfast.

"Yes Professor, welcome to our uprising." Scott said with a smile.

The Professor was surprised by the playfulness of Scott, given the sullen mood of the previous day.

"We were just telling the guys that we will be leaving today." Tara said, then took a drink of her juice.



"You're leaving? May I ask why?" The Professor asked, not having been aware of this development.

"Tara just wants to go to my dimension. And I don't care where we go, as long as we're together." Dawn said with a smile.

The Professor considered his next words before saying them, "Could I speak with you two in my office for a moment?"

"Sure Professor." Dawn said in surprise as the Professor moved his chair out from the table, then out of the room.

Dawn and Tara hurried to follow as the rest of the group looked on in confusion.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ms. Summers, Ms. McCoy. I had hoped to have more time before approaching you about this... but seeing as you are thinking of leaving, the time is now." the Professor said as he made a motion to offer the women a seat.

"What is it Professor?" Dawn asked, beginning to worry.

"Tara, I know why you called your uncle for help. I don't know how else to say it, but your father won't be looking for you anymore." the Professor said without betraying any emotions.

"What? What do you mean? Did something happen to him?" Tara asked, more in hope than in worry.

"Yes. He'll never hurt anyone else." the Professor said coldly.

"What... what about my brother?" Tara asked with a shaky voice.

"He had an unfortunate accident... or will have when Logan finds him." the Professor said and looked suddenly tired.

"Mr. Logan?" Tara asked and went pale.

"Logan has some interesting abilities, one of them is superior hearing. He heard enough to put the pieces together and realize everything that had happened. After that he became enraged and..." the Professor trailed off.

"...and you couldn't stop him?" Dawn said, filling in the blank.

"... and I gave him directions to your fathers house." the Professor said plainly.

The two women sat stunned as the Professor continued.

"I am a peaceful man, I believe that all men should get along and work out their differences... but when there is a threat to one of my children, I take it seriously and work to resolve it as best I can. Tara, I think of you as one of my children. The beast you call a father was evil and had no remorse for his actions. He was dispatched this morning, stabbed through the heart in an alley on his way to work. It was quick and relatively painless. I'm sorry if it disturbs you, but I would do the same for anyone in the mansion." the Professor finished in an emotionless voice.

Tara got up from her chair and walked to the Professor. She leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Thank you Professor. And thank Mr. Logan for me." She said quietly before sitting back down.

"On to other matters. if you two would be interested in staying here, I would like to offer you jobs." the Professor said, switching back to his professional persona.

"But we're not mutants. What would we do?" Dawn asked disbelievingly.

"The philosophy that drives me is that mutants and non-mutants can coexist to their mutual benefit. I would not be providing a very good example for my students if only mutants were welcomed here. As to what you would do... Ms. Summers, during the day, you would be a student, working toward your college degree much the same as Andrew, at night your job would be as an activities director for the students in their free time. After the success of your party yesterday, I believe you would be an asset to the institute and make the students off duty hours more pleasurable."

"Ms. McCoy, I know that you are just a few credits short of a degree. You could gain those credits here during the morning, and in the afternoon serve as an assistant for your uncle. The recent crisis has shown us that he needs more help." Charles said, letting his expression show the truth of his words.

Tara looked at Dawn who shrugged.

"We need some time to think about it Professor. Thank you for the job offers... and the rest." Tara said and got up to leave.

"There is no pressure, just do what you think best." The Professor said as the women left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara and Dawn joined the men back in the dining room. "Where's Xander?" Dawn asked as she sat down.

"He went to ask Hank if Remy could join us for breakfast." Andrew said as he nursed his juice.

"Would you like some more coffee Mr. Summers?" Clarissa asked kindly.

"Yes, thank you Clarissa." Alan said and handed her his cup.

"So what was that all about?" Andrew asked of Tara and Dawn.

"The Professor just offered us jobs if we wanted to stay." Dawn said as she noticed that her plate was gone.

"Kurt is keeping your plates warm in the kitchen." Scott said to the women.

"What kind of jobs?" Andrew asked with a smile.

"He said I could work as an assistant for Uncle Hank and Dawn could be the activities director for the kids when they are out of class." Tara said as her warm plate was placed before her by Kurt.

"Thank you Kurt." She said with a shy smile.

Xander walked into the room with Remy on his arm.

He took Remy's hand off his arm and put it on the back of a chair. "There you go, you can sit yourself down now." Xander said and went to his own chair.

Everyone at the table was shocked by his apparent uncaring attitude.

"C'mon guys, he's blind, not retarded." Xander said as he took a drink of his coffee and made a face.

Remy felt the back of the chair and after a moment to orient himself, he sat down.

Artie showed up with a plate of food and sat it before Remy. Xander said, "Thanks Artie, this is Remy."

"Hi. Did your eyes get hurt?" Artie asked in concern.

"Nuthin ta worry bout Artie. Remy be fine." Remy answered.

"Dr. McCoy is going to try to help Remy with his eyes." Xander said in explanation.

"Dr. McCoy will make you better." Artie said with complete confidence and left.

"Remy, you've got eggs at two o'clock, hashed browned potatoes at six and some mixed fruit at ten. Do you want juice or coffee?" Xander said as he

snagged a piece of toast from a plate in the center of the table.

"Coffee be good for Remy." he said, beginning to understand that Xander was helping him with the things he couldn't do himself, but leaving him the rest.

"Be right back, mine got cold." Xander said and left the table.

Andrew looked around and noticed that quite a few of the students were staring at Remy.

