

Hurt & Comfort:

Book 11 – Creating Comfort

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[Chapter 1: In Search of Home]

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

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

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

"And you are?" Jan asked curiously.

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

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

"Wasn't hiding." Marc mumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's one of the reasons you'll have John and his crew hanging around with you. If you're not used to being around other mutants, or not used to being a mutant, John and the guys will show you the best way to fit in." Logan said, then pointed, "It's that van over there."

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lisa?" Clark called out to the group.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beau Collins." the cowboy replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

Matt walked to the door and unlocked it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"As you can see, each of you has his own computer that is hooked up to the campus network. Be aware that you are not allowed to

install software on the school machines and there is a lockout in place to prevent viewing of inappropriate materials on the Internet. But they are available for you to use within those boundaries." Trey said seriously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marc couldn't help but smile back.

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

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

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

"They are teachers." Trey said honestly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure Mr. ?" Beau asked cautiously.

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

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

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

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

"How old are you kid?" Matt asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dr. Hoffman?" Beau asked cautiously.

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

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

"May I ask why?" Julia asked professionally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" Seth said in shock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seth looked at his father and received a reassuring nod.

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

"I promise." Clark said sincerely.

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

"Cool." Clark said with a smile.

"What?" Seth asked in surprise.

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

"Um, thanks." Seth said shyly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks." John whispered and continued to walk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks." Seth mumbled shyly.

The mood was interrupted by a knock on the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks Scott." Clark mumbled.

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

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

He returned a second later with Beau.

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

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

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

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

Ronny smiled at Seth's statement and nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Chapter 2: Unveiling the New World]

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

"Yes." Paul said in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I will." Louie whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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"This is it." Beau said with apprehension.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not." Clark answered immediately.

"Neither am I." Marc said next.

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

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

Beau stopped his packing to look at Josh, then said, "I'm not a cowboy Josh. I haven't earned the right to be called a cowboy because I've never worked on a ranch. Real cowboys aren't about dressing in western clothes, listening to country music and drinking beer. Real cowboys are hard working men and women who take care of cattle and horses for a living. And I've got a little secret to

tell you. Most of them aren't beautiful people. Their skin is like leather, their hands have calluses and they look older than they are because they work hard to make a living... Josh, have you ever actually *touched* a cow?"

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

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

Beau walked out of the bathroom carrying a plastic bag and said, "I know because I lived in Texas and knew some 'real' cowboys. And seeing that you're a bigot, you'll love the next part. Most of the cowboys I knew were Mexican-Americans. Whites were in the minority. But you go ahead and play dress up and pretend to be whatever it is you think you are. Just leave me out of it. I'm not a cowboy, I never pretended to be one. I dress like this because these are the clothes I brought with me, it's not a fashion statement, it's the way people dress where I'm from."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Cool." Seth said in wonder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul looked around and noticed that everyone had heard.

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

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

Paul got a surprised look that melted into a smile.

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

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

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

Trey looked at Clark and Bobby in question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I will help." Robert said immediately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clark blushed violently, remembering Thanksgiving morning.

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

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

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

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

"Just let me know." Matt said seriously.

John nodded.

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

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

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

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

Matt looked at Scott with question.

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

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

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

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

"Me too." Paul said and followed.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm scared." Louie said quietly.

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

"I'll try." Louie whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

Louie nodded.

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

Louie looked up in surprise.

"Really?" Louie asked in amazement.

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here." Seth answered with a smile.

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

"Marcus?" Jamie asked.

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

"Louie?" Jamie said next.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks." Clark said quietly.

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

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

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

"Thanks." Slash said quietly.

"Any other questions?" Jamie asked the group.

"What about laundry?" Marc asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

//Sorry.// Jesus said sadly.

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

"Me too." Marc said honestly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes." Icheb said with a smile.

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

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

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

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

[Chapter 3: Interviews and Interactions]

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

Seth looked at Julia with wide, frightened eyes.

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

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

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

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

"You've already done it. You've enrolled at the Wagner Institute. Now that you're here, we have to be sure that you're going to stay focused on 'why' you're here. This isn't summer camp, nor is it a party. It is a college and you will be expected to do your part to maintain a good academic standing. Your mutancy doesn't give you any special rights or privileges. If your grades fall below an acceptable level, you'll be asked to leave." Julia said firmly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

"Thank you." Slash said in a whisper.

"Perhaps you could answer a question for me. I clearly remember talking to you Wednesday and you telling me that your name is 'Josiah Andrew Haley-Keith'. I wrote it down so I could attempt to

retrieve your school records. But Friday morning I came in to find your school transcripts on my desk with the name 'Josiah LeeAndrew Wells'." Julia said seriously as she stood and walked to the window.

Slash nodded timidly.

"Then when I looked back at my notes, I found the name 'Josiah LeeAndrew Wells' on the notepad, written in my own handwriting. Would you care to explain how that happened?" Julia asked as she walked back to her chair behind the desk.

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

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

Slash smiled in relief.

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

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

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

"Why?" Slash asked hesitantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmmm... The Piotr Rasputin Memorial Scholarship. It says here that you have been awarded a full scholarship. Books, housing, a

clothing allowance and... I didn't know we could do this..." Julia said as she looked at the document curiously.

"What is it?" Slash asked hesitantly.

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

Slash gave a shrug.

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beau looked at Clark, John and Ronny curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay I guess." Lisa said timidly.

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

Lisa nodded, but didn't make eye contact.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Julia nodded and waited for the rest of the answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lisa stared at Julia in disbelief.

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

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

Julia took in a deep, cleansing breath and released it slowly before saying, "I wouldn't call it a 'good reason' but... it is a reason. Let's try this. Think about what I've said and use this first semester to

decide if college is what you really want. There are also a few books I'd like for you to read."

Lisa looked at Dr. Hoffman in confusion.

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

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

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

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

"The Feminine Mystique?" Lisa asked curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that?" John asked curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quaid nodded with a proud smile.

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

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

"What did he say?" Julia asked curiously.

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

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

Louie hesitantly nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

"Oh?" Julia asked with surprise.

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

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

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

"I see." Julia said in thought.

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

"Anything?" Julia asked seriously.

"Anything." Marc said in a definite tone.

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

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

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

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

Marc realized her meaning and waited expectantly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jamie nodded as he dialed the phone.

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

* * * * *

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

"Really?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

Julia smiled and handed the ID to Lisa.

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

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

Lisa looked back at Julia with an incredulous stare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lisa smiled and nodded happily.

[Chapter 4: The Worst]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some chuckles spread through the group as Beau returned.

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It really was a misunderstanding. I thought he stood me up, he thought I stood him up... anyway, we're going to have some more

pizza arriving as soon as they're out of the oven." Jamie said shyly, watching closely for Scott's reaction.

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lisa hesitantly glanced at Clark and Trey to see if they were staring at her.

To her surprise, they both had their full attention on John who was sitting on the couch.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

"A little." Seth admitted shyly.

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

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

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

"I wanna see." Quaid said seriously.

Seth looked at Quaid with obvious indecision.

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

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

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

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

"Nothing gross so far." Bobby said frankly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Beast?" Beau asked cautiously.

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miguel looked at Jamie with question.

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

"You sure?" Miguel asked cautiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

//Thanks. I'm always trying to encourage Louie to be more assertive, but I think it will seem to him that he has permission if

others will encourage him too.// Jesus said as he nibbled on the edge of his pizza.

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beau looked at Slash with question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

"So you don't remember anything from before that day?" Beau asked, then moved a pawn to threaten the knight.

//Just flashes of things. Eat. Sleep. Hide. I really don't like to think about it.// Jesus said frankly, then levitated his knight out of danger.

"I bet. Do you think that if you left Louie, that you'd go back to being a plain old rat?" Beau asked as he studied the board, suspecting that Jesus' move wasn't just a casual event.

//Maybe. But even if I knew for sure that I could leave Louie and still be myself, I'd still want to stay.// Jesus said, then added, //Your queen is in danger.//

"What?" Beau asked, then saw the trap that Jesus had tricked him into. "Hey! You're just trying to suck me into giving up my knight."

A chuckle sounded in Beau's mind, then Jesus said, //Don't blame me for it. You're sucking all on your own.//

"Well, let's see how you like this." Beau said as he moved his bishop to take Jesus' knight.

//I like it just fine.// Jesus said calmly, then moved his rook to take Beau's bishop and said, //Check.//

"What?" Beau asked frantically as he looked over the board.

//That means that my piece wearing the pointy hat can take your king if you don't move it.// Jesus said with chuckles under his mind/ voice.

"Smart ass rat." Beau muttered as he studied the board.

//Hillbilly red neck hick.// Jesus retorted, then continued, //Now if we're done name calling, could you move so we can finish this?//

Beau reluctantly reached up and tipped his king on it's side.

"You'll have me in two moves no matter what I do." Beau said in resignation.

//All jokes aside, that was the best game I've played in a long time. I hope you'll consider playing me again.// Jesus said seriously.

"Sure thing, li'l buddy. I used to play at school, but the guys I played weren't very good. I didn't really have to try. I guess I got sloppy." Beau said, then added, "You're the first person to beat me since the last time I played my dad."

Jesus telepathically chuckled, then said, //You called me a person.//

Beau looked at Jesus with a smile and said, "I didn't mean it as an insult. I don't know exactly why you're like this, but you're as much a person as anyone I've ever met."

//Thank you. There have been a few people along the way who've treated me with respect, but you're the only one besides Louie who has ever made me *feel* like a person.//

* * * * *

"We really need to be going. These guys have classes in the morning." Scott said frankly.

"Yeah. We should probably be getting ready for bed too." Slash said with regret.

"We're just a phone call away." Lee said as he draped an arm around Slash's shoulders and gave him a quick, assuring hug. "You have the number, don't you?"

"Yeah. I've got it." Slash said past the lump in his throat, overwhelmed by the love that he felt for his newly adopted brother.

"Xavier students! Let's move out." Scott said loudly from the front of the room.

"I don't want you to go." Louie said in a whisper to Quaid.

"Come over here." Quaid urged as he started walking across the room.

"Uncle Joe, can you give Louie the phone number so he can call me if he wants to?" Quaid asked as he approached.

"Sure." Slash said, then looked around until he saw the phone. "In fact, why don't I just write the number down by the phone so he can call you whenever he wants to?"

"Yeah. That'd be nice." Quaid said happily as he held Louie close to his side.

Slash smiled at the sight, then walked to the phone to write down the number.

"Is that everyone?" Scott asked from beside the front door.

Robert looked at their group and said, "Yes, Uncle Scott."

"I hope all you guys have a good first day of school. Remember to call us if you need anything at all." Scott said seriously to the group of new students.

"I should go too. I'll walk down with you." Lisa said, then gave Marc a quick kiss on the cheek before joining the group at the door.

"Bye." Slash said in a small voice as he waved at the members of his new family.

Several members of the group waved before they funneled out the door.

* * * * *

The new students stood in silence for a moment, staring at the closed door.

"I feel like this day's gone on forever." Seth said absently.

"Yeah. Last night I slept in my own bed and tonight I'm in a whole other state." Marc said with a disbelieving chuckle.

"We should probably clean this place up before we go to bed." Seth said as he looked around the room.

"How about we do that in the morning? We can pick up the empty boxes and carry them out to the trash when we leave the building." Beau said casually.

"Yeah. That sounds good. I still need to finish unpacking anyway." Marc said seriously.

//Then I suppose it's time to say goodnight.// Jesus said as he levitated down from the stack of pizza boxes at the chess table.

"Yeah. Have a good night, little buddy. Give us a yell if you or Louie need anything." Beau said with a grin.

//Count on it.// Jesus said seriously, then looked at Louie and asked, //Are you ready for bed?//

"Yeah." Louie whispered, then walked immediately to his room.

Seth looked with concern at the others.

"Give him some space and some time to adjust." Slash said quietly.

Seth slowly nodded, looking with concern at the door Louie had just passed through.

The sound of keys rattling and the front door opening drew everyone's attention.

An older teenager with dark brown wavy hair and glasses opened the door, then reached back and picked up two suitcases.

"Hi." Slash said cautiously to the stranger.

"Where is my room?" the new guy asked seriously.

"I guess you'll be sharing a room with me." Slash said, then pointed as he continued, "Right in there."

The stranger immediately walked past the group of boys and into the indicated room.

Some curious glances were exchanged, but nothing was said.

Finally everyone went their own separate ways to get ready for bed.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Louie?" Seth asked as he sat on his bed.

"Okay." Louie mumbled.

Seth nodded, then quietly said, "Just let me know if there's anything you need so you can be more comfortable."

"I'm fine." Louie said, but the tremble in his voice betrayed his anxiety.

Seth nodded, then took out a Walkman and a pair of headphones.

Louie sat at the head of his bed hugging his knees tight against his chest.

"Crap!" Seth exclaimed with frustration.

Louie jerked at the sound then watched silently as Seth tried to untangle the wires that had become twisted around his horns.

Not being able to really see what he was doing, Seth ended up making the tangle worse.

//Do you need some help?// Jesus asked with a chuckle under his mind/voice.

"I think I can get it, but these horns are nothing but trouble." Seth said with frustration.

//If you'll hold still, I can untangle that for you.// Jesus said in a more serious voice.

"Fine." Seth said with resignation as he let his hands drop.

A chuckle from across the room drew both Jesus and Seth's attention.

Louie was desperately trying to fight down his laughter at the sight of Seth with the mass of wires tangled in his horns.

"It's not that funny." Seth said dryly.

//Are you sure?// Jesus asked with amusement. //Look in the mirror.//

Seth rolled his eyes, then stood from his bed and walked to the mirror over his dresser.

"Yeah. Okay. It *is* that funny." Seth reluctantly admitted.

//Just stay still for a second and I'll get you untangled.// Jesus said with a mental chuckle.

Seth watched in the mirror as the headphone and wires untangled themselves from around his horns.

//You should probably try putting the headphones on from the back next time.// Jesus said seriously.

"Yeah. I already figured that out. I just forgot. This is all new to me. I've only had the horns for a week." Seth said as he carefully brought the headphones up behind his head and slipped them over his ears.

//Things change. Things always change.// Jesus said frankly. //We all just have to adapt.//

Seth nodded at the words, then noticed that Louie seemed to have a frightened look in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Louie?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Are you mad at me for laughing at you?" Louie asked in a whisper.

"No." Seth said immediately. "If I was mad at anyone, it was at myself for not being able to do something as simple as putting on headphones without making a mess of it."

Louie reluctantly nodded, but didn't seem to be assured.

//He felt your anger.// Jesus explained quietly. //Given everything he's been through, I can understand it making him nervous.//

Seth nodded to Jesus that he understood, then turned to Louie and said, "Louie, if I ever do get mad at you, I promise that I won't hit you or scream at you or anything like that."

Louie looked at Seth uncertainly, but finally gave an almost imperceptible nod.

* * * * *

"Are you already unpacked?" Marc asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. I unpacked while you were getting your ID." Beau said as he sat at his desk and turned on his laptop.

"Oh. Good." Marc said as he opened his suitcase.

When the startup was complete, Beau sat and waited for his laptop to connect to the campus network.

"I wanted to thank you again for helping Lisa the way you did." Marc said quietly as he put his clothes into his dresser.

"No problem. Josh was being an asshole and someone needed to let him know that it's not okay to act that way." Beau said casually, then slowly said, "That's weird. I can't connect to the network."

Marc glanced at Beau, then quietly said, "I should have been the one to protect her."

Beau looked up at the quiet statement and thought about the words. "Don't beat yourself up about it Marc. You're new here and you don't know anyone yet. I've been around Josh for a month now and I know how much of a pussy he really is."

Marc considered for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Thanks, Beau. I guess you're right."

Beau smiled and nodded that he had heard before he turned his attention back to his laptop and said, "If the network's not back up by morning, I'll have to leave early to run my printouts for the day."

"Would you like to listen to some music?" Marc asked as he looked over his stereo to make sure it was hooked up correctly.

"Depends on what kind of music." Beau responded as he started proofreading some text files on his screen.

"It doesn't matter. I liked that CD that you played in the living room. I just think it'd be nice to have some music playing." Marc said honestly.

Beau reached into his laptop bag and pulled out a small wallet of CDs.

"Here, see what you think of this." Beau said casually as he held out a CD to Marc.

As Marc stepped away from the dresser where his stereo was located, a sudden 'pop, pop, pop' sound caused him to turn, then he heard the sound of breaking glass as the shards of the window glass fell to the floor.

"GET DOWN!" Beau said as he dived at Marc.

Beau tackled him, then listened carefully.

He heard the sound of an engine racing and tires squealing outside.

"What's going on?" Marc asked in a whisper.

"A drive-by shooting, I guess. Are you alright?" Beau asked as he slowly backed away.

"I... I... don't know." Marc said absently, then whispered, "I think I've been shot."

[Chapter 5: What Happened]

"Did you guys hear that?" Slash asked as he walked in the open bedroom door.

"Get down! Someone might still be out there." Beau said as he looked over Marc to see if he could find any sign of injury.

Slash immediately crouched in the doorway, then noticed the chilly breeze blowing in through the broken window.

Before all the pieces could fit together in Slash's mind, Beau quickly said, "FUCK!"

"What happened?" Slash asked in panic at Beau's desperate tone.

"Marc's been shot. Hurry and call 911." Beau said as he ripped Marc's shirt open to expose the wound on his chest.

"On it." Slash said as he ran out of the room.

"How you doing Marc?" Beau asked in a whisper.

"I... I don't know..." Marc said distantly.

Beau reached over to his bed and grabbed the blankets with one hand and pulled them to him with a jerk.

"Just relax and let me take care of everything." Beau said gently as he covered Marc with the blankets.

"Will you call Lisa and make sure she's alright?" Marc asked with sudden concern.

"Don't worry about it. I'll call just as soon as I know that you're okay," Beau said quietly as he took Marc's torn shirt and balled it up to press it over Marc's wound.

"But what if whoever shot me already shot her?" Marc asked with worry, then his eyes went wide as he asked, "What if he's over there right now?"

"I'll take care of that as soon as I can. I promise." Beau said, then noticed that blood was running down Marc's shoulder and starting to pool on the floor.

"I need to get a towel or something to do this right." Beau said helplessly.

"The phone's dead." Slash said as he rushed back into the room.

"Oh shit." Beau said under his breath, then looked up and said, "We're cut off from the computer network too. That could mean that someone is planning to come in here to finish the job."

"How is Marc?" Slash asked with concern.

"Bleeding pretty bad. Get me a towel or something to try and slow it down." Beau said as he held the balled up shirt firmly over the wound.

//I felt your panic. What can I do to help?// Jesus' voice sounded in Beau's mind.

"I don't know lil buddy. We need help but the phone and computer access have been cut. I'm afraid that if anyone tries to go for help that someone will be waiting to gun them down." Beau said into the air.

//Seth has a cell phone. I can get him to call for help.// Jesus said seriously.

"Yes! Good! Do that." Beau said with some small measure of relief.

"Here. What else can I do?" Slash asked as he handed a jet black towel to Beau.

After a moment to press the towel over Marc's wound, Beau said, "Jesus is getting Seth to call for help. When that's done, I think you should call the guys who just left so they can be on the lookout. If someone is hunting mutants, they might be in danger too."

"Call Lisa." Marc said in a small, weak voice.

"Right. I'll call her for you Marc. I promise." Slash said, then rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

"Seth, I need to use the phone to call the Xavier people. They might be in danger too." Slash said quickly.

"Hold on. The 911 operator wants to know how Marc is doing." Seth said in an overwhelmed tone as he held his cell phone out to Slash with a look of desperation.

"Marc was shot in the chest! How the fuck do you think he's doing?" Slash snarled into the phone.

"Listen lady. Whoever just shot Marc may be after my family too. Get an ambulance and some cops over to the Wagner school, the third floor of dorm 3. I need to call my brother and warn him." Slash said, then hung up the phone without waiting for an answer.

"Do you think they're going to hurt Quaid?" Louie asked as his eyes filled with tears.

Slash quickly dialed the phone, then tilted his head toward Louie.

Seth nodded, then hurried across the room to sit on the bed next to Louie and pull him into a comforting hug.

"Quaid is going to be just fine. Slash is just going to let them know to watch out for anyone who might want to hurt them." Seth said quietly.

* * * * *

"*Xavier Institute.*" A woman answered pleasantly.

"Hi, this is Slash... I'm... Um, Andrew's uncle." Slash said disjointedly.

"*Yes Slash. What can I do for you this evening?*" Storm asked carefully, concerned by his tone.

"Someone just shot Marc. He's one of the new students at the Wagner school." Slash said as he felt his panic spiraling out of control.

"Have you called for an ambulance?" Storm asked calmly.

"Yeah. Right before I called you." Slash said quickly as he fought to keep his breathing calm.

"Slash. you need to maintain your composure for one more minute. I'll call Andrew and he can make a portal to bring you all the help you'll need." Storm said gently.

"Just tell them to be careful. Whoever shot Marc may not be gone." Slash said quickly.

"I'll let them know. One minute... just hold on for one more minute." Storm said, then hung up the phone.

Slash squeezed his eyes tightly shut, then realized that tears were falling down his cheeks.

//You need to call Lisa.// Jesus said quietly.

"I want to check on Marc. Seth, do you think you and Louie could call Lisa and make sure she's okay? Tell her not to go outside until the cops get here. It may not be safe." Slash asked as he walked to the bed where they were sitting and holding each other.

"Yeah." Seth said as he held out his hand for the phone.

As Slash held out the phone to him, he noticed that it had become completely black.

"Sorry." Slash whispered.

Seth looked at his phone, then gave a one shouldered shrug, obviously not bothered by it in the least.

* * * * *

"How is he?" Slash asked as he rushed into the room.

"Not good." Beau said as he held the blood soaked towel firmly in place.

"Seth called 911 and I called the Xavier guys. Seth is calling Lisa right now." Slash said quickly.

"Good." Beau said seriously, then leaned down and quietly said, "Did you hear that Marc? Help is on the way and they're calling Lisa right now."

The sound of the front door slamming immediately drew Beau and Slash's attention.

"I'll go check." Slash whispered.

"Be careful. It might be the gunman." Beau said quickly.

"Yeah. I will." Slash said, then noticed that the bedroom door that he was touching had turned black.

* * * * *

"Who was it?" Beau asked as Slash hurried back into the room.

"No one. I think the new guy just left. He's not in our room." Slash said as he knelt in the floor at Marc's other side.

"Oh." Beau said thoughtfully, then thought to ask, "What's his name, anyway?"

"I have no idea. I introduced myself, but he just ignored me the whole time we were in there together." Slash said frankly.

"What's taking them so long?" Beau asked in frustration.

"It's only been a couple minutes. I'm sure they'll be here any second." Slash said as he looked at Marc helplessly.

"Lisa's fine." Seth said in a rush as he hurried into the room with Louie held tight to his side.

"Is she safe? Are you sure she knows not to go outside?" Marc asked quickly as he tried to sit up.

"Stay still Marc. You need to stay calm." Beau said as he continued to hold the towel firmly to Marc's chest.

"Yeah. She wanted to come over but I told her to stay there until the cops get here and we're sure that the guy who shot you isn't around anymore."

A rumbling drew everyone's attention.

"Oh God! What now?" Beau asked as he looked around.

A plume of flames erupted from the middle of the floor, leaving a gaping hole in it's wake.

Seth clutched Louie tight to his side as he backed against the wall just inside the door.

All the boys watched as something started to emerge from the burning pit.

Slash wilted with relief as he saw Lee and Andrew slowly rising from the flames.

The boys watched with amazement as the flaming hole faded and the floor became solid under their feet.

"Sorry about the dramatic entrance guys. Dad's portal ability forces us to travel through a hell dimension. But since he knew exactly where we were going, this was the quickest way to get us here." Andrew said, then hurried to Marc's side.

Slash ran to Lee and pulled him into a firm hug.

"How is everyone doing?" Lee asked Slash gently.

"Marc's hurt... I think the rest of us are just scared." Slash said past his tears of relief.

"Is your name Marc?" Andrew asked gently.

"Yeah." Marc said uncertainly as he looked at the stranger who had apparently just risen from the depths of hell.

"My name is Andrew and I'm something like a paramedic. Just relax and I'm going to check you out to see how you're doing." Andrew said as he moved his medical tricorder over Marc's body.

Everyone was silent, waiting anxiously for the results.

"Good news." Andrew said as he looked up from his medical tricorder.

All the boys looked at Andrew with hope, urging him to continue.

"The bullet didn't hit anything vital. Marc should be fine." Andrew said, then injected a hypospray into Marc's neck and whispered, "I just gave you something to ease the pain a little."

"That's really good news." Slash said, maintaining his hug on Lee.

"You did exactly the right thing by keeping pressure on the wound and keeping Marc warm. You probably saved his life." Andrew said as he looked Beau in the eyes.

"Thanks. It was all I could think of to do to help." Beau said honestly. "Oh, and I'm Beau Collins."

"And that's Seth and Louie over there by the door." Slash said quickly, just understanding that Andrew hadn't met any of them before.

The sound of sirens drew everyone's attention.

"C'mon Slash. Let's go out to the living room to let the police in the door." Lee said as he encouraged Slash to walk with him.

* * * * *

"Police!"

Slash looked out the peephole to find two uniformed police officers standing in the stairwell.

"Come on in. Marc's back here." Slash said as he opened the door.

The first policeman did a quick visual survey of the room while one of the others blocked open the door.

Slash noticed that the officer's name badge said 'Grossman'.

An adolescent and completely inappropriate bubble of laughter welled within Slash, wanting desperately to escape.

Officer Grossman followed Slash down the hall as the other three police officers filed out of the room.

* * * * *

When officer Grossman saw Marc's blood pooling onto the floor, he picked up his radio and said, "What's the ETA on the ambulance?"

A moment later a voice on his radio responded, "They're pulling into the parking lot now."

"Send them up to the third floor with a stretcher. We've got a chest wound and a lot of blood here." Officer Grossman said firmly.

"Confirmed. They'll be to you in just a moment."

"Out." Officer Grossman said, then looked at the people around the room.

"Who's going to tell me what happened here?" He asked impatiently.

"Someone shot Marc." Slash said immediately.

"Do you have any idea of who that someone might be?" The officer asked firmly, directing his full attention to Slash.

"No... No sir. I was across the hall in my room when it happened." Slash said in a quieter voice.

"I was here when it happened, but there's nothing to tell. Gunshots, breaking glass, squealing tires, Marc bleeding," Beau said frankly.

"How many shots?" Officer Grossman asked immediately.

"Three or four," Beau said in thought.

The officer looked at the window, then at Beau sprawled in the floor.

"Where was he when the shots were fired?" Officer Grossman asked cautiously.

"He was standing over there, a foot or so from the desk." Beau said as he gestured in the general direction.

The officer walked to the indicated spot, then looked toward the window again.

Andrew and Lee exchanged a look at the officer's line of questioning.

"He's in here." they heard Seth say, then turned to see Seth and Louie leading the paramedics into the room.

"Back up guys. We need to get in there to have a look at him." One of the paramedics said as he rushed to Marc's side.

"His pulse is strong and 85, his BP is 105/73. There's one entry wound, no exit. So he's still got the bullet in his chest, but from the amount of blood and his breathing, I'd guess that it missed his heart and lung." Andrew said professionally.

"You a doctor?" The first paramedic asked as he started to get Marc's vitals.

"I'm studying to be a paramedic. Actually, I've got the training, just not the certification for this state." Andrew said carefully.

"Stick with it. From what I'm seeing here, your assessment seems to be spot on." The paramedic said to Andrew, then turned to his partner and said, "It looks like he's stable enough to transport. Let's get on the road and call it in along the way. Bullets have a funny habit of going to the worst possible place if you leave them in there too long."

"Are there any special considerations we need to take into account?" the other paramedic asked seriously.

Everyone was confused by the question, but Beau finally realized what the paramedic was asking and said, "He's not a mutant."

"Sorry. But we have to ask, sometimes it's important." the paramedic said with apology.

"Marc!" Lisa called as she ran into the room.

"He's going to the hospital now. But he's going to be fine." Slash said quickly as he ran to intercept her before she could get in the paramedics' way.

"Lisa!" Marc called across the room.

"I'm here Marc. I'm right here." Lisa said as she fought against Slash's grasp.

"Lisa. Listen to me." Marc said as he strained to see past the other people in the room.

Lisa calmed slightly as she watched Marc through tear filled eyes.

"I'm going to be fine, I really am." Marc said with conviction, then winced as the paramedics lifted him onto a stretcher.

"I love you, Lisa." Marc said as he forced an assuring smile onto his face.

"I love you too." Lisa said as she finally stopped struggling against Slash's hold.

"Andy, do you think you could take Lisa to the hospital? I'd like to stay with these guys." Lee asked hopefully.

"I'd be glad to," Andrew said with a smile, then walked to Lisa's side.

"Lisa. I'm Andrew. If you'll come with me, we can go to the hospital and wait for Marc there." Andrew said gently.

One of the paramedics glanced at Andrew with a grateful smile, then lifted his end of the stretcher to carry Marc out of the room.

"Where are you taking him?" Andrew asked the first paramedic seriously.

"Women's and Children's." The paramedic answered immediately.

"We'll meet you there."

* * * * *

"Hold on. I need to get statements from everyone about what's happened here." Officer Grossman said firmly.

"I already told you, we were here in our bedroom, minding our own business when someone shot Marc through the window." Beau said as he stood. "What more do you want to know?"

"Can you think of anyone who would have a reason to want to attack him?" Officer Grossman asked seriously.

"I'm sure there are a few 'friends of humanity' who would think it's a real hoot to shoot up a school for mutants." Andrew said as he held Lisa to his side, then asked, "Can we leave? We weren't even here when it happened."

"If you'll give me your names, we'll contact you at the hospital if we have any questions." The police officer said irritably.

"LeeAndrew Summers." Andrew said quietly, then looked at Lisa.

"Lisa Brogan... can we go now?" Lisa asked desperately.

The officer wrote down the names, then said, "Go on."

"Come on Lisa, let's go to the hospital." Andrew said gently as he guided her out of the room.

A pair of police officers walked into the room as Andrew and Lisa left.

"Any word on forensics?" Officer Grossman asked immediately.

"Half an hour or more." One of the officers said with a look of apology.

"We've got a motive." The other police officer said firmly.

"What have you got?" Officer Grossman asked curiously.

"Fresh graffiti on the front of the building. 'Die! Mutants! Die!'" The officer said frankly.

"Did you already call it?" Officer Grossman asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah. In fact, they said that the task force is already on their way and could be here any minute." the second officer said seriously.

"Then pull our men out. Get them on crowd control and protect the crime scene. This is out of our hands now." Officer Grossman said firmly.

"What's going on?" Lee asked curiously.

"That graffiti has just elevated this to a full fledged 'hate crime'. That makes it federal jurisdiction." Officer Grossman said firmly, then noticed the looks of concern around the room.

"That means that this is going to be done right. They have the manpower and resources to do the things we wish we could do." Officer Grossman said seriously as he looked Lee in the eyes.

"Thanks." Lee said with some small measure of relief.

"Why don't you guys go into the other room so we can preserve the crime scene... besides, it's cold in here." Officer Grossman said more gently.

"Yeah. Thanks." Lee said to the officer, then turned to the rest of the group and said, "Let's go into the living room."

* * * * *

"How are you doing Louie?" Seth asked as soon as he and Louie were settled on the couch.

"Do you think Quaid is okay?" Louie asked in a small voice.

Lee heard the question and squatted beside the couch to look Louie in the eyes as he said, "Quaid is completely safe. The place where we live has all kinds of security so there's no way anyone could get in and hurt him."

Louie looked at Lee uncertainly, not fully trusting his words.

"I'm pretty sure that we're going to have to hang around here for a while to answer a lot of questions, but when we're done, what would you think about coming over to my house and spending the night with Quaid?" Lee asked gently.

"Really?" Louie asked with excitement.

"Yes Louie. Really." Lee said with a smile, then stood and looked at the rest of the group as he said, "That goes for all of you."

//Including me?// Jesus asked cautiously from Louie's other side.

"Of course that includes you." Slash said immediately.

"I have a room at the boathouse. It's really nice there and I know that you'll all be welcomed." Slash said with certainty, then turned his gaze to Jesus and said, "And that definitely includes you."

"I don't know..." Seth began to say.

"I doubt that they'd let you stay here, even if you wanted to. And I don't think anyone else would be able to rest comfortably if they were worried about your safety." Lee said frankly.

"Slash." Seth said hesitantly.

"Huh?"

Seth looked down at the couch that Slash was leaning against.

Slash followed Seth's gaze and was surprised to see that the couch had become a deep, midnight black.

"Sorry." Slash said in a whisper. "When I get nervous, I forget to control it."

"Just do the same thing to the chairs, so they'll match, then don't worry about it." Lee said with a grin.

Slash thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yeah. At least it'll give me something to do."

"I heard that someone around here got shot. Is this the right place?" A smallish dark blond haired man asked from the doorway.

"Yeah. C'mon in." Lee said as he tried to restrain a chuckle.

"Thanks. I'm Detective Kowalski, you guys can call me Ray. This is my..." Ray trailed off when he noticed that no one was with him.

"Fraser! Where'd you go?" Ray called into the stairwell.

"Be right back." Ray said impatiently, then hurried back out the door.

"Is *that* the federal agent we're waiting for?" Slash asked cautiously.

"Could be." Lee said hesitantly.

* * * * *

"Sorry about that." Ray said as he walked back into the room, then muttered under his breath, "Sometimes it's like taking care of a three year old."

A man in a striking red uniform followed Ray into the room. He stopped suddenly when he heard Ray's comment and seemed to be confused by it.

"Okay. This is Constable Benton Fraser." Ray said seriously, then added in a conspiratorial whisper, "He's a Mountie."

A few looks of confusion went around at the announcement.

Constable Fraser cleared his throat, then nodded downward to his side, to indicate the large wolf that had just sat down by his foot.

"Oh, and that's Diefenbaker." Ray said casually.

"Hold on." Lee said cautiously, "*You're* the feds?"

Ray seemed to be considering his response when Constable Fraser answered, "No. Not as such. We represent a newly formed international task force that was created to address the increasing problem of hate crimes directed at mutants."

"Yeah. What he said." Ray said with a smirk.

As everyone considered what Constable Fraser had said, Ray asked, "Where's the police guy that's supposed to be up here with you?"

"He's in the bedroom back there. He sent us out here so we wouldn't mess up your crime scene." Seth answered honestly.

"You wanna talk to the local? I'll get statements out here." Ray said seriously, revealing the tiniest glimmer of professionalism.

"Understood." Constable Fraser said, then made a motion to the wolf at his side before walking down the hallway.

Lee watched curiously, noticing that Constable Fraser walked directly to the proper room without being told which one it was.

"Okay guys. Who wants to fill me in on what happened here?" Ray asked as he took a small notepad out of his pocket.

"I guess I will." Beau said cautiously.

"What's your name?" Ray asked seriously.

"Beau Collins." Beau answered hesitantly.

"Just tell me what happened in the order that it happened." Ray said as he wrote down Beau's name.

"Would you like to sit down?" Lee asked as he indicated one of the armchairs that was unoccupied.

"Yeah. Thanks." Ray said casually as he took the offered seat, then continued, "Go ahead Beau."

"Well, Marc and I were in our room... he was unpacking." Beau said carefully.

"What were you doing?" Ray asked curiously.

"I was trying to sign onto the campus network to print out my homework for tomorrow. But I couldn't make a connection." Beau said seriously.

"The phone is out too." Slash added.

Ray nodded and made a note.

"Well, Marc wanted to listen to some music and I offered him one of my CDs. When he was about to take it from me, that's when he got shot." Beau said carefully

"Was he in front of a window when that happened?" Ray asked curiously.

"Yeah." Beau said quietly.

"What next?" Ray asked as he looked up from his notebook.

"I guess I heard a loud car engine and tires squealing outside." Beau said distantly.

"Loud? How loud?" Ray asked slowly.

Beau blinked with confusion at the question.

"Did it sound like a small car, a sports car or something else?" Ray prompted.

Beau considered carefully as he tried to remember the sound.

"Actually..." Beau said as he looked up with dawning realization, "...it sounded a lot like my old roommate's truck."

[Chapter 6: Person of Interest]

"Your old roommate? Who is that?" Ray asked seriously.

"Josh... Josh Metcalf." Beau said as his mind whirled.

"And why is he your 'old' roommate?" Ray asked slowly.

"Because this afternoon he was really rude to Marc's girlfriend, Lisa." Beau said with a sinking feeling. "After that, I moved in here."

Ray nodded as he wrote another note on his notepad.

"Do you think he shot Marc?" Seth asked nervously.

Beau sat silently, not knowing what to think.

"Do you know if your old roommate owns a gun?" Ray asked seriously.

"I... I'm not sure. If he does, he never mentioned it." Beau said quietly.

Constable Fraser and Diefenbaker walked into the living room with the police officer following close behind.

"Officer Grossman has been very helpful. I'm going down to see if we can find any evidence in front of the building." Constable Fraser said seriously.

"We have a person of interest." Ray said as he stood.

Constable Fraser looked at Ray with question.

"We need to talk to a student named Josh Metcalf. He was in an incident with the victim's girlfriend earlier today and he's this guy's former roommate." Ray said seriously.

"And he hates mutants." Beau added under his breath.

Constable Fraser and Ray exchanged a significant look at the statement.

"If you would like, we can track down Mr. Metcalf for you." the police officer said professionally.

"Yes. Thank you kindly, Officer Grossman." Constable Fraser said courteously.

The officer blinked with surprise at Constable Fraser's unusual manner of speech, then keyed his radio as he walked out of the room.

"Is there any other significant information?" Constable Fraser asked professionally.

"Yeah. The phone and computer access were cut. We need to check that out." Ray said frankly.

"Understood." Constable Fraser said, then motioned for the wolf at his side.

The wolf made a little 'yip' then walked around the couch and started sniffing.

"What have you found Dief?" Ray asked curiously.

"He can't hear you Ray. He's deaf." Constable Fraser said seriously.

Ray rolled his eyes and watched as Dief started sniffing beside Louie.

//Nice doggy.// Jesus said in a quiet, nervous mind/voice.

"That's new." Ray said with mild surprise as he looked at Jesus.

"He appears to be telepathic." Constable Fraser said speculatively.

//Could you, maybe, stop this thing from eating me?// Jesus asked with a slight note of panic.

"Don't worry. Diefenbaker won't hurt you. I think he likes you." Constable Fraser said as he watched Diefenbaker nuzzling Jesus.

//Diefenbaker? Do you think maybe we could do this later? I'm sure you have work to do.// Jesus asked hopefully.

After a quick lick, Diefenbaker moved to Constable Fraser's side.

"Ready?" Constable Fraser asked Diefenbaker calmly.

The wolf gave one quick, quiet bark in response.

"Diefenbaker will be back to talk to you again later." Constable Fraser said to Jesus, then walked out the door.

"It looks like someone's made a new friend." Ray said with a mischievous grin.

//Oh. Lucky me.// Jesus said nervously.

"It's getting late. Is there any way I could take these guys to my house where they'll be able to get some rest?" Lee asked cautiously.

Ray looked around the room, then said, "I think we have enough to work with for now, but I'll need to be able to get in touch with you if we have anymore questions."

"Sure. I'll give you the address and phone number." Lee said as he held out his hand for the notepad.

Ray waited for Lee to write down the information, then looked it over when he received the pad back.

"Looks good. Get these guys tucked in and I'll be in touch if we have any more questions." Ray said seriously.

"Thanks." Lee said with relief.

* * * * *

"We're here for Marc... what's his last name?" Andrew asked Lisa at his side.

"Stanton, Marcus Donatello Stanton." Lisa said quickly.

"Are you family?" The nurse at the desk asked cautiously.

"No, but he's a student at the Wagner Institute. His family lives out of state." Andrew said anxiously.

"Are you a member of the Wagner Institute staff?" The nurse asked cautiously.

"Yes. I teach there." Andrew said, vowing to himself to teach at least one class at the Wagner school at some future date, just to make it not a complete lie.

"Have a seat over there and the doctor will be over to talk to you soon." the nurse said as she indicated the waiting room area.

Andrew looked at the crowded and chaotic waiting room and slowly nodded.

He put an arm around Lisa's shoulder and guided her to stand with him against a wall, since there were no chairs available.

* * * * *

"Excuse me. I'm going to call for a ride." Lee said as he walked to the other side of the room, then fished in his pocket for something.

"Do you need my phone?" Seth offered quietly.

"That's okay. I've got it." Lee said as he faced away from the group, then pulled a metallic 'X' in a circle out of his pocket.

"That is, if I can figure out how to work this thing." Lee muttered to himself, then purposefully tapped the center of the 'X' twice.

The metal emblem chirped which made Lee smile with accomplishment.

"Hellport to Cyclops." Lee said into the emblem, then glanced over his shoulder and noticed a few of the boys looking at him curiously.

"We were in a rush to come up with a code name." Lee said in a shy whisper.

"Cyclops here. Go ahead." Scott answered professionally.

"We're done here for now. I'd like to get the kids to the boathouse where we know they'll be safe. But Portal is at the hospital with Marc, so we're going to need a ride." Lee said seriously.

"Storm is on her way. She should be there in a few minutes." Scott said seriously, then continued, "What can you tell me about your situation?"

"I'll fill you in after we get the kids tucked in." Lee said, then glanced over his shoulder and noticed Ray watching him curiously.

"Understood. Cyclops out."

* * * * *

"Code names, a private communications network... You know, I've heard a few stories about a mutant militia operating in this area." Ray said casually.

"Oh." Lee said shyly. "You weren't supposed to hear that."

"Don't worry about it. I didn't hear nothin." Ray said as he looked Lee in the eyes.

"Good." Lee responded with a relieved smile, then casually said, "And I haven't heard anything about a mutant militia, but I heard a few stories about a group of people who sometimes try to help out when good people are being treated unfairly and it looks like no one else will step up to defend them."

"Yeah. That's what I meant to say." Ray said slowly. "I was just thinking that if our new task force were to meet someone from a group like that, well, that we might have a few common goals."

Lee thought for a moment, then said, "You might. I guess if the people in that group found out that you were willing to talk, that they might get in touch with you to discuss it."

"Yeah." Ray said thoughtfully, then added, "By the way, since we're on the subject of getting in touch, here's how you can get in touch

with me. You know, if any of the kids remember anything or if you need a little help."

Lee accepted a business card from Ray, then looked up curiously. "Chicago Police?"

"Yeah. Me and Frase were just assigned to the task force this week. In fact, we arrived in New York this morning to get the official assignment. But that cellphone number is still good." Ray said with a grin.

"So does that mean that you and Constable Fraser aren't mutants?" Lee asked cautiously.

"No. But..." Ray trailed off with a look of distant thought. "...Now that you mention it, that *would* explain a few things about Fraser."

Lee smiled at Ray's playful and casual nature.

"Do you guys need to get anything out of your rooms?" Ray asked the group of boys who had been listening.

"Yeah." Slash said and the rest of the boys nodded their agreement.

"Is it okay if I get my laptop? I mean, since my room is a crime scene?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But I'll go with you so no one will be able to say that you messed with the evidence." Ray said, then gestured for Beau to walk with him.

* * * * *

//Professor?// Andrew called in his mind, hoping that Professor Xavier was using Cerebro and paying attention.

//Yes Andrew, what can I do for you?// Professor Xavier asked immediately.

//Could you check on the doctor who's helping Marc and make sure that he's really doing what's best for him? I don't know why, but I really don't trust these people.// Andrew asked hopefully.

There was a long moment of silence, then the Professor responded, //The doctor is currently with another patient, but Marc has received adequate care for his injury and is in post-operative recovery.//

//Thank you, Professor.// Andrew said quietly.

//Andrew. I believe what you are feeling is unease at being around non-mutants.// the Professor said frankly. //Perhaps you might take time while you have the chance to examine why that is.//

//Yeah.// Andrew responded quietly, then put a hand on Lisa's shoulder at his side and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

* * * * *

Someone rushing in the door caused everyone to jump.

"Mr. Wagner?" Seth asked with surprise, recognizing him from his picture on the website.

"Yes. I am Kurt Wagner." Kurt said seriously, then continued, "I came as soon as I heard about zhe incident. Can you tell me vhat has happened?"

"Marc got shot. He went to the hospital in an ambulance. Andrew and Marc's girlfriend, Lisa, went to the hospital to be with him." Slash said seriously.

Kurt slowly nodded in consideration, then said, "I believe ve will need to find you anozher place to stay until zhe police haff concluded zheir investigation."

"Lee said that we can stay at the boathouse tonight." Slash said immediately.

Kurt considered for a moment, then nodded decisively. "Zhat is probably best. Ve know zhat zhey will be safe zhere."

"Hello?" Ray said cautiously as he walked down the hallway with Beau at his side.

"Detective... um, Ray. This is Kurt Wagner, the dean of the Wagner Institute." Slash said haltingly, trying to make a formal introduction.

"Detective Kowalski, but you can call me Ray."

"Unt I am Kurt. Please let me know if zhere is anyzhing zhat I can do to aid in your investigation." Kurt said seriously.

"I'd like to talk to the campus security in case they saw anything." Ray said immediately.

"Of course. But I doubt zhat zhey will be of much help to you. Zhey vere investigating a case of vandalism at zhe administration building vhen zhe incident occurred." Kurt said carefully.

Ray thought about the words for a moment, then said, "I'd like to talk to them anyway."

Kurt nodded his agreement.

"But first I'd like to get these guys settled in for the night." Ray said seriously as he glanced at the group of boys who were listening intently.

"Storm is on her way with a van." Lee said quickly.

"Zhat may pose a bit of a problem. I noticed several reporters in zhe parking lot." Kurt said seriously.

"Yeah. I should have expected that. An attack on a new mutant school has all the makings of a full blown media circus." Ray said frankly.

"Are we going to be on the news?" Seth asked with a tremble of fear at the idea.

"Let me worry about that." Ray said decisively. "I'll go down and make sure the locals let your friend past the barricade and keep the reporters back."

"Thank you." Kurt said sincerely, "I vould not want zhe children to haff to be exposed to zhat kind of public scrutiny."