He raised his voice so all could hear him and said, "This is Remy, he's going to be staying with us for a while. Please make him feel welcomed."

Scott got a smile of fond remembrance, thinking how scared Andrew was on his first day in this very room.

"Remy jus notice somethin, your voices been down low, like your sitting non? Are you all in wheelchairs?" he asked as he found his silverware.

"Yeah, let me tell it, okay?" Dawn asked with enthusiasm.

Everyone nodded and Dawn began.

"Alan tried to kill himself, when he did that he was in the exact same place in your universe as Scott was in this one, somehow that threw this Scott into a coma. The Professor felt it when Scott went into the coma and he called Andrew and Hank to help. Andrew was in California getting Tara, so he made a portal from California to New York, which caused him to have a stroke." Dawn finished triumphantly.

"And Xander was beat up by demons for two and a half days." Tara threw in helpfully.

"Damn, I forgot about Xander." Dawn said in mock frustration.

"So Remy not be da only one hurt at dis table." Remy said, somehow feeling like part of the gang, the sick, injured, beat up gang.

"Yeah, at least you can walk, technically Alan, Scott and I are supposed to be in bed. They're letting us out for breakfast as long as we behave ourselves." Andrew said as Xander returned with coffee.

"Coffee's at one o'clock." He said as he sat the coffee by Remy's plate in the proper place.

"So are you ladies going to take the offered jobs?" Xander asked as he relaxed into his chair.

"We're thinking about it. I mean, I wasn't looking forward to fighting

demons all the time." Tara said, just a little sheepishly.

"Yeah, I'm not going to miss that part, I need to tell Buffy that I've decided to stay here." Xander said to the group.

"You're going to stay here too? Did the Professor offer you a job?" Dawn asked in surprise.

"No, Warren. He convinced me that I could make a life for myself here and said that he would give me a chance." Xander said before taking a drink of his coffee.

"Warren, Sc- Alan, is dat like da Warren we know?" Remy asked in Alan's direction.

"Yeah, most people have doubles here. Wait till you meet the Professor..." Alan said then realized that he hadn't warned Remy about Professor Xavier yet.

"Why, does she have a personality in this universe?" Remy asked, curious how different the Professor in this universe could be.

They all sat silently for a moment until all those with eyes were looking at Alan.

"Okay, I'll do it. Remy, I've got to tell you something that you're probably going to freak out on." Alan said in resigned acceptance.

"The Institute in this universe is run by Professor Charles Xavier." Alan said and waited for the reaction.

Remy began to tremble and got up out of his chair. Xander noticed that he was about to run.

"C'mon Remy, I'm going back to the MedLab, I have to get a check-up too. You want to come with me?" Xander said carefully.

"Yeah, Remy go with Xander now. Tell your Professor ta stay away, Remy still know a ting or two bout fightin'." Remy said with venom before taking hold of Xander's elbow and leaving the room.

"We'd better be getting back to the room. I've suddenly lost my appetite." Scott said sadly.

"Actually, I think I'd rest better in MedLab right now." Andrew said and cast a fond look at Alan.

"Thanks for that, love. I think I want to go to MedLab too." Alan said and sneaked a little kiss on Andrew's cheek.

Since Xander had left, Scott needed to recruit a new driver for his wheelchair. He looked around the room and saw Jubilee watching them. He motioned her to come close and asked, "Would you mind pushing me down to Medlab, my caregiver seems to have forsaken me for another."

"From the look of the other guy, he needs the care worse than you do." Jubilee said honestly and took her position behind the chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

The group arrived in MedLab to be met by the stern face of Hank McCoy.

"I am conducting examinations, you will have to come back later or wait outside." Hank said professionally.

"How long do you think it will take?" Andrew asked, preferring to wait if possible.

"Without further interruptions, less than half an hour for both my patients." Hank said in a considering voice.

"Is Jean awake?" Scott asked quietly.

"I don't believe so, but she could wake at any time. You may visit with her if you like while I conduct my examinations." Hank said and turned back to the examination room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Scott was pushed into the room by Jubilee, closely followed by the others. Jean looked up at the movement and was surprised by the number of people entering her room.

"Hi Jean, how are you feeling this morning?" Scott asked, concern showing in his voice.

"I'm fine, I feel a little woozy but Dr. McCoy explained that the drugs he's using to keep the Phoenix suppressed will have that effect." She said with a tired voice.

Scott noticed her questioning look at the others and said, "Everyone, this is Jean Grey. Jean, you know Jubilee. This is Tara, she is Dr. McCoy's niece. She is pushing Andrew, a good friend of mine from a neighboring dimension. The handsome fellow in the next wheelchair is Alan, my brother and counterpart from another dimension. He is being pushed by Dawn, a friend from Andrew's dimension."

Jean sat silently for a moment, then asked, "Who's from this dimension again?"

Scott, Tara and Jubilee raised their hands.

"And you two are from one dimension and you are from another?" She asked in confirmation.

There was a group nod.

"What has been going on since I've been gone, it looks like I've missed a lot." Jean said and laid her head back on the pillow.

"We'll tell you the whole story in a little bit. First, can we get you anything?" Scott asked with concern.

"I'm thirsty. Could you get me some juice from that pitcher? Dr. McCoy left it out of my reach." Jean said in frustration.

Jubilee was the first to move and got her the drink.

"Thank you Jubilation. How have you been?" Jean asked after taking a drink.

"After you... left... I decided that I wanted a change of scenery. I'm attending the Gen X school now. I came to visit when Scott, Alan and Andrew were hurt." She said quietly.