"She's probably out there waiting for us by now." Lee said seriously.

"Then let's do this thing." Ray said as he started walking for the door.

"I will go viss you." Kurt said as he moved to Ray's side. "Perhaps my appearance vill be enough to distract zhem from zhe children."

Ray chuckled and said, "Yeah. You might be right about that."

* * * * *

Seth's cell phone started ringing and he looked at it apprehensively before accepting the call.

"Hello?" Seth asked anxiously.

"Hey there Horney! I just wanted to call you and wish you a good night in your new home." Junior said cheerfully.

Seth blinked at the statement, then quietly said, "Thanks."

"Did I wake you up?" Junior asked with concern.

"No. I wasn't asleep." Seth said, then glanced around the room at the others who were pretending not to listen to his side of the phone call.

"Is everything alright? You sound weird." Junior asked curiously.

Seth thought for a second, then said, "Everything's fine. I guess I just wasn't expecting you to call. It's good to hear from you."

"Yeah. Well, to tell you the truth, Mom is kind of freaking out here. One minute she seems fine, then the next she's blubbering 'My baby! He's just a baby!'" Junior said frankly, then in a lower voice he continued, "Personally, I think she's going through 'the change'."

Lee poked his head in the door and made a motion for everyone to follow.

"Listen Junior, I've got some stuff to do so I have to go now. I'm really glad that you called." Seth said as he leaned down and picked up his suitcase.

"Yeah. But remember that this phone thing works both ways. Next time it's your turn to call me." Junior said seriously.

"Okay. I'll do that. I've got to go. Thanks again for calling." Seth said quickly.

"No prob. Have a good night, Horney." Junior said with an obvious smile in his voice.

"You have a good night too."

* * * * *

"Who is here with Marcus Stanton?" the doctor asked as he walked toward the waiting room.

"That's us!" Andrew said immediately as he stepped forward.

"Come this way." The doctor said and led them past the reception desk and down a hallway.

He led them into a large room that was partitioned off by curtains.

"We performed emergency surgery to remove a bullet from the patient's chest. There is no indication that any vital organs were damaged and his prognosis is a full recovery." The doctor said in an emotionless and detached tone.

"When will he be able to leave the hospital?" Andrew asked hopefully.

The doctor looked down at the chart in his hands, then seemed to freeze in place.

//Andrew, I am seeding the idea in his mind that Marc is sufficiently well to leave immediately. Sign him out, then port him to the med lab at the mansion. I assure you that Marc will receive far better

care from Hank than he will in that place.// The Professor said firmly.

Andrew couldn't resist the temptation and asked, //Is this because they're non-mutants?//

//No Mr. Summers, it's because these people are so overworked and jaded that no person who is conscious should ever be left in their 'so called' care.// Professor Xavier responded frankly.

//From what I've seen since we've been here, I completely agree.// Andrew said seriously as he noticed that the Doctor seemed to have become animated again.

"I think that as long as he has someone to watch after him, he should be fine to leave with you now." the doctor said seriously.

"Then if you'll tell me what I have to do, we'll be on our way." Andrew said as he tried to restrain a smile.

"There's some paperwork that you'll need to fill out at the desk to sign him out." the Doctor said, beginning to sound impatient.

"Will it be okay if Lisa stays here with Marc while I do that?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Yes. Fine." The Doctor said with barely a glance at Lisa. "If you'll excuse me now..."

Andrew nodded and watched as the doctor rushed out of the room.

"I'm going to the front desk to fill out some paperwork, then we're going to take Marc someplace where he'll receive the best possible care." Andrew said assuringly.

"Thank you, Andrew." Lisa said sincerely, then walked to Marc's bedside and took hold of his hand...

Andrew watched for a moment, then went to the front desk to work on paperwork.

* * * * *

"What happened? How are all of you?" Julia asked as she and Angel rushed up the stairs, meeting the group on the second floor.

"Marc was shot. Lisa and Andrew are at the hospital with him now." Slash answered immediately.

"Andrew?" Julia asked cautiously.

"My um... nephew. Andrew Summers." Slash said a bit shyly.

"Of course. I remember him now." Julia said with a smile at Slash, then looked around the group and asked, "How are all of you?"

"I think we're fine, Dr. Hoffman. Lee is just going to take us to his house so we won't be in the police's way while they figure this out." Seth said calmly.

"Maybe we should hurry and get them out of here. It looks like there's quite a crowd forming out front." Angel said gently to Julia.

"Right. Let's get you out of here so we can get this mess all taken care of." Julia said and ushered the group to walk with her.

"When we get to the entry hall, let's wait for the detective and Kurt to come get us." Lee said decisively.

At Julia's look of question, Lee explained, "We have a ride on the way. The Detective, Ray, said that he was going to clear it so she could get up to the building."

* * * * *

As the group reached the entry hall, they found Kurt waiting on them.

"This is not going to be easy." Kurt said frankly.

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

"There is quite a crowd of people assembled, and there are news reporters." Kurt said apologetically.

"What do you want to do?" Julia asked Kurt quietly.

Before Kurt could answer, Slash said, "When I got kicked out of my home for being a mutant, at first I tried to hide."

Everyone looked at Slash with question, wondering what this had to do with their current situation.

"After a while, I realized that it didn't help. Acting scared and trying to hide didn't make anything one bit better. If they're going to look, they're going to look."

"So vahat are you saying?" Kurt asked hesitantly.

"We're mutants. Stuff like this is going to happen. I know it sucks, but we just have to do it and get it over with." Slash said frankly.

"As much as I would like to protect you and shield you from this, I think maybe Slash is right." Julia said regretfully.

Slash looked around the group, then his gaze stopped on Seth.

"It's okay if you want to put your hood up. Just think of it as depriving the infotainment industry of one more sensational mutant picture." Slash said frankly.

"Thanks." Seth muttered, then pulled up his hood to hide his horns.

"We ready?" Slash asked as he looked around. "I guess I'll go first."

"Not without me." Lee said immediately. "Brothers need to stick together."

Slash smiled at Lee, then stepped forward to open the door.

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go?" Andrew asked Lisa as he walked into the recovery room.

"Yes. Do you really think he'll be okay to travel?" Lisa asked with concern.

Andrew's gaze became distant and unfocused for a moment, then he smiled and said, "Yes. I think so."

Lisa looked at him curiously, then realized that they were standing in a different room.

She was still holding Marc's hand, but he was on a different type of medical bed.

"What happened?" Lisa asked as she looked at the brushed steel walls of the Xavier Institute's MedLab.

"I used my portal ability to relocate us." Andrew said frankly.

Lisa looked at Andrew with concern, then hesitantly asked, "Why couldn't you have done that before? When Marc was shot?"

"I could have. But by the time I got there, the ambulance had already been called." Andrew said frankly.

At Lisa's anxious look, he continued, "If Marc's life were ever in danger, I promise you that I would have ported him here or anywhere on the planet where he could have received the care that he needed."

Lisa gasped as she saw what appeared to be a large blue furry animal walk into the room.

"Dr. Hank McCoy, this is Marc and his girlfriend Lisa." Andrew said pleasantly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lisa." Hank said gently. "The professor already filled me in on Marc's condition. You need not worry. Marc is going to receive the best of care."

"Thank you." Lisa said, as she looked up at Hank with wonder.

* * * * *

Everything that Slash had gone through as a homeless mutant kid on the streets hadn't prepared him for the experience of stepping out of the front door of the dorm building.

Within two steps from the building, six spotlights from television cameras flared and blinded him.

He heard a terrified cry and turned to see Seth clutching Louie close to his side, shielding his face with one hand.

There was a clamor of voices yelling, all trying to gain their attention. Mostly they were reporters trying to scream questions at them from behind the police barricade.

"Komen ze, Storm is over zhis vey." Kurt said as he moved to Slash's side.

//Calm down, Louie.// Jesus said into their minds. //You need to breathe.//

Slash felt a mix of anger and frustration well up in him at the humiliation they were being forced to endure just to get to safety.

He also felt responsible for encouraging everyone to go outside with him. He never imagined that it could be this bad.

One of the camera lights blinded Slash and he instinctively brought up a hand to shield his eyes.

"STOP IT!" Slash screamed in frustration and without thought, his mutant power welled up and flowed out toward the people massed behind the barricade.

"Come on, Slash." Julia encouraged a moment later, snapping him out of the shock of what he had just done.

"You need to move." Julia said more insistently as she took one of his arms.

Lee took hold of the other as they half encouraged/half dragged him toward the waiting van.

Slash looked back at the huge cloud of blackness that was slowly dissipating over the crowd of people.

"Step up." Julia said, finally drawing Slash's attention.

Slash looked forward and blinked, then realized that she was telling him to get into the van.

"Aren't you coming with us?" Louie asked, still huddled under Seth's arm.

"No, Louie. This is my college and I'm going to stay here and find out what happened tonight so we can make sure that it never happens again." Julia said seriously.

"Do you think that you will be safe to travel to Xavier's alone?" Kurt asked with concern.

"Yes Kurt. I promise you that we'll be fine." Storm said from the driver's seat.

"Then you should go." Kurt said with concern, then closed the door of the van.

* * * * *

"Did you see what I did?" Slash asked Lee in a whisper.

"Yeah, Slash. That was really great." Lee said as he hugged his adopted brother to his side.

"I'm really sorry guys." Lee said from the seat beside Storm.

"For what?" Seth asked as he continued to hold Louie close.

"If I'd learned my ability better, I might have been able to get you out of there without you having to go through all of that." Lee said despondently

"Lee, you can't know that it would have helped." Storm said gently. "The children are safe. Take consolation in that. And use this experience to inspire you in your future training to learn your ability."

"Thanks, Storm." Lee said weakly.

Seth felt an unusual movement under his arm and realized that it was Louie holding Jesus in his arms between them.

"How are you doing, Jesus?" Seth asked quietly. "Do you need anything."

After a moment to consider, Jesus responded, //Well, there is one thing you could do for me.//

"What's that?" Seth asked immediately.

//One word: Deoderant.//

[Chapter 7: The Hunkering]

"I've got his pre-surgery scan if you'd like to see it." Andrew said professionally as he moved to get a better view of what Hank was doing.

"Perhaps in a moment. Are you urgently needed elsewhere?" Dr. McCoy asked as he meticulously performed his physical examination of the injured boy.

"No. I just wanted you to know that I had it handy in case it was needed." Andrew said simply.

"Do you think you'd be up to one more teleporting job when I'm finished with my examination? I'd like to keep him immobilized for at least twenty-four hours before making any long-term decisions regarding his care." Dr. McCoy asked absently as he continued to work.

"Will you want him to have a room in the mansion, or do you need to keep him down here?" Andrew asked curiously.

"I'd like to keep him in the MedLab for at least a few days for observation. Although he most likely won't have any complications, his injury was serious enough to warrant such precaution." Hank answered thoughtfully.

"Where are you going to want him then?" Andrew asked curiously.

"You might want to get with Tara and find out if we have a room already prepared. If not, she may need to prep one before we move him."

"I'll go check with her now." Andrew immediately responded.

"Perhaps, while you're doing that, you might want to introduce Lisa to Tara, so that Lisa will know to whom she can go, when I am unavailable." Hank said with an urging look.

It only took a moment for Andrew to catch on.

"Lisa, why don't you come with me to help get Marc a room? You know him better than we do and you may be able to answer questions about his preferences that I couldn't." Andrew asked in an overly cheerful tone.

"I want to stay with Marc." Lisa quietly responded.

"Listen, the doctor is to the part of the examination where it might be embarrassing for Marc if he knew that you were watching. Beyond that, what Dr. McCoy is going to do next might also be more than a little bit uncomfortable for you to witness. If you'll go with me now, Dr. McCoy will be able to do what he needs to do and we can be doing something productive to make things easier for him and Marc later on." Andrew said seriously.

"Okay." Lisa timidly relented.

"As soon as we've got things set up with Tara, we'll come right back here to check on Marc." Andrew gently promised as he led her out of the room.

Dr. McCoy watched them go, then turned to his patient and gently said, "You're very lucky to have someone so devoted to you. Now, let's get you settled in for an extended stay."

* * * * *

"Are you alright Beau? You seem awfully quiet." Lee asked with concern.

"As soon as I realized that Marc was bleeding, I started remembering everything that I'd ever read about how to help someone that's been shot. I didn't even think about it, I just started doing things... it was like my hands knew what they were supposed to be doing." Beau explained distantly.

"I'm glad for Marc's sake that you knew what to do." Lee said honestly, then quietly added, "By the way, if you remember anything else about the shooting, be sure to tell me right away. The only way we're going to be able to make everyone safe is to find

out who did this to Marc and make sure that they can't do it again." Lee said firmly.

"As much of an asshole as Josh is, I'm still having trouble believing that he could do something like this." Beau said in a conflicted tone.

"How sure are you that it was him?" Lee asked gently.

"I didn't see anything, but the more I think about it, the more sure I am that it was Josh's truck I heard racing away." Beau reluctantly admitted.

There was a long silence that followed before Louie quietly asked, "Do you think Quaid's okay?"

"Yes, child. I am certain that he is. He's in one of the safest places in the world." Storm gently assured the distraught boy.

"I bet you're going to love Quaid's room. He just moved in there last week, so maybe you can help him discover some things that he hasn't found yet." Lee quietly suggested.

//I hate to ask, but you don't have any pets at this place we're going, do you?// Jesus asked hesitantly.

"No. At least, not that I've ever noticed." Slash said uncertainly, then looked to Storm for confirmation.

"No. Not currently." Storm said thoughtfully.

//Good. I don't want to have to be looking over my shoulder all the time, worrying if something's going to try to eat me... or maybe even worse.// Jesus said dramatically.

"You shouldn't have to worry about that, but if Janine decides that you would be a good candidate for 'dress up', you may end up *wishing* that there was a pet around, if only to divide her attention." Lee said frankly.

//Who's Janine?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"Janine's a little girl. She isn't human and she's not from Earth... actually, from the way I understand it, she's not even native to this *timestream*. But none of that matters. What's most important is that she's my granddaughter."

"Granddaughter? But you're our age." Seth said with surprise at the impossibility of what Lee was telling them.

"My mutation makes me look younger than I really am and I promise you, I have *several* grandchildren. One of them is a six-year-old girl who very likely is going to fall in love with Jesus the moment she lays eyes on him." Lee finished with an apologetic look at Jesus.

//In my experience, most little girls think that rats are disgusting, so at least I've got *that* working in my favor.//

"I just wanted to give you fair warning. If she takes a liking to you, you may not get much of a choice in how things go after that. She's *very* determined." Lee said frankly.

//I can defend myself if I need to.// Jesus said seriously.

"That's good. But just so you know, if you do *anything* to make my granddaughter unhappy, I can personally guarantee you a one-way trip straight to the deepest bowels of hell." Lee said as a vow.

"When you were talking on the radio you called yourself 'Hellport', didn't you?" Seth asked curiously, apparently not noticing how off-topic his question seemed to be.

"That's right. It's my mutant name. That was the first time I ever *really* used it in the field."

"Do we get mutant names too?" Seth asked hopefully.

"That's not up to me. I'm not sure how the whole thing works, but if I *were* the one handing out names, I'd say that Slash earned his mutant name tonight. He used his powers appropriately for the situation and was able to help us all." Lee said with a proud smile directed toward his adoptive brother.

"What name would you give him?" Seth asked curiously.

"I'd probably call him something like 'Blackout' or 'Blindness'. From what I've been told, most mutant names are based on a person's abilities."

"But what *is* a mutant name?" Louie asked curiously.

Lee was relieved to see that Louie was showing signs of bouncing back from his recent trauma. Hoping to keep Louie engaged in the conversation, Lee carefully answered, "Mutant names are used by the team so that they can call to each other or talk about each other on an unsecure communications network without telling anyone who might be listening who they're talking about."

Louie thought about that for a moment before cautiously asking, "Does Quaid have a mutant name?"

"No. Quaid isn't a mutant. He's... actually, that's a lot to get into. Let's just say that Quaid is my grandson and leave it at that." Lee reluctantly explained.

"Does that mean that Quaid and Janine are brother and sister or cousins or what?" Seth asked thoughtfully.

"They're adopted siblings. They're not biologically related... in fact, they're not even the same species as each other. Even so, they're being raised as members of the same family and are developing a familial bond." Lee said carefully.

"That's probably like what they're going to want for us to do." Seth said thoughtfully.

"How so?" Ororo asked with interest.

"The way they put us together in the dorm, I get the feeling that they're trying to set it up so that we'll watch out for each other." Seth said frankly.

"It'll probably make everyone's lives easier if we do that." Slash said simply.

"I'm not saying that it's bad. Me and Louie and Jesus, we're tight. I'm just saying that I can see the manipulation. We're *supposed* to be friends. We're *supposed* to care how each other are doing in school and stuff. That's all good... but it doesn't feel exactly *real*, it feels arranged." Seth explained with difficulty.

"Perhaps what you're saying is true to some degree, but you might also consider that this is the best that we could think to do for you and your classmates to make up for the absence of your *actual* families. If you can think of another arrangement where you might be happier, I'm certain that the school administration would be interested to hear about it." Ororo said professionally.

"No. I don't have any better ideas. I just didn't want for anyone to think that the dumb new kid didn't see what was going on and being done to him." Seth said frankly.

"Actually, I didn't notice, so you're one up on me." Slash said simply.

"You've got family here. You don't *need* for this to feel 'real' as much as the rest of us do." Seth said seriously.

"Maybe not, but you guys can count on me to be part of your family too. I'm just lucky enough to have my *other* family that I can call on when I need them... like *right* now." Slash finished with a smile at Lee.

"We're here for all of you. Think of it as your family and our family being related through Slash... kind of like in-laws." Lee finished with a grin at Seth.

"That's kind of a stretch, but since everyone wants for it to be true, we can probably just go with it and no one will complain." Seth said frankly.

"I am glad that you have decided so, since we have arrived at your 'in-laws' home, where you're going to be staying for the time being." Ororo said as they passed through the open gates.

"Actually, what you'll see first is the mansion. Don't get your hopes up too much, we won't be staying there. But we'll probably end up going there all the time. We're always finding excuses to visit." Slash said as he smiled at the memory.

"Where will we be staying?" Seth asked cautiously.

"At the boathouse on the other side of the property. The mansion is nice and everything, but it doesn't feel like a home to me. The boathouse is smaller and crawling with people." Lee added cheerfully.

"Well, that sounds... *nice*." Seth said slowly with a 'teenage' level of sarcasm.

"It feels like 'family'. I guess you'll have to decide for yourself if that's a good thing or not." Lee said seriously.

"So you and your kids and your grandkids all live here?" Seth asked curiously.

"Yes. Also my brother and a few of my son's friends." Lee said, then noticed that everyone had fallen silent and were staring in awe at the mansion as it came into full view.

* * * * *

"Tara?" Andrew whispered.

"Andrew? Please come in. I was just visiting with Gar." Tara said gently.

"Hi Gar. How are you doing?" Andrew asked the green-skinned boy curiously.

"I'm okay except that I'm not sick anymore and they're still making me stay in bed." Gar said grumpily.

"Uncle Hank said that you'll tire yourself out too quickly if you don't get your rest." Tara patiently explained.

"But here I am in America and all I get to see is the inside of a hospital room. It's not fair!" Gar cried out indignantly.

"Gar, I think you're old enough that we can break it to you... Sometimes life isn't fair. Like it or not, you just have to deal with it. But it's important to realize that *how* you deal with it is one way people judge what kind of a person you are." Andrew said sagely.

Gar looked at him for a long moment before turning to Tara and quietly asking, "Is this guy as much fun as he sounds?"

Tara tried to hide her smile as she looked away.

"Lisa and I came in here to ask Tara if she has a room prepped for a new patient." Andrew said with a quick smile in Gar's direction.

"I've been so focused on keeping Gar company that I haven't really had time..." Tara trailed off regretfully.

"Who's the patient? Did someone get hurt?" Gar asked with immediate concern.

"Lisa's boyfriend did. Dr. McCoy says that he's going to be alright, but he's going to need to be confined to bed rest for a few days." Andrew carefully explained.

"Is he nice? Does he like cartoons or comics or cheesy monster movies? What's his name?" Gar asked excitedly.

"Lisa? You know him best." Andrew said in a leading tone.

"His name is Marc, and he's one of the best people I know." Lisa said timidly.

"That's nice, but does he like comics and monster movies?" Gar asked hopefully.

"He doesn't really follow comics that much, but he *loves* movies and games with ultra-gore and cartoon-level violence... and anything Resident Evil. We both like that."

For a moment it seemed like Lisa forgot to be shy. Although she remained ensconced in her hoodie, for a brief moment, her voice conveyed her girlish enthusiasm.

"Is he like you?" Gar asked curiously.

"Like how?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"I don't know what you look like under there, but it must be pretty gross from the way you're hiding it. Is Marc gross too?" Gar asked frankly.

"No. He's normal. He's not gross at all." Lisa quickly defended.

"Then what's he doing here? Isn't this a place for people who are weird or gross who can't be around normal people?" Gar asked curiously, seeming to direct his question more toward Andrew than Lisa.

"We help people who need it. It doesn't matter if they're what you would call 'normal' or not." Andrew said in a fatherly, slightly chastising tone.

"You're like a dad and a half, aren't you?" Garfield rhetorically asked under his breath.

"Well, I *do* have nine kids... and one on the way." Andrew reluctantly admitted.

Gar stared at him with wide-eyed surprise for a moment, then quietly asked, "Is that your mutant power?"

"I don't know. I guess it might be one of them." Andrew said as he fought down a chuckle.

"What about you, Lisa? What's your mutation?" Gar asked curiously.

After only a moment of hesitation, Lisa pulled back her hoodie as she quietly said, "I'm a half-human, half-animal monster."

"Yeah. Me too." Gar said before smoothly transitioning into a green chimpanzee.

Lisa blinked with surprise at the sight.

"You're not supposed to alter your body again until you're stronger."
Tara warned.

The chimpanzee slightly rolled his eyes in her direction, then began to return to his more humanoid form before finally saying, "I know. But it's just so *boring*."

"Tara, we were sent in here to see if you had a room ready for Marc, but what would you think about rooming Marc and Gar together?" Andrew asked seriously.

"I don't know Marc. I have no idea what type of personality he has and how he would get along with Gar." Tara said honestly.

"What do you think, Lisa? How do you think Marc and Gar would get along with each other?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Marc's a fairly quiet person when he's on his own. I think that he would appreciate being around someone who is more energetic than he normally is."

"So, you don't think Gar would drive him crazy?" Andrew asked teasingly as he kept careful watch on Gar's expression.

"No. The more I think about it, the more I think that they'll probably get along pretty well. Marc's always so serious, sometimes he needs to be encouraged to do things that are fun." Lisa said honestly.

"Actually, Gar might end up being *too* energetic. As I understand it, Marc is going to need to stay completely still. It might be in his best interest for him to room alone until he's able to get out of bed and move around a little." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"Hey! That's not fair! I didn't do anything wrong! First you say that I'm going to get to have company in here, then you say I'm not good enough?! That just sucks!" Gar whined petulantly.

After a long moment, Andrew slowly said, "I don't know. Maybe if you promised to help Marc out with the things that he won't be able to do for himself and promise not to do anything to cause Marc to try to move around too much, then maybe they'd let you share a room with him."