"What happened to you?" Jean asked, focusing her question on Scott.

Alan jumped in before Scott could answer and said, "When my lover died, I couldn't handle it and I tried to kill myself. That threw Scott into a coma and Andrew had a stroke trying to save him and me." Alan said, his guilt for his actions evident in his voice.

"And if you hadn't, we never would have met." Andrew said and reached over to take Alan's hand into his own.

Jean looked surprised at the action and looked to Scott for an explanation.

"They're a couple." Scott said with a shrug.

Jean was surprised by Scott's flippant answer and realized that he wasn't behaving as she expected.

"Is there any way I could talk to you alone for a minute Scott?" Jean asked, needing to know that he was okay after their last talk.

"Guys, do you think you could give us a couple minutes?" Scott asked without looking away from Jean.

"Sure Scott. We'll be right back." Andrew said and looked up to prompt Tara to get him out of there.

The rest of the group made their way out into the hall when Andrew suggested a quick trip back upstairs for juice or coffee.



## *[Chapter 17: Transcendental Facelift]*

"How are you doing Scott?" Jean asked with concern.

"I'm really alright." Scott answered honestly.

Jean could hear the truth in his words and couldn't help but ask, "How?"

"Andrew mostly." Scott said with a fond smile.

At her questioning look, he continued, "He made me see that I was obsessing over you partly because I was afraid to be alone. Jeanie, I love you... and I think I always will... but you were right. I'm not in love with you either. I wanted to be part of a couple, I was so afraid to be alone that I couldn't consider the possibility that I wasn't in love with you."

"But Andrew fixed that? How did he do it?" Jean asked, truly interested.

"He let me know that he would be my friend and I wouldn't be left alone. He and my brother, plus Xander all said that they would be there for me. And I know they meant it... they even asked me to move into the boathouse with them when we're all recovered." Scott finished with a smile.

"Xander?" Jean asked in confusion.

"Yeah, he's being examined by Dr. McCoy right now. He's from Andrew's dimension too." Scott said simply.

"I'm glad you've been able to accept this... I'm really surprised that you were able to accept it so quickly." Jean said honestly.

"I'd probably be alone and depressed for the next few weeks... or months... if it weren't for the Professor making me talk to Andrew and Andrew telling me exactly what he thought about the situation." Scott said, a little shyly.

"So, do you think you're spoiled on relationships for a while or will you be out on the prowl again soon?" Jean asked with a hint of teasing in her voice.

"I've promised Andrew that I won't date anyone for one year... and I think he's right. I need to understand myself better before I think about getting into another relationship." Scott said seriously.

Jean nodded in agreement and comprehension.

"All I'm worried about now is the relationship between us Jean. Are we going to be okay?" Scott asked with caring showing through his voice and expression.

Jean thought about the question and a smile came across her face. "I think we're going to be fine. You've handled this better than I could have imagined. I didn't consciously realize it at the time, but your behavior was obsessive and your probable reaction concerned me. Now that I don't have to worry about you going all suicidal or stalker on me, we can be the friends I think we were always meant to be." She said with serenity in her voice.

Scott pushed himself out of the chair and walked to the bed to hug her.

There was a knock on the door. Jean and Scott turned as one to see Jubilee's head peek in the door. A moment later she withdrew and closed the door.

Scott could barely hear, "Okay, I owe you a dollar Andrew, how did you know?"

Scott began to laugh and made his way back to the wheelchair.

"Come on in guys." He called loudly enough for those in the hall to hear.

Everyone came into the room along with Xander, Remy and Hank.

"So how did you check out?" Scott asked Xander and Remy.

"Neither man has been excluded from candidacy for an organ transplant thus far. I have reached the limit of my experience and must defer to Dr. Samuelson who will be here this afternoon." Hank said to the group.

Scott looked at Xander with a questioning look.

"We're fine. The next doc will decide if we get new eyes." Xander paraphrased.

Scott made an 'oh' face as the rest of the group seemed to relax at the news.

Xander, being his gregarious self walked up to Jean's bed, leading Remy.

"I'm Xander Harris and this is Remy LeBeau." He said, extending a hand.

She shook his hand and then he led Remy to greet her.

Remy took her hand and kissed the back.

"A pleasure to meet you both." Jean said with surprise.

"Xander is from Andrew's dimension, Remy is from Alan's." Scott said in an informative tone.

"We've got our very own dimensions." Andrew whispered to Alan, yet everyone in the room heard.

Hank cleared his throat and got the attention of the occupants of the room.

"While I have you all here, I would like to see Scott, Alan and Andrew in the examination room." Hank announced.

Scott shook his head at Jubilee, indicating that he would get there under his own power. The other men followed suit and the three men in wheelchairs paraded out of the room.

"What is it that makes them so special?" Jubilee asked the group who had fallen into silence.

"Their love." Xander said absently.

When he noticed that everyone was looking at him, he clarified. "They are each strong, loving, caring men. When they're together, they're complete. Whether they're lovers or brothers or friends doesn't matter. They empower each other and bring out the best that each has to offer."

"What about you?" Dawn asked, noticing that he hadn't included himself in that explanation.

"They're my friends and I love them all, but... I'm not a part of their special bond. Eventually I'll move on, but until then I'll enjoy every moment I can with those three. What they have is something special, something rare." Xander finished in awe.

"He's right. I'm so happy that Scott found those two. They've obviously helped him to grow and develop far more than he ever did with me." Jean said with happiness for Scott evident in her tone.