"You already know that I'm going to say 'yes'. Tara's been nice, but staying in here with me is keeping her from being able to do her job." Gar said seriously.

"Staying with you *is* my job... but other parts of my job have been left undone because I can't be in two places at once." Tara reluctantly admitted.

"Do you think it would help things if Gar and Marc could stay in here together?" Andrew asked Tara hesitantly.

"Yes. I think so. That is, as long as one of them has the presence of mind to press the 'call' button if there's a problem."

"What do you think about that, Gar? Do you think that you can help Marc when he needs it and call for help if there's trouble?" Andrew asked seriously.

"Do you think there's anyone, anywhere, EVER who's gonna be enough of a scumbag to answer 'no' to a question like that?" Gar countered.

"It won't be just him helping Marc. I'll be here most of the time, too." Lisa quietly added.

Andrew looked from Gar to Lisa appraisingly for a moment, then slowly said, "If I've learned anything in my time at the mansion, it's that Tara has impeccable instincts in situations like this. If she says it's a good idea, then I'll do whatever I can to get Hank on board."

"Hank?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Dr. McCoy." Andrew clarified, then explained, "I don't think he'll actually have any opinion on the matter, as long as Marc and Gar can get the bedrest that he's prescribed for them."

"If we're going to do this, there's one other thing I'm going to need." Tara said hesitantly.

"What's that?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"A bed for him to sleep in." Tara said simply as she looked at the vacant space by the wall opposite Gar's bed.

"If you'll tell me which bed you would like moved in here I would be happy to move it for you." Andrew said simply.

"The one from next door will be fine." Tara said as she pointed to indicate to which room she was referring.

Andrew glanced in that direction, then looked toward the vacant space beside Gar's bed in time to see a bed magically appear out of nothing.

"How did you do that?" Gar asked in amazement.

"I just moved it from the next room." Andrew said simply, then cautiously asked, "How do you think you got here from South Africa?"

"Clark carried me, I remember that part... but I don't really remember much about *how* I got here. I was really sick then." Gar said as he strained to remember.

"I'll tell you all about how my ability works some other time, if you're interested, but basically, I used my ability to move the bed from there to here the same way I moved you and Clark." Andrew said slowly.

"Did you move the bed from there to here or did you move *there* to here, then leave the bed here when you put *there* back?" Gar asked curiously.

Andrew looked at Gar with surprise for a moment before answering, "That's *exactly* what I did. How did you know that?"

"Just because I'm not American doesn't mean that I don't know stuff." Gar said defensively.

"I wasn't saying anything like that. It's just that the manipulation of interstitial dimensional vortices is more than most people can wrap their minds around." Andrew said honestly.

"You're just talking about folding one layer of local space, right? It's not that hard to understand." Gar said dismissively.

"I'd really like to sit down with you sometime and discuss what you know about dimensional manipulation." Andrew said honestly.

"Bring cookies." Gar said firmly.

"It's a deal." Andrew said with a smile at the boy.

"Can we go back to Marc now?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"I don't know." Andrew said honestly, then asked, "Tara? Is there anything else you need before I port Marc into his bed?"

"One thing." Tara said, then began slowly chanting phrases in a long dead language.

"What's she doing?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Casting a spell on the bed... a cleansing, I think." Andrew said slowly.

"Spellcasting? For real?" Lisa asked in amazement.

"Yes. There are a few witches here at the mansion. If that's a problem, I can put the word out and they'll be sure to avoid you." Andrew said seriously.

"No. I don't want anything like that. I just thought that witches were make-believe. I never thought that they could be real." Lisa fought to explain.

"I suppose that's fair enough." Andrew said simply.

"If you want to go back to Uncle Hank, you can move Marc in whenever you're ready." Tara said seriously as the gentle fog that had formed around the bed evaporated in an instant.

"Okay. Thank you Tara. As usual, I'll never be able to thank you enough for all that you do for us." Andrew said warmly, then indicated to Lisa that he was ready to leave.

"You've saved Dawn and me more times and more ways than I can count. If it's okay with you, I'd like to just call it even." Tara said shyly.

"Anything you want." Andrew assured her before preceding Lisa out of the room.

* * * * *

The spell that they were under seemed to fall away as they drove away from the mansion.

"Is it as nice on the inside as it looks from the outside?" Seth finally asked.

"It's like a museum in there." Slash said frankly.

"Xavier's operates as a boarding school for the gifted, so there are many children of various ages living there. That being the case, it isn't *quite* as formal as it could be." Ororo carefully explained.

"Boarding school? Do you mean for mutants?" Seth asked curiously.

//You're smarter than you look.// Jesus said before anyone else could answer.

"Be nice." Lee warned.

//Okay. I take it back.// Jesus told Lee, then turned to Seth and continued, //You're not smarter than you look.//

"Hey! What'd I ever do to you?" Seth asked indignantly.

//Sorry. It's been a long day and you've been nothing but nice to us. I guess I'm just getting a little crabby and felt like taking it out on someone. Just about anyone else would probably kick the crap out of me if I did that to them.// Jesus quietly explained.

"If it makes you feel better about yourself to put me down, then I guess it's okay. I won't complain about it." Seth quietly promised.

After a long silent moment, Jesus finally responded, //Well played, my friend. You turned that around on me expertly. I think when you learn to play chess that you'll be very good at it.//

"Thanks." Seth said uncertainly.

"Okay. Here it comes." Lee said as the van emerged from the tree cover.

* * * * *

"Your house has its own boat dock?" Beau asked happily.

"From the look of it, I think my boat dock has its own house. I think the dock was here first. But either way, it's pretty nice." Lee said serenely.

"Do you get to go out on the lake very often?" Louie asked hopefully.

"Not at this time of year. But maybe we'll be able to take a boat out sometime before you leave." Lee said with a smile.

"I never been on a boat before, but I always wanted to." Louie said enthusiastically.

"Then, if you'll remind me, we'll make a point of doing that." Lee quietly promised.

As Ororo brought the van to a stop, the side door of the house opened and a man in a coat ran out.

"How is everyone? Do you need anything?"

"Everyone, this is Alan. He's my son-in-law. This is his house." Lee said as he ushered people out the side door of the van.

"It's freezing out here. Hurry and get inside. How is everyone holding up?" Alan asked as he started back toward the house.

"I think we're okay. How is everything here?" Lee asked with concern.

"The Professor let us know that you were on your way. The kids have been getting all the extra beds ready... I hope we have enough beds for everyone." Alan finished anxiously.

"No matter how many people you've had at your house, you've always found enough room." Lee said good-naturedly.

"I guess I should tell you before you find out for yourselves, you're all over the news right now." Alan said as he opened the side door to the house, then stood back to hold it open for all his guests.

A horn honked and Alan waved at Ororo as she backed out of the driveway.

* * * * *

"What were you saying..." Lee began to ask as he walked into the living room, but didn't need to continue.

The picture on the television was of a huddled group of frightened children emerging from the dorm building. Although in retrospect it seemed obvious, it took a moment for the members of the group to realize that they were seeing themselves and the events from earlier.

The sound was indistinct, but the image was one of terrorized children being hurried away, wanting nothing more than to be in a safe place.

Then, without warning a cloud of blackness sprang out of nowhere and within a second filled the entire screen.

There was silence in the room as the screen changed to show a news anchor, apparently stunned into silence by what he'd just seen.

"Mutants or not, that was a group of terrified children. I don't know about anyone else, but I feel really dirty for having been any part of showing that." A woman's voice said offscreen with obvious disgust.

The anchor was still staring, then appeared to be startled by something. He blinked a few times before finally saying, "And now to Guy Winslow with local sports."

"Louie? I didn't know it was you who was coming! I got a big bed in my room, big enough for two. Will you stay with me?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"I... um... yeah. Sure." Louie stammered.

"It's back here. I want to show you!" Quaid said as he started pulling on Louie's arm.

"Is it okay?" Louie asked Lee uncertainly.

"Yeah. We'll know where to find you if we need you for anything." Lee assured him, then quickly added, "Have fun."

Quaid needed no further bidding. With that he practically dragged Louie through the doorway, down the hallway to the 'new' rooms.

//I guess I'm not invited.// Jesus finally said into the silence.

"Don't worry li'l buddy. Let Louie enjoy having a friend. We'll get by just fine." Beau assured him.

"I have my own room and the bed's big enough for two if you wouldn't mind sharing." Slash quietly offered.

//But where will *you* sleep?// Jesus asked in an obviously teasing tone.

"I happen to have an empty dresser drawer that I bet we could make into a pretty good bed for you. And you could fix it up any way that you want. That is, if you're interested." Slash said in a coaxing tone.

//That *does* sound kinda sweet.// Jesus reluctantly admitted.

"What do ya say, Beau? Do you want to bunk in with me?" Slash asked hopefully.

"My last roommate almost died and we can't be sure that they weren't gunning for me." Beau warned him.

"You're safe here. *We're* safe here. Just *try* to relax." Slash said gently.

"Yeah. Okay." Beau finally relented.

"Okay, you're going to relax or okay, you'll stay in my room?" Slash asked cautiously.

"Either... or both." Beau finished with a smile.

Slash rolled his eyes as he exasperatedly said, "Cowboys."

Seth looked around and his gaze finally stopped on Lee.

"You can stay with me if you don't want to be alone." Lee finally offered.

"He could stay in one of the kids rooms if he wanted. All the Borg kids have beds *and* regeneration alcoves." Alan said frankly.

"Sure. We could do that." Lee said easily.

"Do what?" Seth asked cautiously, not following along with what was being decided on his behalf.

"Come with me and I'll show you what your choices are." Lee said simply.

"Oh, yeah. Okay." Seth said uncertainly, not sure if he had missed something.

* * * * *

As they walked through the doorway, Lee carefully explained, "Six of my grandchildren are what is known as Borg. That means that they have machines implanted throughout their bodies."

"That's horrible!"

"It is what it is. But the reason I'm telling you this is because all the Borg have to 'regenerate' at night, which means that they hook up to a machine to fill up, empty out and recharge. I think each of the kids has their own bed, but none of them sleep. So it shouldn't take more than a few minutes to find a place where you can spend the night." Lee explained as he stopped in front of one of the doors and gently knocked.

"Where will they be while I'm using their bed?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Hooked into a charging station." Lee answered simply as the door opened.

"Grandfather. It's good to see you. Please come in." Trey said with a slight, yet sincere smile.

"I brought Seth with me to ask you if you'd mind if he uses your bed tonight." Lee said as he led the way into Trey's room.

"Dad told us to prepare for having company, but he didn't say that it was you who was coming. I thought that we had everything arranged so that you could stay in your room at the college tonight." Trey said seriously.

"There was a shooting and we brought the kids here so that they would be safe." Lee said frankly.

"Was anyone hurt?" Trey asked with concern.

"Yes. Marc was shot... in the chest. But from the way your father talked, he's going to be fine." Lee hurried to assure him.

"Maybe I should ask Father if I can help." Trey said thoughtfully.

"If there's anything you can do, your father will call on you. You know that." Lee assured him, then continued, "But for right now, the best thing that we can do is make sure that Marc's roommates are kept safe and comfortable."

"Yes. That makes sense. And Father can still call me if he needs me for anything." Trey said seriously.

"Um... Your, um, grandfather said that you... um, like recharge at night or something." Seth stammered uncomfortably.

"Yes. I regenerate." Trey confirmed.

"I just... I kind of wondered, um, what's that like?"

"I do not understand what you're asking me." Trey said honestly.

"It's just, if I'm going to borrow your bed, where will you be and what *exactly* will you be doing?" Seth cautiously asked.

"Lay down and we can try it out for a minute to see if it's going to work." Trey said simply.

"Do what?" Seth asked uncertainly.

"If you'll get into a sleeping position, I will program a brief regeneration cycle so you will know what to expect if you choose to spend the night here." Trey calmly explained.

Seth hesitantly walked over and sat down, unwilling to put his feet on the bed.

Once Seth had gotten himself settled, he looked back toward Trey just in time to see him fit himself into an indent in the wall, which was covered with various types of futuristic machinery.

As Seth watched, Trey's eyes closed and the machinery came to life, seemingly registering all sorts of mysterious bodily functions and activities.

"Oh HELL no!" Seth said as he abruptly stood.

"What's wrong?" Lee asked curiously.

"Do you seriously think that I could sleep for a single *second* with him hanging on the wall like that, looking like a corpse on a

meathook? I'm probably going to have nightmares just from seeing it." Seth finished as he looked away from the disturbing scene.

"When Trey wakes up from his regeneration, be sure to thank him for his hospitality. He can't help what he is and I don't want him to ever be ashamed of it." Lee said firmly.

"Yeah. Sure." Seth quickly agreed.

"Good. Then I guess you'll get a choice. You can either stay in my room with me or you can sleep on one of the couches in the living room. Just do whatever's going to make you most comfortable." Lee said seriously.

"This is going to be my first night away from my family, so I was probably going to have trouble sleeping anyway. Now with the shooting... are you sure you won't mind? I mean, I can sleep on the floor beside your bed if that would be better." Seth nervously offered.

Before Lee could answer, the regeneration alcove went dark and Trey's eyes opened.

"Thanks for offering to let me stay here with you, but I don't think I'd sleep well with all the little lights and beeps and stuff." Seth quietly explained.

"It's possible for me to deactivate some of the monitors and displays." Trey said slowly.

"There's no need to bother with that. Seth can stay in my room." Lee said easily.

"Yeah. Thanks again for offering. I really appreciate it." Seth hurried to add.

"It wouldn't take me too long to make the alcove less... distracting." Trey said carefully.

"There's nothing wrong with your alcove. It's just that a lot's happened to me today so I'm probably going to have trouble sleeping no matter what." Seth assured him.

"We'd better get going then. You're going to need to get to sleep soon if you're going to be well rested for school in the morning." Lee said frankly as he turned to leave.

"We still have to go to school tomorrow even though Marc got shot?" Seth whined.

Lee turned back, then carefully said, "You don't *have to* do anything. You can pack it in and leave whenever you want. Given what happened tonight, no one would even blame you for it. But you need to realize that you're being given the *opportunity* to go to school tomorrow. People all around you are bending over backwards to give you the chance to take advantage of this opportunity. The rest is up to you."

"Isn't that what you're here for?" Trey asked curiously.

That prompted a slight smile from Seth before he said, "I didn't have a clue about why I was coming here. It just seemed like the thing to do. Now, just as soon as I think I understand it, it's like I find another layer of meaning is hiding out underneath it."

"Come on. I'm sure it'll make a lot more sense after a good night's sleep." Lee said gently.

Seth slowly nodded, then stepped past Lee, into the hallway.

"Goodnight Trey. Have a good regeneration. I love you very much." Lee said before pulling Trey into a firm hug.

Seth was surprised by the action, but also warmed by the show of affection.

When the hug was finished, Lee gave Trey a slight peck of a kiss on the cheek before fully releasing him.

"Goodnight Grandfather. Sleep well. You as well, Seth." Trey said before withdrawing into his room.

"I see what you mean about this place feeling like 'family'." Seth said as he followed Lee diagonally across the hall.

"You ain't seen nothin yet." Lee chuckled as he opened the door.

[Chapter 8: Dreamkeeper]

No doubt, the nightmare was horrifying. The new people Seth had met since his arrival were embedded in the walls surrounding him, undead zombies witness to his every move.

Although he was not yet fully aware of his situation, he was 'with it' enough to know that he had gone to sleep in a bed beside his new friend, Lee. As he came more awake, it turned out that his reality wasn't much better than his nightmare had been.

As Seth blearily looked around, he couldn't exactly identify his surroundings. Strangely, at the same time, what he *was* seeing didn't seem to be quite as spooky and foreign as by all rights it should be. The world around him seemed almost familiar, perhaps like something he had once seen in a distant, forgotten dream.

That thought brought him up short, because he couldn't be entirely sure that he *wasn't* still dreaming. It could very well be an instance of a dream within a dream, or more accurately, a nightmare within a nightmare.

As he sat up to get a better view, he couldn't help but notice the gray webbing all around him.

He reached toward the mysterious substance to verify by touch what his eyes couldn't tell him. He couldn't determine with any certainty if the strands before him were wispy and dry like cobwebs, or if they were more liquid, like strands of mucous. The fact that they draped and glistened in the meager light didn't really prove anything either way.

As he touched a strand directly in front of him, it dissolved into nothingness like a collapsing flake of ash. Even so, he derived no physical sensation from having touched it. For all he knew, it could be an illusion of some sort. Maybe it was a trick of the light... or darkness, or whatever it was that surrounded him.

After a little trial and error, he was surprised to determine that the source of illumination appeared to be above his own head. When he turned his head the shadows shifted all around him, creating the illusion that the endless ephemeral gray vines and strands were somehow alive.

While one part of his mind understood the illusion created by shifting shadows, another more primal part of him had the bejesus scared out of it and Seth reflexively reached beside him, to where Lee had been the night before.

Seth was beyond surprised when he encountered a hand. He turned suddenly, hoping beyond hope that he would somehow find that it was Lee's hand that he was holding.

Hope and fear were vying for control as Seth stared disbelievingly at Lee's body being slowly pulled through a semi-transparent gray veil into existence at his side.

"Seth? What are you doing?" Lee asked as he cracked an eye open.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd be able to help me figure that out." Seth said honestly.

"Okay. But first things first. Why are your horns glowing?" Lee asked slowly.

"I have no idea." Seth said honestly.

"Where are we?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Sorry. I got nothin." Seth said frankly.

"How did we get here?" Lee asked as he sat forward so that he could look Seth in the eye.

"I don't know. I woke up from a nightmare and here I was. When I got spooked and reached for you, you were there, even though I couldn't see you there before." Seth carefully explained.

"How old are you, again?"

"Fourteen."

"Yeah. That sounds about right." Lee said consideringly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Seth asked cautiously, not quite sure if Lee were insulting him or not.

"Listen, this is as new to me as it is to you but from the way it looks to me, I'd guess that what just happened here is because your mutant ability is emerging." Lee said frankly.

"But I've already got my horns and see-through skin. Isn't that all of it?" Seth asked hesitantly.

"Apparently not. It looks like you also have some sort of dimensional ability... although I'm not sure exactly which dimension you've brought us to." Lee said as he looked around.

"I did this?" Seth asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. I think so. At least, I'm pretty sure it wasn't anything I did." Lee said seriously.

"I don't know how it works. How am I going to get us back? What if we're trapped here forever?" Seth asked anxiously.

"Don't worry too much about that right now. I've got a dimensional ability too, so if it comes down to it, I'm pretty sure that I'll be able to punch through to the hell dimension, then get us back home from there." Lee said honestly.

"Wait... does that mean that I have an ability like yours?" Seth asked hopefully.

"I don't know. Maybe. I'd really like to talk to Andrew about it and find out what he knows about this place. When he and I talked about things before, I don't remember him saying anything about any dimensions that look like the inside of a smoker's lung." Lee said thoughtfully.

"But if my ability is to bring us... here, what good does that do for anyone?"

"There's nothing that says that every ability has to be useful. Actually, it may come down to what kind of creative ways you can find to make a lame ability provide some sort of benefit." Lee said frankly.

"So you *do* think it's lame?" Seth cautiously asked.

"I didn't say that. My ability is to create a doorway directly into hell. As far as I know there isn't a whole lot of call for that, at least not among the more respected members of society. But anyway, when Andrew and I heard that one of you guys had been shot, I used my ability to take us through hell and directly to you." Lee said frankly.

"So you *don't* think my ability is lame?" Seth asked cautiously.

"I don't even know what your ability really is. We're just assuming that something you did in your sleep caused us to end up here."

"So, what can we do about that?"

"I think that before we try to find the way back, we should try to figure out where we are and how your power works. I have a feeling that if we take the time to sort it out now we'll be grateful for it later."

"Grateful is good. Where do you want to start?"

"Well, based on absolutely nothing except what I'm seeing here, I'm going to guess that your ability is contained in, or transmitted through, your horns."

"Okay." Seth said hesitantly.

"So why don't you see if you can consciously control the brightness of your horns?"

"How?"

"I don't know... push or something."

"Um... I'm not sure what I'm supposed to push, but I'm going to try it. You might want to be ready to make one of those doors into hell, just in case."

"Trust me, I've already picked a spot." Lee assured him.

"Here it goes." Seth cautioned before both physically and mentally pushing to try and make something happen.

After a minute of trial and error, something finally seemed to work. When Seth saw the slightest increase in illumination, he continued to focus on the sensation until he finally had *some* measure of conscious control.

"Can you hold your high beam for a few seconds? I want to try something." Lee asked hopefully.

"Yeah. This isn't hard to do, it just takes a minute to figure out how to control it." Seth said frankly.

Lee hesitantly reached out and touched one of the thinner strands that were surrounding them.

Rather than dissolve into nothingness, the strand remained solid and resistant to Lee's touch.

"Uh oh. That's not good." Lee muttered, mostly to himself.

"What's that?" Seth asked cautiously.

Rather than answer verbally, Lee simply plucked the strand, resulting in a low bass twang.

"What's wrong with that?" Seth asked in puzzlement.

"It means that we're trapped. There's no way that we're going to be able to climb over, under and around all this webbing."

"Then we'll do it like this." Seth said, then consciously lowered his light to the point where everything appeared to be half-hidden in shadow.

Before Lee could ask what he was doing, Seth stepped to Lee's side and made a show of very carefully touching the same strand that Lee had touched before.

As expected, the formerly strong strand dissipated into nothingness.

"So it looks like you're able to control either how 'real' we are or how 'real' our surroundings are." Lee said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. It looks that way. But that thing you were saying before about us being trapped, this kinda takes care of that, doesn't it?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Yes. And if I'm right about how all of this works, I might have just found a use for your ability."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Let me try out a few more things before I say too much about that."

"Okay. Yeah. But what do you want to do next?" Seth asked curiously.

"I guess that if you're up to it, we could go for a little walk." Lee said with a grin.

"Do we just have to guess where we're going, or do you somehow know?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Actually, I was wanting for you to figure out how to navigate on your own." Lee said frankly.

"How?" Seth asked simply.

"Andrew probably has a bullet point list of steps to follow, but honestly, I've had the best results from just trying different things until something works." Lee said honestly.

"That'd be fine except that I don't have any experience to fall back on. This is coming at me from out of nowhere. I'd really appreciate it if you could point me in the right direction." Seth said imploringly.

Lee placed a hand flat on Seth's back, then gave it one short gentle push.

At Seth's look of puzzlement, Lee pointed as he said, "That way."

The shadows all around them shifted as Seth looked from side to side to get his bearings.

Rather than start walking, Seth quietly asked, "The door's over there, right?"

"Yes. But before we start roaming around aimlessly you need to figure out how to navigate for yourself."

"I'm open to any suggestions."

"From the way I understand it, Andrew can sort of send his power out and see things that aren't right in front of him." Lee said carefully, then continued, "For me, it's more like everything I see is layered on top of the hell dimension, which I can almost see bleeding through."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I can't see anything like that." Seth said frankly.

"I didn't think that you would. But knowing that there's a door right in front of you, maybe you can try some different things to see it... you might try adjusting the light of your horns or something. You've had pretty good luck with that so far." Lee carefully suggested.

"Yeah. Okay." Seth said with determination.

Lee watched carefully to be sure that Seth didn't do anything too dangerous.

Internally, he was constructing contingencies in case things went terribly wrong. He had the most direct course to Andrew's room already plotted.

A sudden change in the lighting renewed Lee's focus.

As the lighting began to become more and more blue, Lee quickly said, "Up the brightness a little. We're fading."

"Right. Got it." Seth said in slow concentration.

"There it is. Can you see that?"

"Yeah. Give me a second. I'm kinda juggling things here."

"Take your time... oh crap. I didn't think about it, but your ability might not only affect *spatial* dimensions. You could have projected us a hundred-thousand years into the past... or the future, I guess." Lee reluctantly suggested.

"That's just a bunch of made-up sci fi stuff. That can't happen in real life."

"Yeah. I need to get you to babysit my grandson Thomas when we get back. It'll only take a few minutes with him to make you a true believer."

"Okay, um... you might want to cover your eyes for a second. I'm gonna try something."

"Just do what you're going to do. I'll manage."

Lee noticed the light not only becoming slightly brighter, but also significantly less blue. In fact, there wasn't really any color to speak of. They seemed to have become black & white.

"There. Is that what you were talking about?" Seth asked as he pointed ahead of them.

Lee could make out the vague outline of the bedroom door amongst the loosely draping phlegm-like ropes and vines all around them. Of course, if he weren't familiar with the appearance of the door, he probably wouldn't automatically make that association.

"Do you want to see if you can go through it?" Lee cautiously asked.

"No. Hold on." Seth immediately answered as he held up an arm to prevent Lee from stepping forward..

Lee froze in place, then hesitantly asked, "Then what would you like to do next?"

Their bright black and white surroundings began to dim and a blue-gray cast washed over them.

"Can you explain what you're doing? I don't understand."

"We could see where to go the other way, but we couldn't walk through it. I could feel it in my horns. If we'd tried to walk through that we'd have been torn to shreds." Seth explained with difficulty.

"Okay. I'm just as happy not to test that theory." Lee automatically accepted, then asked, "Are we good to go now?"

"Yeah. Except that I don't know where to go." Seth admitted.

"I was thinking that we could try and find our way to Slash's room. It's just a few doors down; Left out the door, at the end of the hall on the right."

"Across from Trey's room?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's right." Lee confirmed.

"Okay. I can't be sure that we won't be blocked from going there but I guess we can try." Seth said as he led the way.

"The way Andrew explained it to me, these overlaid dimensions seem to follow certain rules, one of them being that barriers and walkways generally exist the same in both dimensions." Lee explained as he moved closer to Seth, just for safety's sake.

"Why would that be?" Seth asked curiously.

"I don't know. I guess that if you're someone who believes in gods, this might be an argument in favor of that. 'Intelligent design', I think they call it." Lee said as he slowly followed.

"I'm guessing you don't believe in that." Seth observed.

"I believe in a lot of things that I didn't just a year or two ago. Let's just say that at this point in my life that I don't automatically assume that everything that happens around me has something to do with divine intervention." Lee said diplomatically.

"Yeah. Sounds right." Seth easily agreed.

"Of course, if you believe that complex systems automatically exhibit a tendency toward order, as demonstrated in snowflakes and the formation of crystals, then you might attribute the formation of pathways and barriers as being part of that same natural process." Lee explained as he noticed that Seth was avoiding as many of the strands as possible, trying to climb over or around them to avoid touching them if he could.

"That sounds to me like someone who's making up a story to fit the facts without having any clue about what's really going on." Seth said frankly.

"Why are you being so careful not to touch the strands?" Lee finally had to ask.

"They look like they're part of something alive... or maybe like something that's *been* alive. What if we're inside of someone, or what if this world is somehow a living thing. I wouldn't want to cause it pain or maybe even kill it for no reason at all." Seth carefully explained.

"You know, that hadn't occurred to me." Lee said as he began to take extra care not to accidentally touch any of the strands as they continued down the hallway.

"I guess if you really believe that stuff you were saying about things falling into order, that would be another way of explaining it." Seth quietly added.

"No. I don't really believe it, I was just throwing it out there as a possible explanation. I actually don't care *why* certain things are like

they are. I just accept them, then get on with life." Lee reluctantly admitted.

"Is this it?" Seth asked as he indicated a gap in the strands that almost looked like an archway.

"I think so. Let me look." Lee said as his eyes started to glow.

"Wow! I didn't know you could do that." Seth said with a grin.

"I don't like to show it off. This is just how I can see past the veil into the demon world." Lee quietly explained.

"What can you see now?" Seth asked curiously.

"It's kind of difficult to describe. The way it used to be, I thought that I could only see into hell, and for the most part that's true. But thanks to Andrew, I discovered that when I'm in hell, I can use my ability to see back into our regular human dimension... well, the dimension that you're used to, anyway. If you'll remind me, I'll tell you more about where I'm really from later. But anyway, now I've figured out how I can look *through* the hell dimension and back into ours." Lee carefully explained.

"So does that mean that you can see inside?" Seth cautiously asked.

"Yeah. That's what it means." Lee said with a smile.

"Do you want for us to go in?" Seth asked hesitantly.

"Yes. I think Slash would like to be included in this adventure. And since you've mastered the art of navigation, I think the next trick might be to see if you can *intentionally* bring someone in and send them back." Lee said frankly.

"I'm worried that I might do something wrong and hurt him." Seth said honestly.

"We're not just going to go in and abduct him. First thing I'm going to ask you to do is send me back, then, if that goes well, I'll wake

up Slash and invite him to join us on the next part of our adventure."

"What's that going to be?" Seth asked with interest.

"Waking up Andrew." Lee said with a mischievous grin.

"Any particular reason?" Seth asked cautiously.

"He's the greatest authority on interdimensional travel that I know. Not only would I like to share the news with him, but I'd also like to get his opinion about this dimension that you've discovered."

"Yeah. And he might also have some warnings for us about things that we don't already know to watch out for." Seth said a bit nervously.

"What are you worried about?" Lee asked cautiously.

"What if we're not the only ones running around in here? What if this dimension is someone or *something's* home?" Seth asked frankly.

"I never even thought of something being able to live here. Listen, if you're ready to do it, maybe you could try sending me back so that I can get Slash. I can give you a thumbs-up when I'm ready to come back here and once I'm back, I can tell you if Slash will be joining us."

"How am I going to send you back?" Seth asked hesitantly.

"Just try things. If we can't find a way to make it work, it's no big deal. Right now we're just trying to figure out how it all works." Lee assured him.

"Yeah. Alright." Seth finally agreed.

* * * * *

//What are you doing?// Sounded in both Lee and Seth's minds.

"We're just trying to figure out how to use Seth's mutant ability. I'm sorry if we woke you. Can you see us?" Lee asked hesitantly.

//No, I can sense your psychic presence, but I can't visually see you at all.// Jesus said seriously, then casually added, //So Seth has an ability? I never saw that one coming.//

"Be nice!" Lee playfully chastised.

"I want to try something." Seth distractedly interrupted.

"That's fine. Go ahead." Lee encouraged.

Seth brought his hand up to Lee's chest and held it there for a moment with his fingers spread. Before Lee could ask what he was intending, Seth firmly pushed him away.

* * * * *

"Is everything okay? I can't tell what's going on." Seth finally asked.

//Hold on. I think Lee may be about to ask you to bring yourself back.// Jesus responded uncertainly.

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

//Pull Lee back and he'll explain it to you.// Jesus quickly responded.

Seth shifted his light from black and white to blue-gray, then reached forward and placed a hand on Lee's arm.

Seth didn't have to physically 'pull' Lee across dimensions but rather reorient Lee from one dimension to the other.

"Hang on a second. Andrew wants to see if he can make it here on his own." Lee said quickly.

"Andrew? How long were you there? It just seemed like a minute to me." Seth asked anxiously.

"No. It's nothing like that. Andrew was just looking for us when you sent me back..." Lee was saying when a movement beside them heralded the arrival of Andrew.

"Remind me not to play hide and seek with you guys." Andrew muttered as he looked around.

"It kind of happened by accident." Seth timidly explained.

"Seth, we need to get you back so you can talk to your parents. That news story got picked up by the network and now your parents are ready to call out the National Guard to make sure that you're safe." Andrew explained.

"I left my phone on the charger back in the bedroom. I didn't think about bringing it with me." Seth said anxiously.

"Don't worry too much about it. I doubt that your plan covers this dimension anyway." Lee quietly offered.

"Yeah. And I bet the roaming charges would be murder." Andrew added.

"If my parents are worried about me, I need to get back. How do I do that?" Seth asked sternly.

"You were able to push me out of this dimension. See if you can find a way to do that to yourself." Lee said seriously.

"Can't you open a door for me or something?" Seth asked hopefully.

"I *could* but then you would need someone with you at all times until you've learned your ability. If you can get yourself in *and* out on your own, then you'll be free to explore whenever you want." Lee patiently explained.

"I bet if it was *your* kids that the news had been talking about that you wouldn't want to be kept waiting." Seth grouched.

"Probably not. But it's still better if we do it this way." Andrew assured him.

"The sooner you do it, the sooner you won't have to worry about it." Lee helpfully added.

"I'm working on it. Give me a minute." Seth slowly said in concentration.

"Andrew, before Seth goes, can you tell us anything about this dimension that he found?" Lee asked hopefully.

"This isn't exactly a dimension. It's more like the connective tissue between dimensions. I never would have thought to look for you here."

"Connective tissue? Is it alive?" Seth asked anxiously.

"I don't know, Seth. The definition of life would probably have to be expanded before you could say 'yes' or 'no' to that." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"Any suggestions for Seth on how he can get himself back to our dimension." Lee asked hopefully.

"Not really. I don't know how his power works." Andrew said honestly.

"Watch while Seth sends me back. Maybe that'll give you a hint." Lee suggested.

"Yeah. Go ahead." Andrew said as his eyes began to cast a golden glow.

"Woah. *That's* impressive." Seth said with surprise at the sight.

"Remember that your parents are worried about you." Lee said firmly.

"Oh, yeah. You ready?" Seth asked as he forced himself to look away from Andrew's awe-inspiring level of power.

"Go ahead." Lee assured him.

Seth took a moment to gather his wits so that he could be certain that he wouldn't accidentally hurt Lee.

One simple push against Lee's chest and he seemed to fall backward, out of existence.

* * * * *

After a moment of observation, Andrew finally said, "Okay. I can see why you're having a problem."

"Do you know how I can send myself back?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Yes. In fact, I'm fairly certain that you have everything you need to do it except the understanding of how to make it work." Andrew said slowly.

"What does that even mean?" Seth asked imploringly.

"Dad and I have basically the same ability, except that mine just seems to have manifested a little more fully than his. Your ability, while having certain foundational similarities, operates in a completely different way. Dad and I create doorways. A physical body can step through and move from one place or one dimensional plane to another. What you do is override the dimensional cohesion of a being so that it is no longer associated with one universe and seems to fit naturally into another." Andrew carefully explained.

"So, can you tell me how to send myself back?" Seth asked hopefully.

"I can tell you the effect that you're trying to produce, but I'm not you. I don't feel what you feel, so I can't tell you *how* to produce it." Andrew said seriously.

"Go ahead. I've figured it out this far. I can do it." Seth said confidently.

Andrew smiled at Seth's determination, then said, "Imagine for a second that our world, where we normally live, has music that's always playing quietly in the background. It's kind of like a hum or a low harmonious drone in the distance. This world has an entirely

different hum. All you have to do is remember what that other hum sounded like and alter your own internal 'hum' to match it."

"So when I change my light, that's what I'm doing, I'm actually changing the 'hum' of the things around me, so that they become more or less 'real' in relation to me, right?" Seth cautiously asked.

"Right. And when you pushed Dad back to the other dimension, you basically reset his vibration to go back to normal." Andrew carefully explained.

"And when I pulled him in, I was making him be in tune with me." Seth said thoughtfully.

"That's what it looks like to me." Andrew agreed.

"Okay. Then I guess I'm ready." Seth said as a twinge of his nervousness slipped past his confident facade.

"Go ahead. If anything happens, just stay calm and I'll get you through." Andrew said seriously.

"You and your dad are pretty cool. Thanks." Seth said sincerely, then closed his eyes as his horns began to cycle through various colors and intensities.

"You're doing fine. When you get to it, it should feel familiar." Andrew said in a low, calming voice.

"Yeah. Here I go." Seth announced, then seemed to warp and dissolve out of the in-between universe that he found himself in.

Looking around using the golden glow of his own eyes, Andrew assessed that the situation was sufficiently resolved as he, also, faded out of existence.

* * * * *

"We're all going back to my room so Seth can get his phone." Lee announced when Andrew appeared.

"It looks like the excitement's over for the moment. I'm going to get back to Alan and the babies, unless I'm needed here for something." Andrew said quietly.

"No. Go ahead and get your rest. I'll be sure to fill you in if anything new comes up."

"Sounds good. I'll see you at breakfast then. Have a good night... what's left of it."

"Yeah. You too."

* * * * *

"Hi, Mom?" Seth cautiously asked into his phone.

He had to pull the phone away from his ear for a moment, due to the screaming.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Really." Seth tried to assure her without letting the phone get too near to his ear.

"Yes. I was in my room when it happened. Nobody tried to shoot me and I wasn't ever in any danger." Seth said calmly.

"I heard something about graffiti, but I really don't know anything about it. The important thing is that when we were in trouble they took all of us to someplace safe and saw that we were taken care of." Seth said firmly.

"No. I *don't* want to come home. Classes haven't even started and I've already learned so much that I can't even tell you."

"Mom. I'm a mutant. No matter where I go, there's going to be people like that trying to hurt me. I think it's better if I'm someplace where I can be around people who'll watch my back and who'll be willing to jump in and help me when I need it." Seth said frankly.

"Mom. If I'm going to be a part of this world, I've got to live in it. I think this is the best way, with lots of friends and support."

"Okay. I will. Is Dad there? I'd like to talk to him."

"Yeah. I love you too."

"Dad? Yeah... I'm fine. Listen. Do you remember Marc? He's the one who was shot."

"I don't know. I haven't heard anything since we got here..."

"We're at another school, one with a big fence around it and a gate. We're safe. I promise."

"Right. What I was wondering is if when Marc gets well enough to get out of the hospital, if there's anything we can do to help him. I don't want him feeling like him and Lisa are all alone in this."

"Yeah. I'll let you know if I think of anything."

"No. I'm sure. I think it's going to be great here, just as soon as they can get all their psychos and stuff under control."

"Yeah. When you're just starting out it takes a while to work the bugs out." Seth said with a pained smile.

"Really, I'm fine." Seth quietly assured his father.

"What? Oh, yeah. I guess I'll talk to him."

"I love you too. Bye." Seth said quickly.

"What are you doing up so late? Don't you have school tomorrow?" Seth asked with a smile as he noticed that a tear had escaped down his cheek.

"Don't worry about me. Get your sleep so you can be all brilliant and everything at school tomorrow."

"I'm fine. I wasn't even there when it happened. I was in a totally different room."

"Well, I didn't know you'd be calling, did I? But for whatever it's worth, next time one of my classmates or roommates is shot, I'll be sure to keep my phone with me and turned on. How's that?"

"Sorry Junior, that sounded funnier in my head. I didn't mean to make you worry."

"Yeah. Okay. Keep an eye on the old folks for me, will you? If you notice them worrying or being depressed, let me know and I'll be sure to give them an extra call."

"Yeah. I love you too..."

"...and don't call me Horney."

* * * * *

"Is everything alright at home?" Lee asked quietly.

"Yeah. I guess so. I should have called them as soon as I got here. I should have known that they'd find out and be worried." Seth said quietly.

"I should probably call my mom too. And if my great-aunt finds out..." Beau trailed off, obviously not able to describe the horror that would be wrought in that eventuality.

//How are you feeling about your new ability?// Jesus asked curiously.

"Okay, I guess. I mean, if anyone had asked, this probably isn't the one I would have chosen. But as far as mutant abilities go, it's not bad." Seth said frankly.

"What is it, again? I was asleep when most of this was going on." Slash asked curiously.

A flash of consuming darkness erupted from Seth's horns just before Seth seemed to wink out of existence. A moment later, Seth appeared on the other side of the room.

"You're a teleporter?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"More of a dimensional traveler, I think. But that doesn't mean that he can't do a teleporter trick or two as well." Lee finished with a smile.

"Yeah. I can only go to one other dimension so far..." Seth quietly admitted.

"I'm thinking that Andrew and I might be able to help with that." Lee assured him.

"It sure was lucky that I was with you when my mutant ability manifested." Seth said frankly.

"I doubt very much if luck had anything to do with it." Lee said seriously.

//How do you mean?// Jesus asked curiously.

"If you go back over the number of coincidences that are stacked, one on top of another, I think you'll see that this couldn't have possibly happened naturally." Lee said with certainty.

"I thought you said that you don't believe in gods." Seth said cautiously.

"That's not what I'm talking about. But all of this, it isn't natural. We're being manipulated." Lee stated with conviction.

"By who?" Slash asked in surprise.

//By whom.// Jesus automatically corrected.

"Seriously?" Slash asked with a dubious look down at the rat.

Before Jesus could respond, Lee calmly said, "Some *one* or some *thing* seems intent on promoting a certain outcome."

"Do you think they had anything to do with what happened to Marc?" Seth asked quietly.

"I really don't know. I'd like to think that whatever is at play behind the scenes is on our side, doing what's right for us but I have no evidence to prove it. All I can tell you is that what's happening is something that *appears* to have a point. Different people and situations are being drawn to produce a specific outcome." Lee said slowly.

//I think that I could probably pick up on it if there were a telepath pushing people to do things like that.// Jesus said frankly.

Lee thoughtfully nodded his agreement.

"But maybe it's like me and Lee having different abilities. Even though what we've got is kind of the same thing, it's different too. Maybe whatever's happening isn't really telepathy but something else that can end up doing the same thing." Seth said speculatively.

"Why do you say that?" Slash asked curiously.

"Because Lee's right. How much of a longshot is it that when my mutant ability broke through that I happened to be sleeping next to Lee, who is another dimensional traveler? I could have been lost forever. No one would have known where to look for me." Seth said seriously.

Lee begrudgingly nodded his agreement.

"Even a one in a million chance happens that *one* time." Slash said simply.

"True. But how many times in a row can you hit that one in a million jackpot before you have to wonder what's going on?" Lee countered.

"So you're saying that a new mutant who didn't even know that he had an ability, just happened to find out about a new school being opened, then after being accepted and showing up, was relocated to another school due to a completely unexpected and unforeseen shooting and ended up sleeping next to another mutant who just happened to have almost the same mutant ability as him and when this new mutant got scared, he was *somehow* able to pull that other mutant into the new dimension without even knowing that he was using a mutant ability... is that the part you're saying is a little too coincidental to have happened all on its own?" Seth asked curiously.

"Um, yeah. That." Lee confirmed.

"I'm not saying that you're right, but even if you are, what are we supposed to do about it?" Slash reluctantly asked.

"Just keep your eyes open for bizarre coincidences and unlikely decisions being made. Even if we can't figure out who's doing it, if we can just figure out what they're trying to accomplish, we might have a better idea of what to expect." Lee said firmly as he looked around the group.

//What if he's telling you to say that?// Jesus asked into everyone's minds.

Lee looked at Jesus with surprise, then broke into a smile before responding, "Then I suppose that whoever he or she is, they're probably pretty happy with the way things have turned out."

"We still have to go to school in the morning, don't we?" Seth asked as he quickly looked at the clock.

"Yeah. In about three hours." Slash regretfully confirmed.

"Goodnight everyone. Thanks for all your help." Lee said wearily.

"Yeah. I guess if you were going to wake us up in the middle of the night, at least it was for something interesting." Beau said with a smile as he started toward the door.

//I don't know about all of you, but I need my beauty sleep.// Jesus said playfully.

"No you don't. You're perfect just the way you are." Beau said with a smile.

//I can accept that. But just don't make a habit of it.//

"It's a deal." Beau said as he led the way out of the bedroom.

"Hey Seth." Slash said as he stopped in the doorway.

At Seth's look of question, Slash continued, "Welcome to the club."

"Thanks." Seth answered timidly.

Slash smiled as he continued on, out of the room.

[Chapter 9: Childish Dream]

A flurry of enthusiastic knocking jarred Seth out of an unusually deep sleep.

"This day is going to be brutal. I can already tell." Lee muttered from beside him.

Before either could bid the perpetrators of the knocking to enter, they let themselves in and cheerfully announced, "It's time for everyone to wake up and have breakfast so that they can go to school or work or whatever they have to do today."

Seth looked from Louie to Quaid and back again before realizing that they were waiting for some sort of a response. Since Lee didn't seem to be inclined to engage with them just yet, Seth finally responded for both of them by saying, "We'll be out in a few minutes."

Seth was beyond shocked when Quaid hopped onto the bed in one lythe move and immediately pulled Lee into an extremely startled hug.

Although Seth was intellectually aware that Quaid and Louie were nearly his same age, their more immature attitudes made him think of them as being significantly younger. It wasn't until Seth was faced with the prospect of the boy nearly landing on top of him that he was reminded that Quaid wasn't a child, but a young teenager.

Before Lee or Seth could formulate a response, Quaid released Lee, then moved over to give Seth a hug, too.

Out of the corner of his eye, Seth saw that Louie had taken Quaid's place and was currently giving Lee a firm and heartfelt hug which by all indications was the most special thing in the world to him in that moment.

Seeing Louie being able to openly express his affection helped more than anything in getting Seth over his surprise at the morning wakeup ambush hugs. If that's what Louie needed to do to feel that

he could hug someone, then it was good that he had Quaid to run interference for him and pave the way.

Soon Quaid moved off the bed and Louie gave Seth a much shorter hug than what he had given Lee. That was fine with Seth. He was happy as long as Louie was getting what he needed.

Quaid and Louie then bounded out of the room, cheerfully going to awaken their next 'lucky' targets.

After a long silent moment of staring at the door, Lee finally forced himself to get out of bed as he asked, "Do you want to shower first?"

"What I'd *really* like to do is lay back down and get about three more hours of sleep." Seth said honestly.

"You're free to do that. I certainly won't stop you. In fact, as far as I know, the only person you'll have to answer to, if you take the day off, is yourself. I mean, if it gets to be an everyday thing, it could be a problem. You *are* here to go to school, so if you *aren't* going to school... do you see what I'm getting at?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I wasn't planning on skipping, I just felt like whining about it for a minute." Seth said wearily.

"Oh? You done?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Yeah." Seth confirmed.

"Good. Go in and shower while I check in with Andrew. Considering how *your* parents reacted, there's no telling how much sleep anyone else got last night." Lee said as he pulled on a robe.

"Yeah. Okay. I won't take too long." Seth said as he picked up the duffel he had packed at the dorm before they left.

* * * * *

As Seth emerged from the bathroom, he was still working to towel his hair dry, not quite used to maneuvering around his horns yet.

"Well, if any of the other parents freaked out last night, they apparently didn't get our phone number."

"Did someone call Marc's family?" Seth quietly asked.

"I'm sure that Julia or Kurt must have." Lee said as he gathered some clothes to take into the bathroom with him.