"You should have known Andrew before he met Scott. He was a jerky little guy. I couldn't stand to be in the same room with him because he was so awkward." Xander said to the group.

"Alan be so worried bout what other people tink, he don tink for himself. Gene be like de puppeteer, non?" Remy said.

"Mr. S was all business. I didn't think he knew what fun was. A major stick-up-the-butt." Jubilee said.

"So, who's going to tell me the whole story of what I've missed in the past month?" Jean asked the group.

After a slightly more intensive examination than usual Hank announced to the group, "Gentlemen, as I had hoped, you're all recovering well. Your trip to the dining room this morning was what prompted me to check your conditions."

The men sat riveted to his words, each hoping that he would rescind the bedrest order.

"I believe you all three still need rest, but you no longer need the complete bedrest that I originally ordered. You have been upgraded from recovering to convalescing. As such, you will still need help for certain things such as walking any significant distance. But you will be able to take your meals in the dining room and come to the common room to watch a movie if you like." Hank said, receiving the pleased reaction he expected.

"Piotr, Bobby, and Kurt are currently in your room, removing Scott's bed and returning it to his room." Hank said and saw the men's expressions fall.

"In the place of Scott's bed, they are setting up a series of single beds so everyone will have their own place to sleep... though Andrew and Alan will be sharing Andrew's bed." Hank said with a smile.

"So we're going to have three beds in the room?" Scott asked in confirmation.

"Four actually." Hank said and waited for someone to figure it out.

"Remy?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yes, I see no reason that he can't leave MedLab, and since the cohabitation has benefited the rest of you so well... why change something that works?" Hank finished with a shrug.

"Thank you Dr. McCoy." Alan said sincerely.

"Yeah, thanks, you're the coolest doctor I've ever known." Andrew said with honest admiration.

"So are we done?" Scott asked Hank, ready to get back to Jean.

"Just one thing. If you feel tired, rest. You are not healed, if you try to push yourselves too far, too soon, you'll end up back in bed... and this time I'll restrain you." Hank said without a hint of humor.

"Understood." Scott said and got out of his wheelchair and walked out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Conversation stopped as the three men made their way into the room on foot.

"I'm guessing that it was good news." Dawn said with a smile.

Each of the men found a chair and sat heavily, the walk having taken its toll on all three.

"Yeah, we're allowed to walk and eat in the dining room now. We still need help, but we don't have to stay in bed all the time." Andrew said happily.

"I guess I'm not out of a job after all." Xander said to no one in particular.

"So what are you going to do with your new found freedom?" Jubilee asked the men.

"Right now? I think I'm going back to bed. Between breakfast and the examination, I'm tired." Alan admitted reluctantly.

Scott and Andrew nodded in agreement.

"Oh yeah, Dr. McCoy had a bed put in our room for you Remy, if that's okay with you." Alan said casually.

"Who else be in dis room wit me?" Remy asked cautiously.

"Me, Andrew, Scott and Xander." Alan said without inflection.

Remy nodded in acceptance.

"Is everyone ready to go? I'm beat." Scott said.

"Let's take the short cut." Andrew said to the group.

"Are you sure you're up to it, love? Remember yesterday." Alan asked with caution.

"It'll be easier on me to open a portal for a minute than to try to walk both halls and stand in the elevator." Andrew said honestly.

"We could get the wheelchairs." Tara offered.

"No thanks Tara. I'd rather walk the halls than ride the wheelchair anymore. I feel like a complete burden in the wheelchair." Andrew said and noticed a twinge in Remy's expression.

"Okay, I guess it's decided then. Jean, I'll come back and visit soon. Everyone who's going up to our bedroom, follow Andrew." Scott said in his team leader voice.

Xander placed Remy's hand on his elbow and followed the group through

the portal.

"What jus happen?" Remy asked as he heard the acoustics of the room change and felt carpet beneath his feet.

"Sorry Remy, I should have warned you. Andrew just made a portal from the MedLab to our bedroom so we wouldn't have to walk so far." Xander said and led Remy to one of the vacant single beds.

"Here's a bed for you." he said and moved to Remy's left and took the next bed.

"This will be my bed. Once everyone has settled into their place, I'll walk you around the room so you can find your way to the bathroom and chairs if you need to." Xander said as he laid back.

"It hard for Remy to say da words, but tanks Xander." Remy said sincerely.

Xander could tell by Remy's self-sufficient nature that he'd probably not said that to more than five people in his life, so was honored by the thanks but aware enough of Remy's pride not to say more than a sincere, "Your welcome."

"Andrew, are you still planning on opening the portal at noon?" Dawn asked quietly.

"Yeah. Have you decided what you're going to do?" he asked with interest.

"Yeah. Today we're going through the portal to visit with Buffy and the others. We're going to take the next week to visit and pack. Next week we'll come back and start our jobs here." Dawn said while holding Tara's hand.

"That sounds like a good idea. This way you have plenty of time to explain things to Buffy and you don't have to do without your clothes like Xander and Alan have been doing." Andrew said with a smile.

"Xander, if you like, I can pack your things and have them ready tomorrow." Dawn said helpfully.

"Yeah, thanks Dawn... are you going to tell the Professor before you go?" Xander asked as an afterthought.

"Yeah, right now." Dawn said and gave Tara's hand a squeeze to signal that she was ready to go.

Jubilee gave a little wave at the group and followed Dawn and Tara out of the room.

"It's just 9:00? I feel like we've been up all day!" Scott said in wonder.

"I know, the day really drags when you spend it in bed." Alan said with a smile.