"Out of all of us, he's the last one who should have gotten hurt. He's not even a mutant." Seth said bitterly.

"None of you deserves to be hurt. I mean, yeah, it sucks that it happened to Marc, but it wouldn't suck any less if any of the rest of you had been shot. If it was you laying in that hospital I wouldn't think you somehow deserved it because of who and what you are." Lee said firmly.

"I know. I didn't mean that the way it sounded." Seth said uneasily.

"I think I know what you meant." Lee assured him, then explained, "But if I don't call out things like that when I hear them, it's almost like I'm agreeing with them. I don't want my kids or grandkids to ever think that I believe stuff like that about them."

"Yeah, well, from what I've seen so far, I don't think there's any chance of that." Seth chuckled.

"Alan's got the first wave of breakfast set out in the dining room. If you want to go on in. I'll meet up with you in there in a few minutes." Lee said as he stepped into the bathroom.

"Yeah. I'll see you then." Seth called after him, then picked up his duffel and left the bedroom.

* * * * *

"Where can I put this that it won't be in the way?" Seth asked as he held up his duffel while walking into the living room.

"You can put it by the front door over there, unless you plan on needing it before you leave." Andrew suggested as he pointed across the room.

"Nope. That'll be fine." Seth said easily as he changed course to continue on across the room.

"How are you doing this morning, Seth?" Andrew asked curiously.

"I coulda used a little more sleep, but besides that, I think I'm fine." Seth said honestly.

"So you don't have any headache or extreme fatigue or anything like that?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"No. I feel pretty normal. Just a little tired from being awake in the middle of the night." Seth confirmed.

"Good. Sometimes when you use a mutant ability there's an unpleasant price to pay." Andrew said frankly.

"Do you have anything like that?" Seth asked curiously, then thought to add, "I mean, if it's okay to talk about it."

"The way my portal ability works, the farther away the portal has to reach, the more of a physical toll it takes on me. There was one instance not too long ago where, by all rights, I should have died." Andrew said honestly, then added, "As to talking about it... I'd be careful about that. There are people who will take whatever personal information you give them and wait for an opportunity to use it against you."

"When we first got here John said that we should be careful about talking to people, or around them, about being a mutant. He said that some people are really sensitive about it." Seth said carefully.

"That's good advice. There are people who work really hard to hide that they're a mutant and are ashamed of it... in fact, some are even in denial about it." Andrew said frankly.

"I might be a little bit that way. I mean, it's not that I can't deal with it, but I just haven't been a mutant too long and sometimes I forget that I don't look like regular people anymore." Seth said honestly.

"You're doing fine. This is one of those things that there really aren't any social norms for. Just try to keep that in mind and cut people some slack if they're unintentionally being rude. If all of us can make an effort to overlook each other's shortcomings, it should make all our lives that much more pleasant as we go along."

"Breakfast is all laid out. Go ahead and get started." Alan called from the kitchen doorway.

"Go on in. I'm going to see if there's anything else that needs to be carried to the dining room." Andrew said as he started toward the kitchen.

As Seth turned, he saw Lee standing in the doorway to the bedroom hallway.

"It looked like you two were having a good talk. Was Andrew able to answer your questions?" Lee asked as he ambled slowly to Seth's side.

"I guess so. We were just talking." Seth said easily.

"How are you now?" Lee asked as he motioned for Seth to walk with him to the dining room.

"Right this minute? I'm worried about Marc." Seth said frankly.

"From everything that I've ever heard about this place, Marc should be getting the best medical care that there is; really world class." Lee assured him.

"I wasn't worried about that as much as I was that Marc might be feeling like he doesn't belong here with us, or isn't wanted here, or something." Seth said seriously.

"Yeah. I can see how being shot might make someone feel unwelcome." Lee said frankly.

"Do you think there'd be a way that we could stop at the hospital sometime today to let Marc and Lisa know that they're not all alone in all of this?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Hey! That sounds like a pretty good idea." Slash said as he and Beau walked into the dining room.

"What's a good idea?" Beau asked uncertainly.

"Checking in on Marc and Lisa." Slash automatically answered.

"Going to the hospital to see Marc and Lisa and let them know that we're worried and care and stuff." Seth further explained.

"Yeah. I don't know who we'd have to talk to to set that up, but it'd probably be worth the trouble." Slash said with an uncertain look at Lee.

"You guys get started and I'll ask around." Lee said decisively.

"Why don't you have your breakfast first?" Seth asked curiously.

"Because, with any luck, I'll be able to find out all the steps that we'll need to take to visit, if it's even possible. Once we know what needs to be done, we can put our heads together and make plans over breakfast." Lee said frankly as he started toward the door.

Before he could take two steps, Andrew walked into the dining room carrying a large basket.

As soon as Lee spotted Andrew, he firmly asked, "You got a minute, Andy?"

"Sure, Dad. What's up?" Was his immediate response.

Slash, Seth, and Beau watched as they both left.

"He coulda left the food with us." Seth whimpered.

"I'm sure that he'll eventually remember that he's carrying it. Andrew's really responsible like that." Slash said confidently.

"Is everyone here yet?" Quaid asked as he hurried into the dining room.

"No. But I'm sure they soon will be. You woke everyone up real good." Beau said with a gentle smile at the energetic boy.

"Where's Andrew?" Alan asked as he carried a platter heaped with breakfast foods into the dining room.

"Lee needed to ask him something." Seth quickly answered.

"Andy! We're going to need that toast in here!" Alan called loudly into the air.

"Sorry!" Andrew's voice responded from a distance. As the boys watched, a blurry twist in reality formed above the dining room table. Before Seth could fully process what he was seeing, a pair of hands placed a basket of toasted bread and warmed muffins in the center.

"Is there anyplace for Jesus to sit?" Louie timidly asked as he walked to the table with Jesus riding on his back in a backpack.

"Actually, yes. Hold on for a second. I've got just the thing." Alan said suddenly as he rushed away.

//You don't have to do anything special for me. As long as I can get some food and water, I should be fine.// Jesus gently explained.

"You can't eat and drink in the backpack and with all the people we've got around here, I don't want anybody stepping on you." Louie firmly explained.

"Here. How about this?" Alan asked as he rushed back into the dining room carrying a high chair.

//Is that really alright?// Jesus asked uncertainly.

"Well, don't expect me to kick the babies out if they're using them. But until they're ready to sit up at the table, there's no issue with you using one of their high chairs." Alan assured him.

"Where *are* the babies?" Slash asked cautiously.

"William and Robert are feeding them right now. They might bring them in here to show them off when they're done." Alan easily explained.

//Alan, not many people have genuinely welcomed me into their homes. Thank you. I will humbly and gratefully accept your hospitality.// Jesus said reverently.

"Well, good. Now, all of you, dig in. Drinks are on the sideboard over there. Help yourselves." Alan announced to the group.

With a modest amount of telekinetic help, Jesus made his way out of the backpack and onto the high chair.

"Don't worry about waiting for everyone to gather in here. Most of the kids don't eat and the rest are all at different stages of being ready for work and school. People will be passing through here for the next half hour or so." Alan explained as he looked around to see that everyone had what they needed.

"Do you know how we're getting to school or when we're supposed to leave?" Slash asked Alan cautiously.

"Actually, I don't have a clue. Nobody's said anything to me about it." Alan said honestly.

"Oy! What do we have going on in here, then?" Spike asked as he and Alex walked into the dining room.

"These are some of the kids from the Wagner school. There was a drive-by shooting at their dorm last night, so they stayed with us." Alan helpfully explained.

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

"Marc got shot and is in the hospital. I think the rest of us are alright." Seth said simply.

//What are you?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"A vampire... What are you?" Spike asked in return.

//A rat.// Jesus answered simply.

"A rat... who can talk... like a real person?" Spike asked slowly to confirm his understanding.

//Yeah. Just like that... Can we get back to the *vampire* thing? Are you talking about being *like* a traditional vampire in some way or are you saying that you believe that you're *actually* a vampire?// Jesus asked slowly.

Rather than answer verbally, Spike simply allowed his demon transformation to fall into place.

//Does this mean that you want to hurt us or feed on us or anything like that?// Jesus asked cautiously, as the others around the table readied themselves for action, should it be necessary.

"The only thing I want to feed on right this minute is some of those sausages and eggs. Alan here puts on a proper feed and I want to pay it due respect by not letting it go cold." Spike said as his 'game face' faded.

"Wagner students, if you can finish your breakfasts in the next few minutes, we think that we've worked out a way for you to visit with Marc before you go to school this morning." Andrew said as he led Lee into the dining room.

"I don't want you to go." Quaid said grumpily.

"I know. But I said that I'd go there, so I'll do what I promised to. But if it's really bad there, I'll ask about going to school with you instead." Louie said seriously.

"Yeah. Me too." Quaid easily agreed.

"So, what's the plan?" Slash asked Andrew and Lee curiously.

"As soon as everyone's finished with breakfast, I'll walk you over to the mansion. That's where Marc is. You can visit with him and Lisa for a few minutes, then Matt can drive you from the mansion over to the Wagner school so that you can start your classes." Lee said informatively.

"Aren't you going to go to school with us?" Louie asked Lee with obvious disappointment sounding in his voice.

"No. I have a job to do. While I might drop in on you at Wagner's when I'm over there on business, I won't be attending classes with you." Lee said honestly.

"Good morning..."

"Everyone, in case you haven't met them yet, this is Xander and Remy, and their daughter Marguerite." Andrew said with a grin.

There were a few uncertain waves and muttered *hi's* from the group in general.

"Xander, Remy, Marguerite. I'd like to present... everyone." Andrew said in the cadence of a formal introduction.

"Andrew. Dis ting you got wit adopting kids, Remy tink you be needin professional help wit dat." Remy said slowly.

"Don't worry. We're not keeping them... probably." Alan finished with a concerned look at his beloved partner.

"Slash *does* have a room here and it looks like Louie fits right in." Andrew explained.

"Are the Wagner students just about ready? We need to be leaving soon if we're going to visit before we leave for classes." Lee patiently explained.

"Yeah. Just give us a second to clean up our dishes." Seth quickly volunteered.

//Please. Allow me.// Jesus said firmly as the empty plates and silverware all levitated to one end of the table and organized themselves.

"Whoa! I didn't know you were that powerful!" Slash said with surprise.

//I can't do something that complicated very often or for very long. But when the time is right, I like to show my appreciation by using the talent that I've been given.// Jesus said seriously.

"Even so, your exact telekinetic control reminds me of Jean when she was adapting to the phoenix." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"What about a phoenix?" Beau asked suddenly.

Andrew snapped out of his distant thoughts and quickly answered, "Just a teacher who used to work here. You guys had better get going or you're going to miss your chance to visit with Marc."

"I left my bag in your bedroom. I'll be right back." Beau said to Slash before dashing away.

"Father? Can I walk to the mansion with Louie?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"Just stay with your grandfather and it'll be fine." Andrew assured him.

"Thanks for taking us in and making us such a good breakfast and everything." Slash said sincerely.

"You don't have to thank me, Joe. You're family." Andrew said gently.

"Oh. Yeah. Well then, thanks for taking such good care of my friends." Slash said peacefully.

"Any time." Andrew said with a smile as he watched the group starting to funnel out of the room.

* * * * *

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Slash asked as they walked away from the house.

"You know that's bad for you, right?" Lee asked in a half-teasing tone.

"I'm getting lots of practice at dodging bullets lately. So, is it okay?" Slash asked a bit more insistently.

"Yeah. In fact, I'll join you." Lee said as he took a battered pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket.

"Couldn't you just drive us over? It's freezing out here." Seth asked as he hugged himself for warmth in his medium-weight coat.

"I suppose that I could have. But we usually don't bother for such a short hop." Lee said patiently, then explained, "In the time it takes us to get everyone settled in and belted up, we can just walk it."

"*This* isn't cold." Slash informed Seth in no uncertain terms.

"I'm from Texas; the desert part. If anyone's feelin the cold, it should be me." Beau said frankly.

//Seth, why don't you at least *try* to live with it for a few minutes before you start complaining?// Jesus asked curiously.

"That's easy for you to say, you've got a fur coat." Seth said grumpily.

"There's the field house. It looks like the locker rooms are open. If you need to stop and warm up, there's the place that you can do it." Lee said seriously.

"No. That's okay. Now that we're moving, I'm actually not as cold as I was." Seth timidly replied.

Beau, Slash, Lee, and even Jesus shared a look, but didn't verbally respond.

* * * * *

"Guys, before we can go any further, I'm going to need for each of you to promise that you're not going to tell anyone about what you're about to see." Lee said firmly.

"What are we about to see?" Seth asked cautiously.

"I can't tell you until you promise."

"I can't promise until you tell me." Seth countered, then explained, "If you're about to show me your meercat torture dungeon, then I'm not going to promise not to tell."

"It's not a dungeon... well, maybe the hangar is a little dungeony but... wait, meerkats? Where did you come up with that?"

"They're cute!" Seth said in his defense.

"Listen. The only reason I'm taking you there is because that's where Marc is and I agree with you that it's important for Marc and Lisa to know that there are people who are concerned about them." Lee carefully explained.

Seth seemed uncertain what he should do.

"I promise that no meerkats have been harmed." Lee quietly added.

"Okay. I won't tell anyone." Seth reluctantly agreed.

"How about everyone else?" Lee asked as he looked around.

"If we're going where I think we are, I've already been there." Slash reminded him.

"I wasn't worried about you." Lee said with a grin, then said to the others, "Actually, I wasn't really worried about any of you. I just felt like it had to be said aloud so there wouldn't be any doubt that it's supposed to be a secret."

"We won't tell anyone." Beau assured him.

"Louie?" Lee asked to be sure.

"Everyone I'd tell is already here." Louie said honestly.

"Good. The back door's right over there. But there's a cigarette butt can wedged in the rocks, so we'll be swinging by there first." Lee informed the group.

"That's a really bad habit you've picked up there." Beau said as the group followed Lee and Slash's lead.

"I know. But since moving in with Andrew I hardly smoke at all anymore. Who has the time?" Lee chuckled as he reached between the rocks to properly dispose of his cigarette butt.

"Yeah. Same here. Lately, I've just been working it in when I've got the chance." Slash said frankly.

//Guys. Can we go in now? Seth's being really good about not complaining, but I can hear his teeth chattering from all the way over here.// Jesus asked hopefully.

"Yeah. We can do that." Lee said with a smile as he led the way.

* * * * *

"This kind of reminds me of my family's house in Maine." Beau said as they emerged from a hallway into a grand room.

"You come from money? I wouldn't have guessed." Slash said consideringly.

"Thanks." Beau said with a smile.

"This place doesn't only serve as a home for several people, but also functions as a school." Lee explained as he led them across the great hall.

"If this place is a school, why are you bothering with the Wagner school?" Beau asked curiously.

"Wagner's is publicly known as a school for mutants. It's a place where obvious mutants can go to get an education without having to worry about being harassed or discriminated against. Xavier's is more for mutants who need to learn to control their abilities to safely be around other people." Lee carefully explained, then motioned for the group to enter the elevator at the side of the room.

"So, is my 'sideways' thing the kind of ability that I'd have to go to Xavier's for?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Sideways thing?" Lee asked with a smile.

"Yeah. You know. The way you and Andrew do it, you punch a hole from one dimension into another. I just kind of slip sideways in between dimensions." Seth said frankly.

"I guess, if you want to look at it that way." Lee said uncertainly.

"Do you think that I'll need to go to Xavier's to learn how to do my 'sideways' thing?" Seth pressed.

"I really don't know." Lee said honestly.

"What about me?" Slash asked cautiously.

"What about you?" Lee automatically responded.

"Do you think that I'll need to go to Xavier's to learn how to use my 'blackout' fog?" Slash asked with concern.

"I honestly don't know. Let me talk to a few people and get their advice before I give either one of you a definite 'yes' or 'no' on that." Lee said as the door of the elevator opened.

Everyone was silent as they stared at the intimidatingly shiny brushed-metal walls.

"What *is* this place again?" Beau asked hesitantly.

"A school... for more powerful mutants." Lee said carefully.

"Are you really *that* powerful?" Seth asked cautiously.

"No. Not me. I'm here because of Andrew and Alan. They're both high-level mutants. I'm just here to help take care of the kids." Lee said as they walked.

"This isn't like any school that I've ever been to." Seth said under his breath.

"The MedLab is up here on the right. Would you guys hang back for a minute while I talk to Dr. McCoy and get his permission for you to visit?" Lee asked hopefully.

"I thought you called ahead to do that." Seth said frankly.

"I did. He told me to check with him before bringing you in." Lee said simply, then continued on through the door to their right.

* * * * *

"You've been here before, right?" Beau asked Slash uncertainly.

"Yeah. This is just their private doctor's office. There's actually nothing creepy about it." Slash said seriously.

"You don't think *this* is creepy?" Seth asked disbelievingly.

"No. Not particularly. It never occurred to me that there might be anything wrong with it." Slash said frankly.

"Guys. You can come in and visit with Marc and Lisa for a few minutes. Lisa's ready for school. She'll be going with you." Lee said quickly.

"Where are you going to be?" Seth asked slowly.

"I'm going to be talking to a few people about you and Slash to see which school is going to be best for you. While I'm doing that, why don't you two be thinking about which school you'd like to go to? In the end, your own preferences will probably be the deciding factor." Lee said honestly.

"Okay. Yeah." Slash said decisively.

Seth nodded his agreement.

"Good. Come on." Lee said as he led the group into the MedLab.

* * * * *

"You can come in for five minutes but be aware that Marc may not be able to hold a conversation or remain awake. If he falls asleep, let him. He needs his rest." The large blue furry doctor said seriously.

"We won't get him worked up." Slash assured him.

"I trust that you won't. But if you notice Marc having any problems, you can ask Garfield to press the call button to summon me. I will return shortly." Dr. McCoy said professionally before leaving.

As all the boys turned their attention from the door toward Garfield, he timidly said, "Hi. I'm Gar."

"Are you sick or were you hurt like Marc?" Seth asked cautiously.

"I was sick. I'm getting better." Garfield answered simply, then asked, "Are you Seth?"

"Yeah. How did you know? Are you telepathic like Jesus?" Seth asked curiously.

"No. Lisa told me about you. Is Jesus here with you?" Gar asked hopefully.

//I'm back here, in Louie's backpack.// Jesus responded.

"Can you come over here? There's something that I was wanting to try." Garfield asked hopefully.

//Sure.// Jesus responded hesitantly as Louie brought him closer to Garfield's bed.

* * * * *

"How's Marc doing?" Slash asked Lisa quietly.

"He's hurting, but not too bad I guess. I want to stay here with him, but Dr. McCoy and Marc both said that I need to go to school to make a place for us there." Lisa said uncertainly.

After a long silence, Slash cautiously said, "They might be right about that. If everything was already set up and established, it probably wouldn't be as big of a deal. But with this being the first day, they're probably going to be trying to figure out what fits where. If neither of you are there, it may make things harder for both of you later on."

"Thank you." Marc said in a weak whisper, drawing both their attention.

"Hey there. It's good to see you awake. How are you feeling?" Slash asked warmly.

"Where's Beau?" Marc asked as he fought to see past Slash and Lisa.

"Beau. Marc wants to talk to you." Slash said quickly.

"I'm right here." Beau answered, as he hurried to Slash's side.

Once Marc could focus his eyes, he broke into a slight smile as he said, "You saved my life."

"I was just in the right place and time to use the things I've been studying. I'm glad I was able to help." Beau said frankly.

"Thank you." Marc fought to say as his eyes fell closed.

"Sure. Anytime." Beau whispered in response.

* * * * *

//What did you want to know?// Jesus asked curiously as Louie and Quaid walked to the side of the bed.

"Get on the bed with me. I want to be able to see you." Garfield said imploringly.

//What for?// Jesus asked suspiciously.

"I haven't been able to use my mutant ability thing since I've been here, at first because I was sick, but now because all I can do is the same thing over and over." Garfield fought to explain.

//What do you expect me to do about it?// Jesus asked hesitantly as Quaid picked him up.

"You don't have to do anything. I just need to be able to see you for a minute so I can try to use my mutant thing." Garfield said enthusiastically.

//Why does this sound like one of those things that you look back on as not having been a good idea?// Jesus asked slowly as Quaid placed him on the bed beside Garfield.

"Are all rats as worried about things as you are?" Garfield asked curiously.

//As far as I know, they're not worried about anything. They're just rats.// Jesus said frankly.

All of a sudden, without any warning, Garfield shrank until he was almost identical in size and shape to Jesus. While there was no possibility of mistaking one for the other, since Garfield was still green, he had nonetheless successfully transformed himself into a duplicate rat.

//You should probably check your ink cartridge.// Jesus said hesitantly.

The green version of Jesus twisted and turned a few times before returning to his more humanoid form.

"That was really great! When I get out of here, maybe I could change myself again and you could show me some rat things." Gar said hopefully.

//As far as I'm concerned, 'rat things' includes being carried around in a backpack and being served strawberries for breakfast in a highchair.//

"That sounds great! Count me in!" Garfield said with an ear-to-ear grin.

* * * * *

While Lisa described the events after Marc had been taken to the hospital, Beau discreetly slipped out of the room and stopped in the hallway, just outside.

"I thought I left you in Texas. What are you doing here Emily?" Beau asked curtly.

"It was never your house that was haunted. It was always you." A female voice whispered in the air.

"That doesn't surprise me. I'm a Collins, after all." Beau said wearily.

"I wouldn't have revealed my presence to you now, except that I thought you would want to know. There's a spirit here." Emily said imploringly.

"You mean besides you?" Beau asked firmly, not being swayed by her apparent emotional state.

"Yes. It's a human soul. He's displaced and desperate and grieving the loss of his life." Emily urged Beau to understand.

"Okay. Let's say for the sake of argument that I agree to help him. What is it that you expect me to do?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Help him to cross over, or help him to find a reason to stay. Whatever you decide to do, just don't let him remain trapped here like he currently is."

"If I agree to do this, it's going to have to work around my school schedule. I'm not going to let it become the most important thing in my life." Beau said firmly.

"I can talk with him and find out what he wants. Then I can come to you and let you know what needs to be done."

"Who do you work for?" Beau asked seriously.

"I don't work for anyone. I'm just trying to help." Emily insisted.

"Well, that's just about a load of horse shit. Tell me who sent you to me or I'm not going to do anything to help you."

*"I was **sent** to you by your Uncle Barnabas, but I don't work for him. I'm only here because I want to help you."*

"Okay. What about Mrs. Durtal? Did you 'help' her too?" Beau asked insistently.

"She helped you in her way and I help you in mine."

"Okay. I don't have any of my supplies with me. I'm going to need to get some before I can perform any rituals." Beau cautioned.

"*This is a new place with many new people. I will need time to find you what you need.*" Emily implored him.

"I'll leave that part to you. But you need to understand that I won't be able to perform *any* Necromancy without the proper tools."

[Chapter 10: Staging Assets]

"Hey Slash! Matt sent me down to get you. We're ready to go when you are." Clark said as he walked into the MedLab, with Beau unobtrusively following him in.

"Did they say if I can go too?" Gar asked hopefully as he sat up in bed.

Clark walked to Gar's bedside and gave him a firm hug before saying, "Sorry Gar. We're going to the Wagner school and when you get out of here, you'll be going to Xavier's."