"Remy, c'mon and I'll give you that tour now, in case you need to get something." Xander said and got off his bed.

Remy thought about protesting the action, but reasoned that Xander was giving him the tools to be able to depend on himself, if only in this room.

Xander took Remy to the wall and counted out the steps to the bathroom. He took a moment to walk Remy around the bathroom to familiarize him with the layout. After the quick tour Xander led him back to the bed, then to the door, and back to the bed, to the chairs, back to the bed and finally took Remy's hand from his elbow and said, "Would you find your way to the bathroom for me? That's the one I want to be sure that you can find."

The group watched silently as Remy found his way from the bed to the wall then set off across the room and went directly to the bathroom.

"Good. I'm going downstairs for a while, I don't need to rest right now. You wanna come with me or stay here Remy?" Xander asked casually.

Remy realized that Xander had gone through the whole procedure of showing him how to find the bathroom so he could honestly have this choice. It seemed such a little thing on the surface, to be given the choice of going or staying, but this was probably the first time he had the opportunity to make this type of decision in weeks and it felt frightening... and good.

"Tanks Xander, Remy go wit you. Don need ta sleep now and don wan ta keep dese guys awake." Remy said with a hint of a smile.

"I'm at the door when you're ready." Xander said to let Remy know he was waiting for him, more than his location.

Remy made his way to the door and felt Xander take his hand and place it on his elbow.

"We'll be back later guys, get some sleep." Xander said and closed the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ms. Summers, Ms. McCoy, come in and have a seat." the Professor said in a much happier mood than he had had in recent days.

"Thank you Professor, we've come to a decision." Dawn said as she and Tara took their seats.

Professor Xavier moved from behind his desk, then looked at Dawn, prompting her to continue.

"We're going to go back to my universe for a week so I can get some things and make sure Buffy's okay with this. Then we'll be coming back to accept your offer." Dawn said happily.

"Very good. It may seem on the surface that I created these jobs to encourage you to stay but we do really have a need for both of you here." Charles said sincerely.

"I agree. The children need to have someone to channel their energy during their free time, and Dr. McCoy seems to have been stretched to his limits." Dawn said seriously.

"I have another matter to discuss with you before you go. You will be needing an identity when you come here to stay. I have been working on providing identities for Andrew, Alan and Xander so I decided to get you one too." The Professor said and moved his chair to reach some papers from his desk.

He handed a paper to Dawn and waited for her reaction.

"I'm Scott and Alan's sister?" Dawn asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Your parents exist in this universe as well as Buffy. It would be nearly impossible to make a false identity as Buffy's sister without their cooperation. Since I'm already creating a false identity for Alan, I just added you as his sister and it was easily done. This way, we only have to get Alex to cover our story." the Professor said with pride in his accomplishment.

"It makes sense. And the guys are going to love having you as a sister." Tara said warmly.

"I didn't even think about my identity here. Thank you Professor, I can't wait to tell them, they're going to love it." Dawn said happily.

"I might as well give you the profiles I have composed for the others. The official paperwork will be arriving in the next few days. After that all of you will need to go to the department of motor vehicles to get identification, but I have secured documentation that will make that no more troublesome than a regular trip to the DMV." the Professor said with honesty as he handed over the other profiles.

"Andrew's name has been changed to LeeAndrew, is that a misprint?" Tara asked as she read over Dawn's shoulder.



"No, the best way that I could create an identity for Andrew was to remove the death certificate from his other self in this dimension and construct a history from the point of his death. His name was LeeAndrew Malachi Wells." the Professor said matter-of-factly.

"Alan Sunshine Summers?" Tara asked with a laugh.

The Professor just shrugged and smiled.

"What? You don't have some long convoluted explanation of why you gave him the middle name of Sunshine?" Dawn asked through her own laughter.

"No, I was picking the names, so that's what I picked for him." the Professor said and gave into his own laughing urge for a moment.

"Alexander Lavelle Wainwright Harris?" Dawn asked, knowing the Professor had a story to cover this one.

"Alexander and Alexandria were twins, separated at birth. Xander only recently found out that he wasn't the birth child of the late Felicity and Robert Wainwright. After some investigation, he tracked his origin and discovered that he had a twin sister. When he discovered his true identity he took the name Harris and kept the name Wainwright as a second middle name." the Professor said, waiting for questions.

"You've been watching soap operas haven't you?" Dawn asked in accusation.

The Professor didn't confirm or deny Dawn's claim as Tara asked, "Don't you think that his mother would notice that she didn't have twins?"

"With a little help from Cerebro, I altered her memories just a bit so that she remembers that she had two babies, and that the nurse had told her that the second one was stillborn." the Professor said quietly.

"So when Xander shows up, she'll think that the nurse stole the baby and told her it was dead... won't she try to sue the nurse or the hospital?" Dawn asked in disbelief at his flamboyant plan.

"She may, but the statute of limitations has run out for her to pursue any criminal actions, the nurse who attended Alexandria's birth has long since died, and any lawyer worth his salt will advise her that there is nothing to be gained from trying to pursue a twenty-three year old crime with no monetary damages to be won." the Professor said simply.

"I don't know if I like your plan, but I suppose it could allow Xander to develop a relationship with Xandria and his mother if he wanted that." Dawn said.

"Yes, and I wanted him to have that opportunity, otherwise I would have created his identity without any surviving relatives." the Professor said in explanation.

Tara nodded in understanding.

Dawn finally agreed and got up to leave.