"But that's not fair! Why can't I go to school with you?" Gar whined.

"It's not that we don't want to include you in what we'll be doing, but I've talked with Dr. McCoy about it and he believes that you're too powerful to go to the Wagner school and be around regular people without some training first." Clark gently explained.

"I wouldn't use my mutant thing in front of them if he told me not to." Gar said defensively.

"Take it from someone who knows, it's not always that easy. The whole reason that I'm here at all is because someone slammed into me while I was at school and before I knew what happened, I had let loose an optic blast." Clark said seriously, then quietly added, "I could have killed someone."

"But then why don't *you* have to go to the Xavier school like I do?" Gar asked seriously.

"I did. But because I've been working really hard since then and learning how to control my ability, I think I've proven that I can keep calm and solve more problems than I cause. But if it turns out that it isn't safe for me to be around regular people for some reason, then they won't let me keep going to Wagner's. I think it's that way for all of us." Clark said frankly.

"I want to go to the Wagner school with Louie, but they said that I have to stay at the Xavier Institute." Quaid interjected.

"But if I learn how to use my ability, they'll let me go to the Wagner school, too?" Gar asked hopefully.

"If you can show that you're able to use your ability in the right situations and use it safely, then maybe you'll be allowed to choose which school you go to." Clark said honestly.

"Me too?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"It's not up to me, but if you can prove to people that you can be a benefit, they're more likely to want to include you in things." Clark patiently explained.

"I learned to do something different since the last time I saw you. Do you want to see it?" Gar asked hopefully.

"Matt's waiting for us, so we can't take long." Clark gently answered.

"This'll just take a second." Gar assured him, then turned toward Louie and asked, "Jesus, can you get up here beside me so we can show Clark?"

//Yes. I'm still trying to figure out how you do it.// Jesus said as he smoothly dropped onto the bed at Gar's side.

"What are you..." Clark began to ask, then fell silent as Gar began to shrink until he disappeared under the covers.

Clark was further astonished when a green rat emerged from under the blanket where Gar had been a moment before and stopped at Jesus' side to look up at Clark inquisitively.

//I never really thought about what it would be like to have a twin before. I'm still not sure how I feel about it.// Jesus said playfully.

"I thought you could only become different kinds of monkeys." Clark told Gar thoughtfully.

"I'm not an expert or anything, but it looks to me like he's got pretty good control." Slash said frankly.

Once Gar had returned to his humanoid form, he quickly asked, "How'd you like that? Wasn't it something?"

"Yeah, Gar. That was really amazing... and a little scary, to be honest. This means that you might be able to turn into just about anything... any animal that's ever lived." Clark said slowly as his mind raced.

"Matt told me to tell you that he's leaving in five minutes, with or without us." Ronny said as he walked into the MedLab.

"Um, yeah." Clark said distractedly, then looked around and asked, "Is everyone ready to go?"

"I think so. As far as I know, since it's our first day, we're not expected to be bringing anything with us." Seth said uncertainly as he looked around at the others, for confirmation.

"Well, I have some work that I'm supposed to be turning in this morning, but I'm hoping that the whole 'getting shot at' thing will be a good enough excuse to get me an extension." Beau said frankly.

"Lisa? Are you going to be okay?" Slash asked with concern.

She looked over at Marc, who was still asleep, and quietly said, "Yeah. I've got to make a place for us."

"If I've got to stay here anyway, I might as well do something that'll help. Don't worry about Marc, I'll make sure that he's alright." Gar said sincerely.

"Okay. I'll trust you to call Dr. McCoy if Marc's having any trouble at all." Lisa told Gar firmly.

"I bet Tara's going to be in here with us the whole time you're gone. But either way, I'll be right here if Marc needs anything." Gar confirmed.

"Let's get going. I want to hear all about what was on the news last night." Ronny said from the doorway.

"Then I guess Slash had better lead the way." Beau said to Slash with a cheeky grin.

* * * * *

Once the elevator doors closed, Ronny finally asked, "So? What happened last night to get you on the news?"

"It wasn't anything we did. I guess that someone thought it would be a real kick to shoot some mutants last night and they picked our dorm as their hunting ground." Slash said grimly.

"Then, to make the night *absolutely* perfect, the local news thought it would be a really good idea to put us on display for the whole world to stare and point at... *look at the silly mutants.*" Seth spat bitterly.

"I had to talk to Marc's parents last night." Lisa wearily announced.

"Ouch! You win! That sucks a whole lot worse than anything we went through." Beau said honestly.

"Are they on their way here to be with him while he's recovering?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Or do you think that they'll take him away?" Louie asked anxiously.

"As far as I know, neither. I mean, if there was something that they could do that would make a difference, they'd probably do it. If Marc needed money or a private nurse or a kidney or something, they'd see to it that he got it. But as far as the hand-holding and bedside care thing... it's not really their style. I think they just assume that that's what I'm here for." Lisa said as the elevator doors opened.

"So are his parents really strict or demanding or just plain old evil?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Not that I've ever seen. The few times I've met them, they seemed nice enough... kind of distant. They never were very involved in Marc's life. Past a certain age, they left him to pretty much take care of himself with the understanding that if he screwed up, he'd be on his own to dig himself out of it." Lisa said frankly as they walked across the massive entry hall.

"Do you think it had anything to do with him dating a mutant?" Ronny asked curiously.

Lisa seemed to be surprised by the question, but after a moment to consider, she finally responded, "I really don't think so. It's not just how they reacted to me or anything that they said. I just think that if they'd felt that way there would have been, like, tension in the air or something. If I had to sum up their thoughts about me being Marc's girlfriend, it'd have to be something more along the lines of... 'Fine. Whatever.'"

"If that's what Marc grew up with, then I guess it's up to us to make sure that he knows that the people he lives with care about him and will make sure that he has everything that he needs." Seth said firmly.

"Marc and I are kind of used to only having each other." Lisa said frankly, then hurried to add, "My mom and my aunt have always been mostly supportive of us, but that's about it."

"Is that the way that you'd like things to be for you? Having only each other?" Ronny asked curiously as they passed through the side door into the garage.

"No. It's just what we've gotten used to." Lisa quietly admitted.

Clark opened the door to the outside and held it open as everyone passed.

The side door of the large stylish minibus slid open as John stood aside to usher everyone into the vehicle.

As Clark brought up the rear, John quickly asked, "Did you ask him?"

"We ended up going off topic." Clark reluctantly responded.

"Ask who what?" Beau asked suspiciously.

"Well, if that thing we saw you do on the news last night is what it looks like, then we were going to talk to Slash about maybe thinking about trying out for the X-Men. His ability looks like it could come in handy for us."

After finding a place to sit, Slash quietly said, "Aren't you supposed to not talk about this kind of stuff with people outside the team?"

"You've got an ability. You're going to have to train to use it. It won't take long before everyone here knows anyway, so we might as well let them in on it now." John said frankly.

"All of you are going to train." Matt announced as he began to back the minibus out of the driveway.

"Train to do what? Not all of us have special abilities." Beau asked cautiously.

"Think about what happened last night and what *could have* happened. Anyone who has a mutant ability needs to know how to use it. Everyone else needs to develop effective strategies for dealing with various threat scenarios. No matter how things end up shaking out, there may come a time when you'll have only yourselves to depend on. You need to be able to make the most out of what you have." Matt explained while maintaining the majority of his concentration on his driving.

"We didn't sign up for this." Lisa said quietly.

"Yeah. Welcome to the world, kid." Matt finished with a weary chuckle.

"When Marc gets better, how's he going to be able to handle it if some mutant haters show up and want to start some trouble?"

Slash asked cautiously.

"If we're going to do this, then we need for *all* of us to do it." Seth said seriously, then looked directly at Slash and said, "We can't be running off, joining other teams."

"I'm not the only one of us who could be recruited away. How sure are *you* that you won't run off the first time someone tells you how wonderful *your* mutant ability is?" Slash asked seriously.

"I need for this to be real. I probably need it worse than anyone. Don't worry about me. I'll stick with it." Seth said confidently.

"Beau?" Slash asked firmly.

"Are you sure you want plain old humans in your group?" Beau asked frankly.

"Our team won't be made of the strongest and best of everyone we can find to recruit. It's us. Rich and poor, weak and strong, cowardly and brave, we're what we have to work with. We're not asking you to be something that you're not, we're just asking you to stand with us and do as much as you can." Seth said passionately.

"Well, I may not be a mutant, but I know a thing or two that might end up being of use. For as long as we can keep this thing going, you can count me in." Beau finished confidently.

"Louie? What about you? Do you understand what we're talking about?" Seth asked cautiously.

"I dream about being a hero, you know, wearing a cape and flying and being someone that everyone thinks is important and strong and special. Doing something like this is probably as close as I'm ever going to get to doing something like that." Louie said frankly.

There was a long moment of stunned silence before Seth finally said, "We're not talking about being superheroes. We're talking

about training together so that we can protect ourselves and each other."

"But, can I wear a cape while I'm doing that?" Louie asked hopefully.

Before Seth could reply, Slash said, "You know what? Sure. Why not? If it makes you feel like a part of the team and motivates you to learn to protect yourself, then you can wear a cape if you want to."

"I can help you find a really good cape if you want." Quaid said with an affectionate grin at Louie.

"Yeah!" Louie said with a grand, triumphant smile in return.

"Jesus? What do you say? Are you with us?" Seth asked hopefully.

//Can I be teamed up with Louie?// Jesus asked seriously.

"It's not really up to me. But as far as I'm concerned, there's no problem with it." Seth said frankly.

"It *is* up to me." Matt said from the driver's seat, then continued, "And yeah, I think you teaming with Louie sounds right."

//I'm in.// Jesus said firmly.

"Lisa?" Slash asked in a leading tone.

"Before I answer, there's something you should know."

"What's that?" Slash asked cautiously.

"For the last few years I've been living in my mom's basement, kinda hiding from the world." Lisa shyly admitted.

"Don't beat yourself up about it, kid. People do what they have to do to deal. Don't try to read more meaning into it than there is." Matt said seriously.

"Thanks." Lisa said with an actual note of relief, then continued, "I've never told anyone. I mean, I think Marc knows, but he also knows that I don't want to think about it..."

"Did I miss the part where she told us what she's talking about?" Seth slowly asked.

"Shhh. I think she's about to get to it." Beau whispered.

"I'm strong." Lisa said simply.

"How strong?" Seth asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I'm just... I know that I'm stronger than most people." Lisa quietly admitted.

"That's not a bad thing. One of the things we'll be working on as you learn to work together is how to depend on each other's strengths." Matt said seriously.

"There's also this." Lisa reluctantly said as she raised one of her furry paw-like hands.

Everyone watched silently as her sheathed claws revealed themselves.

"Looks like I know who *I'll* be training." Matt said as he mimicked her motion and extended his own claws.

"Um, okay. I didn't see *that* coming." Seth muttered under his breath.

After a moment for the surprise to sink in, Lisa imploringly asked, "Will you help me learn how to protect Marc?"

"Yeah. In fact, that's *exactly* what we're doin' here, kid."

"Should we go ahead and get started? I mean, since we're here?" Clark asked as he pointed out the front window.

"I think I was supposed to stay with Grandpa Lee. Should I go with you now?" Quaid asked uncertainly.

"As far as I know, your grandpa should be hooking up with us sometime before lunch so he can find out if you guys need anything from the Xavier school. Stick with me and I'm pretty sure we'll run into him sooner or later." Matt said frankly.

"Maybe you can help us set up our team." Louie said hopefully.

"Actually, it might be best not to talk about that too much until we're sure of who all needs to be in on it and who for sure doesn't." Matt said seriously.

"What should we call you?" John asked curiously, directing his question mostly at Slash and Seth.

"How do you mean?" Matt asked cautiously, on their behalf.

"When we talk about the X-Men you know exactly who we're talking about and what they're all about. Shouldn't you guys have a name like that so that we can talk about you as a group without having to define exactly who and what we mean each time?" John asked reasonably.

"Something like X-Men Junior or Y-Men?" Ronny asked jokingly.

"Probably not. You're the first generation at this new school, so it would make sense if you created something new that's all your own." Matt quietly explained, taking Ronny's comment far more seriously than any of them had expected.

"From what I was told, the X-Men were named that because all of them have the X gene that gives them special abilities." Ronny said slowly, following Matt's lead.

"But now they have a variety of people with different talents from various sources." Clark interjected.

"Maybe you can try thinking about what all of you have in common. That might be a good place to start." John suggested.

"Just don't make the mistake of naming yourselves after your objective. If you do that you'll end up regretting it." Matt said frankly.

"So don't call ourselves 'Revengers' or something like that?" Seth asked to confirm his understanding.

"Right. Let's say you get your revenge... then what? You disband? Rename yourselves? Continue on using a name that has become meaningless?" Matt asked before opening the driver side door and getting out.

The others followed suit and climbed out of the minibus to assemble at its side.

"Louie should come up with your name. He's the one who cares the most about things like that." Quaid announced to the group.

"I won't automatically agree to whatever he says, but I'll be willing to listen." Slash said frankly.

"Yeah. He *is* as close to an expert as we have on the subject, so we'll consider what he has to say about it." Beau agreed.

"Go ahead Louie. Tell them what you think." Quaid urgently encouraged.

"What are we going to be doing?" Louie asked timidly.

"We're trying to come up with a name for our group." Seth gently informed him.

"I know that. I mean, what is *our group* going to be doing?" Louie asked more slowly.

"No matter what else we do, school has to come first. We're here to learn, so we need to be sure that we're doing that. Even if everything else falls apart, we've got to keep that going." Slash said firmly.

"Yeah. If we let them drive us away, they've won." Seth added.

"That's assuming that we understand their motives." Beau interjected.

"Some anti-mutant bigots are shooting at us and trying to scare us away. What other *motive* could they have?" Seth asked curiously.

"For us as a group, I don't know. But it *could* be something more personal." Beau cautiously suggested.

"Group name?" Ronny asked into their conversation.

"You know, why don't we just call ourselves some stupid random thing like the 'Meerkats' for now?" Slash asked with a quick smile at Seth, then explained, "That's something you can visualize, but it doesn't really say anything too important about us. And if we come up with something more meaningful later on, no one would blame us for changing it."

"It might be fun to watch people tie themselves into knots trying to figure out what it means." Beau said with a grin.

"But if we call ourselves the 'Meerkats' or something else weird like that, people will think that there's something wrong with us." Louie said anxiously.

"Yeah. They might. And they'd probably be right." Seth finished with a grin.

"I doubt that you're going to get it any more settled than this. Let's head in and see what Kurt and Julia have in store for you." Matt said as he led the group toward one of the side buildings.

* * * * *

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Seth asked, then winced at the horrible echo in the massive decrepit gymnasium.

"This is where Julia said that we were supposed to meet." Matt said uncertainly as he surreptitiously surveyed their surroundings.

"Is everyone here?" A man's voice asked as he slowly stepped out of a darkened doorway.

"Detective Kowalski?" Seth asked uncertainly.

"It's Ray, remember?" The detective asked with a disarming grin.

"Right. Um, everyone's here but Marc... you know, who was shot last night." Seth stammered.

"And was already released from the hospital, from what I've been told." Ray added seriously.

"Yeah. But he'll be okay. He's got a really good doctor looking after him." Slash assured him.

"Good to know." Detective Kowalski said absently as he glanced upward.

"Have you found who was shooting at the kids?" Matt asked firmly.

"And you are?" Ray asked in a leading tone.

"Matthew Logan, their bus driver."

"I asked Dr. Hoffman to give me a few minutes to talk to the kids. She should be here before long."

"You didn't answer my question." Matt said informatively.

"No. We haven't found who was shooting at your kids." Ray slowly admitted, then added, "But we are reasonably certain that we know who *didn't* shoot at them."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Matt asked in a tone of voice which revealed that his reservoir of patience was not infinite.

"I think he's saying that the shooter wasn't Beau's old roommate." Slash said with a questioning look at Detective Kowalski.

"Why do you think that?" Ray asked curiously.

"It just wasn't adding up. A person can only be so stupid before it becomes too far-fetched. The chances of someone actually being *that* stupid are far less than the chances of *framing* someone to look like they're that stupid." Slash said thoughtfully.

"Good call." Ray said with a slow nod.

"And I know Josh. He might be a lot of horrible things, but he's not a murderer." Beau quietly added.

"You might be surprised..." Ray began to say, but instead shook his head and said, "Let's just say that Mr. Metcalf is no longer a person of interest in this investigation."

"What happened?" Beau asked curiously.

"Sorry. We're in the middle of an investigation, so I can't tell you much. But I thought you'd like to know that Metcalf has been cleared and is expected to be okay." Ray said carefully.

"Wait, why wouldn't he be okay? What happened to him?" Beau asked with concern.

"I've said too much already." Ray said firmly, then continued, "What I need to know now is if any of you know who *else* might want to disrupt your life at this school or, you know, kill you."

"I'm pretty sure that there are a few hundred people scattered around who'd really like for us to not be here in this school... or town... they'd really rather we weren't in this state, either." Seth said honestly.

"I know *just* who you're talking about. They like to whine and cry about things, but any of them who had the balls to do anything would have done it before now. No... I have a feeling that this is something else." Ray finished speculatively.

"We're all new here. No one knows any of us." Seth said seriously.

"Not *all* of us are new here." Slash said as he gave Beau a significant look.

"It sounds like if it's something personal, that it most likely has to do with you." Ray said as he looked directly at Beau.

"How much do you already know about me?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Not much. Your past is unusually cloudy for someone your age."
Ray said frankly.

"My family has money. The lawyers like to muddy our identities just to make things difficult for any private investigators who might want to cause us trouble someday." Beau said resignedly.

"You know, that actually makes sense to me. I've seen a few cases of wealthy people who *didn't* take precautions with their personal information and ended up being royally screwed because of it. But that doesn't tell me what the shooting had to do with you."

"I was probably the target." Beau said simply.

"Do you know who's after you?" Ray asked more quietly.

"No. I don't know for sure if anyone is." Beau said seriously, then explained, "But if they are, it wouldn't surprise me a bit to find out that whoever's at the bottom of it has the last name of Collins."

"Why would your family want to kill you?" Ray asked with evident concern.

"Too many mouths at the trough, I think. There they are, gorging on their own slop and all they can do is look at mine and imagine how much better it must be than theirs."

"Are you *that* rich?" Seth asked curiously.

"I'm not rich at all. But if the family fortune was divvied up today, everyone would get a slice of the pie. One less heir means everyone else's slice gets that much bigger. As far as I know, that's all there is to it." Beau finished wearily.

"Do you really think that the gunman could have been aiming for you?" Lisa quietly asked.

"I really don't know. But if he were, Marc and I are about the same height and weight. I could see someone at a distance not being able to tell us apart." Beau said frankly.

"But you didn't know that someone was after you?" Lisa asked to verify her understanding.

"I still don't know. It's just something that's been hanging over my head for a few years now. I thought that sooner or later someone would decide that it's time to prune the family tree." Beau said wearily.

"Ray. The lab technicians were very helpful in expediting the results." Constable Fraser said as he hurried into the gymnasium with Dr. Hoffman following a step behind.

"What'd you get?" Ray asked with interest.

"A significant amount of Rohypnol was detected in his beer." Constable Fraser announced.

"You called it." Ray said in an impressed tone.

"Has your questioning yielded any favorable results?" Constable Fraser asked curiously.

"Nothing solid, but Beau here might be in line to inherit some money one of these days; so it's possible that some of his relatives wouldn't mind it too much if he were to suddenly become ineligible, for whatever reason." Ray said in a bored matter-of-fact tone.

"If that turned out to be true, this case would no longer fall within the purview of our mandate." Constable Fraser cautioned.

"I know. I know. I was just saying that while we're looking at all the local anti-mutant activity and checking out the most vocal people on social media, that we *might* devote a few minutes to checking on this guy's family... you know, just to be thorough." Ray said in a leading tone.

"Tying up the loose ends as we go along, so to speak." Constable Fraser added thoughtfully.

"You know I'm all about crossing those T's and dotting those I's." Ray finished with an impish grin.

The arch of an eyebrow was Constable Fraser's only response to Ray's assertion.

"Beau, just so you know, I'm going to be talking to Barnabas later this morning." Julia said quietly as she stepped to his side.

"Not many people would feel free to call him... I know my mom wouldn't. She'd call my great-aunt and have her do it." Beau said honestly.

"He and I are dear friends from a time that's long since past. I just didn't want for you to feel that you have to call your mother to warn Barnabas about the forces at play. I'll fill him in." Julia assured him.

"Thanks Dr. Hoffman. I didn't know when I came here that there would be someone on my side." Beau said timidly.

"Just do your best in your classes and leave the rest to me." Julia assured him.

"I'll try." Beau quietly promised.

Julia smiled warmly at him, then looked toward Detective Kowalski and Constable Fraser and asked, "So what do we still need to do for you so that you can be on your way?"

"I think you've done it. We have a few things that we need to check on, then we'll get back to you." Ray said in realization.

"Would you like for us to arrange for some of the local constabulary to monitor the property?" Constable Fraser asked seriously.

"Now that our security is aware of the possibility of another such incident, they are on alert. They have my complete confidence. On the other hand, I wouldn't object if the local police wanted to stop by and look around now and then, just for their own peace of mind." Julia responded.

"We will inform them that they will be welcomed if they happen to choose to visit." Constable Fraser assured her.

After a few steps, Ray turned back and asked, "Dief? You coming?"

"He's deaf, Ray." Constable Fraser reminded him.

"Since when has that ever made a difference?" Ray chuckled.

//So, Diefenbaker, how do you feel about the whole cross-species relations' taboo?// Jesus asked nervously.

"Diefenbaker can be looked upon as quite the rebel in some regards." Constable Fraser said proudly.

//Oh. Goody.// Jesus said flatly.

"Don't worry, you two. We'll be sure to visit again soon." Constable Fraser assured them both as he motioned toward the door.

//I'll be counting the minutes.// Jesus said uneasily as he watched them go.

* * * * *

Dr. Hoffman waited for a long moment after hearing the door of the gymnasium slam before saying, "Now that they're on their way, we can move on to the next order of business."

"Quaid and I could leave now, if that would be best." Matt quietly offered.

"If I understood correctly, the plan is for you to conduct the pre-college physical training regimen." Julia said, seeking confirmation.

"Starting out, yeah. Once we've tested everyone, we'll see that they each get the best possible teacher for them." Matt said seriously.

"Excuse me, but I'm supposed to be in class in about ten minutes. Do you need for me to stay here for anything?" Beau asked cautiously.

"From the sound of it, Matt's testing is probably going to take some time. I don't know of any reason why you would need to stay behind for that." Julia said, then looked to Matt for confirmation.

"Beau could be wearing a target. It might be best if he stayed with the group." Matt said seriously.

"If I don't go to class, then we'll be giving whoever's trying to stop me a win. I don't want to do that." Beau said frankly.

"I can call security to escort..." Julia began to say, but was interrupted.

"We can take care of it." Seth hurried to volunteer as he looked to Slash for confirmation.

After a moment to consider, Slash finally said, "Yeah. Between the two of us, we can be sure that Beau gets to his class safely."

"While we're doing that, you guys can get started testing. Beau's already earned his spot on the team with what he's done for Marc, so he doesn't need to be here anyway." Seth finished with a grin at Beau.