"We need to go back to Tara's room and pack a few things for the trip to my dimension. We'll be back in a week, Andrew can get a message to us if you need us any sooner." Dawn said and made her way to the door.

"Thank you Professor." Tara said and followed Dawn.

The Professor went back to his desk and started on some of the more mundane tasks of running a school.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander and Remy had taken a tour of the mansion and the grounds, just walking calmly and enjoying an unhurried morning without any particular purpose.

Xander led them to a pile of rocks that had been strategically placed to look natural, but also to provide a good sitting place.

"There is a rock right behind you and it looks like a good sitting spot." Xander said and helped Remy find the rock with his hand before moving to his own rock.

"Remy got a question for you." Remy said, facing a group of trees.

"Sure, what do you want to know?" Xander asked as he rested back on his elbows and turned his face toward the sun.

"You heard what the doctor said to Remy bout my condition... I mean besides the eyes." Remy asked, a little tremble in his voice.

Xander closed his eye and said quietly, "I heard."

"How can Remy still be a man? Dey took dat away from me, an I don know what ta do now." he said in a defeated voice.

"I can't tell you what you should do or how you should feel Remy. I don't have those answers... but if you want to know what I think, I can tell you." Xander offered softly and honestly.

"What you tinkin?" Remy asked and turned to face Xander.

"I think that if Hank can get the testosterone balanced in your system like

he was talking about, and if you let him insert the prosthetic testicles, the only difference between you and any other man will be that you won't be able to father a child." Xander said in a steady tone.

"You really tink dat?" Remy asked in wonder.

"Yeah, I understood most of what Hank was saying in there. The treatment that Professor Frost was giving you was like a megadose of testosterone that got used up over a period of time. It was causing your system to go crazy because your hormones were so out of balance. Hank wants to check your levels each day until the megadose has flushed out of your system, then give you weaker doses, more often. You'll have a patch that you'll put on and that's all you'll have to mess with for the day. After a while, you'll be balanced and feeling just like you did before." Xander said with assurance.

"What bout de other ting? The pross ting?" Remy asked, somewhat ashamed.

Xander realized that Remy didn't understand what Hank had been saying and paraphrased, "He just wants to give you some fake nuts in your nutsack. That way, when a woman goes down there, she finds everything she expects to."

"So you tink the doctor can make Remy like before?" Remy asked in confirmation.

"Pretty close. I've lost enough things to know that when you lose something, it'll never be completely like it was before... but what's your other choice? Either give into it and let them win or keep fighting by living the best way that you can." Xander said simply.

Remy sat silently, thinking over the words.

After a long contemplative silence Remy finally said, "I tink I let da doctor fix me up. But Remy don always understand what he be sayin. You tink you be able to help Remy?"

Xander let a fond smile come across his face as he said, "Remy my friend, I promise that I'll be there to help you however I can."

"Remy don know how to repay you for dis..." Remy trailed off, facing away from Xander now.

"There is no debt between friends in my mind. Anything I give a friend, I give freely and anything I receive I consider a gift. If you have something I need, I'll ask you and I expect you to do the same to me." Xander said simply and looked down at his watch.

Remy nodded either in agreement or comprehension.

"We should be heading back to the room if we're going to see off Dawn and Tara. Are you ready?" Xander asked as he got off his rock.

Remy stood and held out his hand, ready to have it placed on Xander's arm.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander and Remy entered the room to find Alan and Andrew snuggled together asleep and Scott laying in bed, reading one of Andrew's Star Wars books.

Scott looked up from his book and asked, "So what have you two been up to?"

"We took a walk around the grounds. How about you?" Xander asked as he led Remy back to his bed.

"This is it. I'm actually surprised at how good this book is." Scott said, holding up the book.

"Oh yeah, that is a good one, the next one after it is good too." Xander said, remembering the fanciful stories.

"Which one is that?" Scott asked, pulling out the box of books.

Xander looked through the books and after a minute came out with the next in the series.

"So are they all in a row or can I read them out of order?" Scott asked, never having read any Star Wars books before.

"Either. But I enjoyed them in order because you catch subtle things in the story you tend not to notice if you read them out of order." Xander said and sat on his bed.

There was a gentle knock on the door.

Scott sat the box down and put the book aside as Xander walked across the room to answer the door.

Tara and Dawn walked into the room with one suitcase each.

"How do you have two suitcases of clothes when neither of you brought anything with you?" Scott asked in wonder as Alan and Andrew were waking up.

"We bought the things we needed. We didn't have identical twins here to clothe us like some people." Dawn said, looking at Alan who just put on his glasses and had a bad case of bed-head.

"What's my fault now?" Alan asked in playful mock-confusion.

"Everything... until further notice." Xander said with a fond smile.

"Ooo guys, the Professor gave me these to give you." Dawn said and started handing out profiles.

"LeeAndrew?" Andrew asked in confusion.

"Wainwright?" Xander asked next.

"Sunshine?" Alan said in horror.

The men went to Alan and started reading, trying to figure out what had caused him such distress. One by one the men were leaving, fighting down the laughter.

"Remy wan to know what happenin." Remy said indignantly from his bed.

Dawn sat on the edge of his bed and said, "Andrew was renamed LeeAndrew because that's what his double was named. Xander was given the second middle name Wainwright to fit in with some long story that might have come from 'Days of our Lives' or 'Oprah'. I'm Scott and Alan's sister now..." She said and got a great big smile as she noticed everyone paying attention to her story.

"What about 'Sunshine'?" Alan asked sourly.

"I guess the Professor thought it fit." Dawn said simply and went back to Tara.

"Are you ready for the portal?" Andrew asked of the women.

"Whenever you are LeeAndrew." Dawn said with a smile.

"Just think, in one year you'll be my sister-in-law." LeeAndrew said with a grin.

"Cool." Dawn said with a smile as the portal opened before her.

## **[Chapter 18: Sedentary Hope]**

Andrew opened the portal to show the familiar living room of slayer central. Buffy, Willow and Faith had obviously been waiting for the portal to open.

Dawn and Tara waved to the guys and stepped through the portal.

"Andy, do I have time to talk to Buffy for a minute?" Xander asked seriously.

"Sure Xan, I'm feeling fine. Do what you need to do." Andrew said with a smile for Xander's concern.

Xander looked at Andrew and decided that he was telling the truth, he didn't look too drawn.

Xander took Remy's hand and led him through the portal.

"Hey Buff, Wills, Faith. How are you all doing?" Xander said once he cleared the portal.

"Good", "fine", and "five by five" were their answers.

"I've decided to stay in the other dimension. The eye thing did it for me. I'm going to try for a simpler life for a while. I just wanted to let you know in person." Xander said with a sheepish look.

"Way to go Xan." Faith said with honest admiration.

"I hope it works out for you, but if you get bored with it, you'll always have a place with us." Buffy said, looking like she might cry.

"We'll still see each other all the time. Besides, the new slayers are a lot better fighters than I could ever be." Xander said honestly.

"It was never about the fighting. It was about the team. But you do what you need to do for you. I hope you make a good life for yourself." Buffy said with sincerity.

"Who's your new friend?" Faith asked, noticing Remy.

Xander led Remy to the women and said, "Remy LeBeau, I would like to introduce you to Buffy, Faith and Willow."

Remy put out a hand in greeting and received Buffy's.

Remy accepted her hand and noticed the calluses. He took the hand to his lips, but before he could kiss her hand she pulled away.

"No offense, but I've been bitten like that before." She said and took a step

back.

"Non, no offense. Remy not be considered a threat for a while. It be a good feelin." Remy said with a smile directed in Buffy's general direction.

"I'll talk to you again soon, I don't want for Andrew to keep the portal open too long." Xander said and placed Remy's hand on his elbow.

"Okay, and Remy, maybe you can stop in and visit for a while next time?" Buffy asked with a slightly seductive tone in her voice.

"Same time tomorrow?" Xander said as he led Remy through the portal.

"Yeah, tomorrow." Buffy said absently as she watched Remy.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How did you do that Remy? You had her totally unhinged before you even said two words." Xander said in wonder.

"Le femme jus be lonely, you tink she be interested in Remy?" he asked cautiously.

"Andy, help me out here. Wasn't that Buffy's aloof, come hither look?" Xander asked, hoping for confirmation.

"Xan's right, and she was totally checking out your ass."

"De women Remy knows, dey see de eyes an leave. Buffy don do dat." Remy said in wonder.

"Buffy's been dating the undead. You have a pulse, so you're one step up over two of her exboyfriends already." Xander said and threw himself back on his bed.

"Lemme guess, le femme don like a normal man, non?" Remy asked cautiously.

"No, Buffy doesn't do normal very well." Xander said seriously.

Remy hung his head and said, "When women go to see the sideshow, there's some that want sex wit de freaks... its what makes em hot."

"Buffy's not like that..." Xander started when Remy interrupted.

"She ever have a normal boyfriend?" Remy asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Andrew said when Remy asked, "How long ago?"

"Eight years." Xander said with a weak voice.

"Don worry none Xander. Remy not hurt by it. It not be Remy's problem, It be Buffy's. And Remy jus find he have self-respect for seein it." Remy said with a triumphant smile.

"Way to go Cajun." Xander said with his own smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

The group of men traveled downstairs and joined the students for lunch. All of them stayed in the dining room after the meal, dreading the trip back upstairs.

"When is the doctor supposed to be here?" Andrew asked the group.

"Hank just said 'this afternoon'. Anytime I suppose." Xander said, concerned by the tiredness of the men.

"Then I suppose we should go down to wait in the MedLab." Andrew said, resigned to his fate.

"I don't think that's such a good idea." Xander said, knowing that the men all wanted to be there.

Before they could protest, Xander continued, "Hank won't allow you into the examination room. This guy's a specialist, so there's no telling how long the exam will take. I think the best thing the three of you can do is go in the common room and watch a movie to pass the time for a little while. I promise that as soon as Remy and I are finished, we will come and tell you everything." Xander said with a reassuring smile.

"Yeah, I guess... and I need to call Alex. If I call right now, I should be able to wake him up." Scott said with a mischievous smile.

"We all need to get in on this call, it's not every day you get to tell him he has a new brother, sister and boyfriend-in-law." Andrew said with equal mischief.

"Let's do it then." Scott said and forced himself out of his chair and toward the common room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wat dey be talkin about?" Remy asked Xander as they left the dining room.

"Scott has a brother, Alex, who lives in Hawaii. They are going to call him to let him know that he has a new brother and sister... Alan and Dawn." Xander said as they entered the elevator.

"So dey be serious. Alan and Dawn becomin part of Scott's family?" Remy



asked, not sure why he was having such difficulty with the concept.

"Yeah, and if you're around them for a while, you'll think they were always brothers by the way they act. They're really great guys." Xander finished as they reached the MedLab.

"Gentlemen, I'm glad to see you, I was just about to summon you. This is Dr. Samuelson, Dr. Samuelson, this is Alexander Harris and Remy LeBeau." Hank said cheerfully.

"Good to meet you gentlemen. Who wants to be first?" The doctor asked as he made his way to the examination table.

Xander could see the look of nervousness on Remy's face and said, "I will doctor."

\* \* \* \* \*

The talk with Alex had gone as expected, with one surprise. Alex announced that he was going to visit so he could meet his new brother and sister. While they were talking on the phone, Alex went online and booked reservations for a flight in one week. By then Dawn should be back and they could have their first family reunion.

All the men were sitting with worry and not paying attention to the movie as they each thought about Xander and Remy down in the MedLab.

"I'm going to go visit with Jean for a little while." Scott finally announced.

"Do you mind if I come with you?" Alan asked, wanting to be near when Remy got out of his examination.

"You two aren't leaving me alone up here." Andrew said indignantly.

"Well come on then." Scott said as he made his way toward the elevator.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xander finally stepped out of the examination room with Remy on his arm. He was surprised to find Alan and Andrew sitting and waiting for them in chairs in the hallway.

"I thought you were going to wait for us upstairs." Xander said in accusation.

"If it were us in there, would you?" Andrew asked bluntly.

Xander thought about his words for just a moment before admitting, "No, I'd be out here in the hallway. Thanks guys... where's Scott?"

"With Jean. So are you going to tell us or do we have to beat it out of you... how did it go?" Andrew asked anxiously.

"They were using some massive medical lingo in there that was waaaaaaay beyond my understanding but I think it all meant that we're good to go. The doctor said that since Remy is a mutant and the MedLab has all the equipment that he needs, he'll do the surgery here. He feels that Remy might not get the best care if he were treated in a regular hospital. There is a lot of anti-mutant sentiment going on out there." Xander said irritably.

"So when are you going to do it?" Alan asked excitedly.

"That's the problem. The procedure calls for 'live' organs. Which means that they have to be harvested and immediately transplanted. We have to wait for eyes to become available, and when they are, we have to be ready for surgery." Xander said with a bit of disappointment.

"Any idea how long that will take?" Alan asked, not quite as excited as before.

"It may be ten minutes or ten months from now before we have compatible eyes available for surgery." Xander said resigned.

"Nothing like a relaxing wait... how you feeling about all this Remy?" Andrew asked.

"Remy don know wat ta tink. It be a good ting ta get some eyes but Remy be feelin funny bout da people who gotta die ta provide em." Remy said seriously.

"If it helps, imagine that they are friends-of-humanity. That should make it easier to accept them." Alan said seriously.

"Remy don play games like dat Alan. If Remy get new eyes, he need to know who had em before." Remy said seriously, and each man there knew that his mind wouldn't be changed.

"I can't say I understand why you need to know Remy, but I don't have to. I respect you and if that's what you need, I'll do whatever I can to help you find out." Alan said honestly.

"Tanks Alan. Remy knew dat." Remy said and gave a smile.

"So is that everything that they had to say?" Andrew asked Xander.

"No, they were going out of their way to make sure we knew that this might not work. There is a chance that it won't work at all. There is a chance that it won't work completely and we'll have partial blindness, and there is this

small, like itty bitty, chance that everything will work the way it's supposed to and we'll be able to see just fine." Xander said in a half hearted smirk.

"But for Remy, any chance be better than no chance." Remy said honestly.

"I understand that, but the news is essentially good, I mean you both passed the exam and now are just waiting for new eyes, right?" Andrew asked in confirmation.

"Yeah, I guess we did pass. If the doc found something wrong, that would be it... dead end. But everything is okay for the transplant so I guess we're in good shape for now." Xander said with a shrug.

"Then let's go get Scott and celebrate." Andrew said happily.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Scott. Xander and Remy passed their eye exam. We're going to go celebrate. Wanna join us?" Alan asked as he walked into Jean's room.

"You guys don't mind if Jean comes along do you? She's good to go as long as she takes her medicine regularly." Scott said to the group.

"Of course Jean can join us. Do you need a wheelchair or can you walk?" Andrew asked from the doorway.

"I think I need the wheelchair, I can walk, but this medication makes me drowsy and I might fall asleep without warning." Jean said with an undertone of disgust in her voice.

"I'll get the wheelchair, Scott can be your driver." Andrew said and retreated back into the hallway.

"What kind of celebration are we going to have?" Jean asked the group.

As one the group of men answered, "Cookies."

"Why do I get the feeling that this isn't the first celebration you have had?" Jean asked in fun.

"We celebrate the wonder of each day and the good company we keep." Alan said as Andrew returned with the wheelchair.

"Don worry cher, Remy new to dis group too. If dey be celebrating too much, you stay by Remy, he protect you." Remy said in a gallant voice.

"Thanks Remy, I think I can handle them, but if the celebration gets out of hand I'll remember your offer." Jean said, trying to sound serious.

Remy nodded his head in acknowledgment and a faint smile could be seen.

Between Xander and Scott, they were able to get Jean into the wheelchair and ready to go.

"Where to?" Andrew asked as he was ready to leave the room.

"The common room, I can think of a few dozen kids that would love to visit with Jean when classes let out." Scott said to the group.

"I don't know Scott. It might traumatize the children, letting them see me in a wheelchair." Jean said with worry.

Scott, Alan and Andrew laughed a little as Xander explained, "Scott and Andrew have been conducting class from their sickbed."

"And the kids threw Alan and Andrew a party yesterday when they were still in wheelchairs." Scott said gently.

Jean thought about it, then smiled. "Let's go."

***The End***