"What do you say, Doc? Is that enough security?" Matt asked curiously.

Julia smiled, then said, "Just enough, I think."

"We'll be back as soon as Beau is in his class." Seth promised as he followed Beau and Slash toward the door of the gymnasium.

Before they could get there, the door suddenly opened.

"Hi." Slash said hesitantly as the relative stranger veered slightly to the left to walk around them.

"Can I help you?" Julia asked uncertainly.

"My schedule said that I'm supposed to be here." The young man said simply.

"Wait. I remember you." Slash said slowly, as he started walking back toward the gathering.

The young man looked at him vacantly for a moment, then turned his attention back to the group and forced the slightest, most superficial smile onto his face.

"I didn't realize you were included in this group... I completely forgot you... now isn't that diabolical?" Julia puzzled uncomfortably.

"Who are you, kid?" Matt asked sternly.

"My name is Brian, but I guess you and the Meerkats can call me Chesser."

[Chapter 11: The Stratagem]

"How did you know about the Meerkats? Are you some kind of telepath?" Slash asked as he approached the new arrival.

//No. He's not a telepath. I'd be able to sense it if he were. There is a telepath in the area keeping watch, but he's kind of watching everyone, not us specifically.// Jesus said thoughtfully.

"That's probably the professor. Don't worry too much about him. He just does that to make sure that everyone's safe." Matt helpfully supplied.

"Who are you?" Lisa asked the stranger imploringly.

"He's our other roommate, the one sharing a room with me. He never introduced himself." Slash said as he looked at Brian inquiringly.

"It doesn't matter. You wouldn't have remembered me anyway. Part of my mutant ability is being forgettable."

"How did you know about the Meerkats?" Slash asked firmly.

"Why don't you guys take Beau to class and let us handle this?" Lisa hesitantly suggested.

"Oh! Yeah! Thanks Lisa! I really appreciate it." Beau said quickly with Slash and Seth following closely on his heels as he hurried toward the door.

"Are you guys sure you don't want us to go with you?" Clark called after them.

"No. I'd actually feel better if you'd stick around here and help take care of this." Slash called back in response.

"You got it." Clark assured him.

* * * * *

Once the trio had exited the gymnasium, Dr. Hoffman firmly asked, "So, Brian, what exactly is it that you're doing here?"

"I'm in this class group. I showed up for the first day of class just like everyone else. This is where I'm supposed to be, isn't it?" Brian finished with a self-satisfied little smirk.

//Lisa, I think we just found someone that you can test your strength on.// Jesus said malevolently.

"It would be irresponsible of me to endorse or encourage such behavior, even in jest." Julia said firmly toward Jesus; then she turned to Brian and added, "As far as I can see, they're a team and you're a member of their class. If you want to become something more to them, you may need to put forth some effort."

"I'm not the kind of person that people want to get to know. I already know that. They'll include me on their team because they're going to need me. It's that simple." Brian told her firmly.

"Does that mean that you expect us to kick you off the team as soon as we can manage without you?" Lisa asked curiously.

"I can't get a sense of things that far in advance, but yeah, probably." Brian reluctantly admitted.

"What do you have to contribute to the team?" Matt asked reasonably.

"To put it simply, I have the ability to influence scenarios to work out the way I want them to." Brian said uncomfortably.

"So you're like... a god?" Louie asked hesitantly.

"No he isn't! He's nothing like a god. He's a liar!" Quaid said vehemently.

"I never said I was a god. When I'm using my ability, I can see different possibilities and push things to go a certain way." Brian said carefully, then looked Quaid in the eyes as he added, "But for some reason, I can't see or influence you at all."

"Good." Quaid said firmly as he matched Brian's gaze.

"Did you cause what happened to Marc?" Lisa asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"No. I had only been there a few minutes when that happened, I didn't even have a chance to get started." Brian said seriously, then thought to add, "But later, I used what happened to Marc to try to draw you together to form a team."

"Why? What do you get out of it?" Julia asked darkly.

"I don't even know if I can describe it. All I really got of it was a glimpse, just a peek at a moment in one possible future." Brian said as he looked longingly into a distant place of memory.

Clark, John, and Ronny shared looks of concern at what he was saying.

"What I saw was a future worth working toward. I saw me, getting to be part of the team. What the team gets out of it is someone who can push things to work out in our favor." Brian carefully explained.

"So, since Marc got shot, you've been causing things to happen?" Matt asked to confirm his understanding.

"Not everything, I showed up when I had to so that the preferred future could happen. From there I influenced things to go a certain way to help the team... well, the team that we will someday become." Brian hurried to explain.

"What did you do?" Julia asked cautiously.

"Not that much, really. Mostly I just gave a little push here and pull there to get people to where they needed to be, then amped up the stress on Slash and Seth to cause their mutant abilities to manifest a little sooner than they might have otherwise." Brian said carefully.

"Can you make my mutant thing do something?" Louie asked hopefully.

Brian seemed to be about to answer, but then appeared to notice the collective mood of all those watching him.

"I can't make your mutant ability work..." Brian began to say and noticed the collective mood darken even further.

"...but I can tell you a little bit about how you'll eventually be able to use your ability as part of the team." Brian hurried to explain.

"Hold it right there. Before you do anything that can't be undone, we need to go back to your 'glimpse' at a possible future. I need to know if we're talking about time-travel or fortune telling or anything else that's going to cause a temporal paradox or anything like that." Matt said firmly.

Julia did her best to minimize her reaction to the suggestion, but was still visibly shaken by it.

"I'm not completely sure how it all works. It just does. As far as I know there's never been a problem with anything like that." Brian said frankly.

Matt looked at him uncertainly for a long moment, but finally ended up giving him a slight nod to proceed.

"Louie, your main ability is to bestow abilities, like what you've done for Jesus." Brian carefully explained.

"So I can't have any powers of my own?" Louie asked with disappointment.

"You can, just probably not in the way that you're thinking." Brian said slowly.

"Do ya think you could maybe just go ahead and tell him about it before he explodes?" Ronny asked in frustration.

"It's not like your ability." Brian said to Ronny, then explained, "There's a lot more to it than just squirting out a gravity field in one direction or another."

"What is it then?" Ronny demanded.

"If Louie and Jesus will work to synchronize their efforts and with a little 'push' from me, we should be able to create a combined being who'll be everything that Louie dreams of." Brian carefully explained.

"Wait." John demanded, then dubiously asked, "Combined being?"

"Yeah. It's just like it sounds. They'll become something that's neither human nor rat, but component parts of a thing that's bigger than both of them."

"That sounds like something that's two or three steps beyond dangerous." Clark said firmly, then asked more reasonably, "Can we not play word games right now? Tell us exactly what's going on."

"I'm already saying more than I should. Just because I anticipate something, doesn't mean that it's going to happen the way I expect it to. I'm just saying that according to my ability, based on what I've seen and what I can speculate, I can see the likelihood that Louie and Jesus will find a way to empower themselves." Brian said carefully.

"How?" Quaid asked simply.

Brian looked at him with surprise, then cautiously said, "I don't know. What I see is from the outside. I don't know what they feel. I can just see what happens when it works."

"What does happen when it works?" Ronny asked simply.

"They just sort of become one... thing. Combining them releases a frightening power that could actually go totally out of control and cause more of a problem than if they'd done nothing. That's why I pushed Matt to bring Clark, John, and Ronny. Originally it was just going to be the new Wagner students doing this."

"I remember that." Julia said with surprise, then looked to Brian and continued, "I distinctly remember thinking that having the more experienced students included in the power assessment might end up providing both a physical and emotional benefit."

"The truth is, we couldn't do this if they weren't here." Brian said frankly.

"Do what?" Ronny cautiously asked.

"Combine for the first time into their fighting form." Brian answered simply.

"That doesn't sound like a very good idea." Clark said honestly.

"They can be great! I promise!" Brian hurried to assure him, then continued on to qualify, "It just might take a little time to get the bugs worked out."

"Well, that tells us... pretty much nothing." Ronny said frankly.

"Hold on. If you can control how things work out, why are you here telling us all of this? Shouldn't you be working behind the scenes?" John asked curiously.

Brian seemed to be frozen in place, uncertain how to answer.

//If he did that, he would have to continue to do that.

Circumstances would conspire to remove his other options. This might well be the only chance for him to escape a future lived out entirely in a windowless room.// Jesus said seriously.

"Really?" John asked Brian in a whisper.

The devastated expression that Brian suddenly wore was more than enough of an answer for any of them.

"I know what isolation feels like. For as long as I have any say in it, you'll have a place on this team." Matt said firmly.

"Are you going somewhere?" Lisa asked Matt with concern.

"I'm just here to help you guys get started. Once you're ready to stand on your own, I'll get out of your way." Matt assured her.

"That being said, we should probably get started." Julia interjected.

"Right." Matt agreed, then thought to say, "Actually, before we get in too deep, all of you need to know that starting tomorrow we'll be meeting here at seven am for our defense training before classes. Tuesday and Thursday after classes, I'll be having driving lessons with Clark, John, Trey, and Slash. You guys be sure to remind me to tell him when he gets back."

"Can I take driving lessons too?" Lisa asked suddenly.

"Yes. Monday and Wednesday, Lisa, Beau..." Matt trailed off, then look to Brian and asked, "How old are you, kid?"

"Seventeen."

"Wanna learn to drive?"

"Yeah! Can I?"

"Sure. Just meet us here after classes today."

"I'll be here!" Brian happily announced.

"Good. When Marc is up to it, he'll be joining the Monday Wednesday class." Matt said with a quick glance at Lisa, then continued to the group in general, "Today, instead of you going to your regular classes, we're going to do our best to measure your offensive and defensive capabilities."

"Is it going to hurt?" Louie asked timidly.

"It shouldn't." Matt began to say, then amended, "Not much, anyway."

Matt's words didn't seem to help put Louie at ease.

"If you keep Jesus in your backpack while you're being tested, then you should be fine." Brian told Louie quietly.

"Are you trying to get them to activate their mutant ability?" John asked curiously.

"I'll do that in a little bit. Right now I'm trying to see that Louie has everything he needs when he needs it." Brian said frankly.

"If that's what we're doing, then I suppose we might as well do it." Matt said as he gestured toward the middle of the gymnasium.

"What do you want for us to do?" Louie asked cautiously.

"To start with, why don't you and Clark spar for a minute?" Matt casually suggested.

"You want Clark to hit me?" Louie asked fearfully.

"No. I want for him to fire his optic blasts at you... at low power, of course. I don't want for him to hurt you."

"I don't want for him to hurt me either. So why do this at all?" Louie asked indignantly.

"Because next time it might not be a friend helping you practice. If someone is really trying to hurt you, then you'll need to have these skills ready to call up at a moment's notice." Matt explained.

"Keep Jesus with you. Work together... with each other... for each other." Brian quietly added.

"Are you going to be doing your mutant thing on us?" Louie asked Brian uncertainly.

"Yes. I'll help you take your first step, but after that, it's going to be up to the two of you as to how it ends up going." Brian carefully explained.

"Do you need to do anything to get started?" Matt asked Brian cautiously.

"It'll help if I can sit down."

"Go ahead." Matt said simply.

Brian took a worn pack of playing cards out of his back pocket and a handful of various gaming dice out of his front right pocket before sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Clark, are you ready?" Matt asked quietly.

"Yeah." Clark said as he stepped forward.

"Louie?" Matt asked cautiously.

"I guess so." Louie hesitantly answered as he glanced to see what Brian was doing.

At just that moment, Brian rolled the entire handful of dice at once.

"Jesus?" Matt asked to confirm.

//I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, but I guess I'm ready to do it.// Jesus anxiously responded.

This time it was Matt who glanced downward.

Brian was placing playing cards, face down in a pattern on the floor before him. He finally turned one of the cards over to reveal that it was the three of clubs. Brian then looked up at Matt and gave a firm nod.

"Ready? 3... 2... 1... Begin."

* * * * *

The first move was Clark's.

He let loose an optic blast that was easy for Louie to sidestep.

"Jesus, listen to Louie. Amplify his reactions." Brian called out as he pulled three cards off his deck and placed them face down in a pile before him.

//Louie, is that okay with you?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"Just do it before he hits us!" Louie said in panic as he dodged another relatively easy to spot optic blast in his path.

"Match your breathing, match your movements, become one." Brian called out, then took another card from the deck in his hand and placed it face up. It was the seven of spades.

"Keep it going, Clark. You're doing fine." Matt said firmly.

"I feel like total trash doing this." Clark said irritably.

"I know. But it's for their own good. They need to be able to dodge an attack." Matt said firmly.

The sound of dice being rolled drew the attention of some of those gathered, others had their attention drawn by Brian quietly saying, "Uh oh."

"What?" Julia began to ask when she saw Louie step into the path of Clark's optic blast.

"Sorry!" Clark yelled as he immediately stopped the blast.

Louie reflexively grabbed his shoulder with the opposite hand, then looked at Clark with anger smoldering in his eyes.

"I thought you were moving the other way." Clark tried to explain.

A guttural growl erupted from Louie, then he seemed to vanish.

The next thing anyone knew, Clark was pinned to the floor with Louie's hands around his throat.

"Get off him Louie. He didn't mean to hurt you." Matt said as he took a step toward the pair.

In the blink of an eye, Louie seemed to vanish and Clark was left clutching his throat and looking around for any sign of a threat.

"That could have gone better." Brian said as he turned over another card.

"What's happening?" Julia demanded to know.

"Unfortunately, Louie's primal self is in control. I was actually hoping that Jesus would end up being the dominant personality." Brian said as he flipped over several cards in succession.

"Up there!" Ronny said as he pointed at the ceiling.

"That's not Louie." Lisa said quietly.

"It's part Louie." Brian corrected.

"It's like a black blur, like it hasn't settled on a final form." Julia said cautiously.

"Jesus! I need for you to step forward and take control of this. The only way you're going to be able to protect Louie is to take control and protect him from himself." Brian called into the air.

"Guys. As much as I don't want to do this, we have to protect the weaker members of our team. If he threatens any of them, do what you have to do." Matt said regretfully.

"How? They move so fast I can't even see them." John said frankly.

"I might be able to optic blast them if I really try." Clark said quietly.

"Only if they attack and only as much as you have to." Matt said firmly.

"Jesus! Listen! The only way to protect Louie is for you to take control. He's your motor, but you're his driver." Brian implored him to understand.

"I am the driver." The black blur of a monster slowly responded.

"Yes! You can have all of this strength at your command and Louie can live his dream of being a hero if you're strong enough to contain his rage." Brian fought to explain.

"I am the driver." The black blur repeated.

"That's right. Now that Louie's safe, you can separate and become yourselves again. You can be you." Brian said as he simultaneously

placed a card face up, across the three of clubs, the new card being the jack of clubs.

The black blur dropped from the ceiling, then crouched before the group, seemingly trying to decide what to do next.

"I'm probably not the one who should be welcoming you to the team, but I'm really glad that you're going to join us, Vile Cricket." Brian said as he stood.

The misshapen black blur turned its head in an odd expression of apparent curiosity.

"Vile Cricket?" Ronny asked dubiously.

"You have a mutant name, don't you?" Brian asked in return.

"Yeah. I'm Crush."

"They're Vile Cricket... Actually, when they're separate, Jesus is Vile and Louie is Cricket, but that's mostly just so that we'll have something to call them on the radios when we're out in the field." Brian rambled.

"So, do you think that you're in charge of this team? What gives you the right to hand out mutant names?" John asked curiously.

"No. I'm not in charge. But because of my ability, I know about some things that the rest of you don't." Brian said frankly.

"Do you already know what my mutant name is?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"I know what it could be." Brian responded.

"What happened? Did I hurt anyone?" Louie asked as the blurry black coating that had been covering him finally fell away and seemed to dissolve.

"I think you surprised us more than anything else." Ronny said honestly.

"Yeah. I don't think you'll have to worry about Clark shooting optic blasts at you anymore." John said with a grin in Clark's direction.

"Did I hurt you?" Louie asked Clark with concern.

"No. You just moved so fast that I didn't have a chance to react. I don't know what your mutant ability is exactly, but you're really fast." Clark finished with a smile.

"I remember some of it, but it's like something that I dreamed or saw on TV a long time ago." Louie said uncertainly.

//I remember all of it, although for me it was like trying to move in a vat of syrup.//

"Have you ever been in a vat of syrup?" Quaid asked curiously.

//No. But I can imagine what it's like.// Jesus responded.

Quaid nodded that he could accept that answer.

"How about we call Louie and Jesus' defensive training done for today and move on to Lisa?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Why don't you do Brian first?" Lisa immediately asked.

"Would you mind?" Matt asked Brian cautiously.

"No. I don't mind trying. I don't get to show off very often." Brian said as he gathered his cards and dice.

"John? Do you think you can spar with Brian without really hurting him?" Matt asked curiously.

"Yeah." John said, then flicked his Zippo to light it.

"Ready? 3... 2... 1... Begin."

* * * * *

"John? Are you okay?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Why?" John asked as he held a gelatinous fireball in his hand.

"You're supposed to be testing Brian's defenses."

"Who?" John asked curiously.

"Brian. That guy over there." Ronny said as he pointed.

"Who is he?" John asked as he stared at Brian uncomprehendingly.

"He's one of the Wagner students, one of the Meerkats." Clark carefully explained.

"And what did you want me to do?" John asked uncertainly.

"Throw that fireball at him." Clark said slowly.

"Why? Did he do something?" John asked dubiously.

"No. You're supposed to be testing him to see if he can defend himself." Clark fought to explain.

"Clark, why don't you do it?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Do what?" Clark asked obliviously, as he looked around.

"Ronny?" Matt asked quickly.

"What?" Ronny asked as a strange, uncomprehending look filled his expression.

"Stop it!" Quaid said as he walked up to Brian and punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Brian said as he clutched his shoulder and backed away.

"It's okay Quaid. He was just showing us what his ability can do." Matt gently explained.

"It's no fair using mind tricks on people who can't fight against them." Quaid firmly declared.

"Sometimes that's true. But if there was someone here who wanted to hurt Brian, then I'd want for him to use his mind tricks to protect himself. He has that ability for a reason, so it's up to us to help him learn how to use it to his best advantage." Matt said seriously.

"What happened?" John asked as he looked around quizzically.

"You and Brian just sparred and he mopped the floor with all three of you." Lisa finished with a chuckle.

"He what?" John asked, looking to Matt for an explanation.

"He mind-whammied you pretty good." Matt verified.

"That was weird." Clark said slowly, then continued, "It was like that feeling when you forget something and you know that you forgot it, but you just can't quite remember what it was."

"That's what my ability mostly is. The rest of it's just guessing what's going to happen next and nudging it to go ahead and happen or not." Brian quietly explained.

"So you don't really have any defenses in a hand-to-hand fight?" Matt asked curiously.

"No. Quaid could probably take me out without much effort." Brian timidly admitted.

"Probably?" Quaid asked dubiously.

"Ease up, Bruiser. Brian may not have big muscles, but he took out three of our heavy hitters single-handed. That's pretty good in anyone's book." Matt said frankly.

"Thanks." Brian said quietly, obviously taking Matt's praise to heart.

"But you're going to need to learn how to use your fists, too. Every now and then you're bound to run into someone like Quaid, who can't be mind-whammied. The team will do their best to defend you, but you're going to have to do your part." Matt said firmly.

"Okay. I will." Brian said in the tone of a vow.

"Lisa? Are you ready to try?" Matt asked cautiously.

"No. But I probably have to, don't I?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"It's what we're here to do. We can't really move on to the next step of setting up defenses for the team until we have a better idea of what you have to contribute." Matt carefully explained.

"You can test her strength right now, but if you try to test her fighting ability, it's not going to work." Brian reluctantly interjected.

"Why's that?" Matt asked cautiously.

"It's the same as you trying to test Louie by himself. He can't really do his best without Jesus to back him up." Brian said uncomfortably.

"So are you saying that she needs Marc to be here before she can fight for real?" Matt asked curiously.

"Not exactly. But please trust me when I say that she can't do it right now. Later, when things have come together, she'll be able to take on your heavy hitters and give them a pretty good workout." Brian said seriously.

"But not now?" Matt asked to confirm.

"That's right." Brian said confidently, then added, "You can still test her strength. That won't change. But you'll have to wait for later to really test her skill."

"So be it." Matt finally conceded.

"How do you want to test her strength? Are you going to wrestle her?" Ronny asked with a grin.

"You and me need to have a talk about how to treat a lady." Matt said with a grim look at the boy.

"You treat a lady just like you treat anyone else, don't you?" Ronny asked curiously.

"What d'ya say, Doc?" Matt asked Julia hopefully.

"Go ahead. I'm interested in what you have to say on the subject." Julia said with a barely restrained smile.

Matt looked askance at her, then turned his attention back to Ronny as he said, "It's not right to wrestle girls. It has nothing to do with their strength, but with what you might be forced to grab onto to get a good firm hold. You don't grab girls that way unless you have no other choice in the matter."

Ronny seemed to be processing what Matt was telling him for a moment before turning to Julia and asking, "Is that right?"

"I think what Matt told you is a good way of looking at it. Sometimes you don't get much of a choice in the matter, but when you have a choice, it's best to avoid it." Julia said seriously.

"So how are you going to test her strength?" John asked curiously.

"Come here and I'll show you." Matt said with a mischievous grin.

After a moment of hesitation, John stepped forward until he was face-to-face with Matt.

"Do this." Matt said, then demonstrated crossing his arms and holding them with a firm grip.

"Okay." John said hesitantly as he did as he was told.

"Lisa. See if you can do this." Matt said as he lifted John off the floor with one hand.

"Couldn't we just use the gym equipment in the dorm room?" John asked as he fought to maintain his balance.

"I didn't think to check it out, but I'm guessing that Lisa's ultimate strength is probably beyond the upper limit of most commercially available equipment." Matt said as he gently placed John back on the floor.

"If you need things to be heavier for a few minutes, I can help you with that." Ronny suggested with a grin.

"That sounds like a good idea. We'll do this for now and later on we'll probably try that in training." Matt said with a smile in his direction.

"Do you mind?" Lisa asked John timidly.

"No. Go ahead. I'd like to know just how strong you are." John said honestly.

"Okay. I'll try to be gentle." Lisa said before following Matt's example and easily lifting John off the floor using only one hand.

"You're not even trying, are you?" Ronny asked curiously.

"He's not heavy, if that's what you're asking." Lisa said simply.

"Do you think you could lift a car?" Matt asked cautiously.

"I can pick up the back of a car one-handed, but I haven't tried to pick up a 'whole' car before. I don't know, I probably could." Lisa said thoughtfully as she slowly lowered John back to the ground.

"What about your grip strength? Can you crush things fairly easily?" Matt asked curiously.

"My hands aren't shaped the same as yours, but most of the things that I can grip, yeah, I can crush them like they're nothing." Lisa confirmed.

"Brian, are we going to have to wait for Marc to get out of the hospital before we can test Lisa's skill?" Ronny asked curiously.

"No." Brian answered simply.

After waiting a moment to be sure that more of an answer wasn't forthcoming, Ronny slowly asked, "Then when will we be able to test her skill?"

"I know some things that I can't tell you. Okay? I know it sucks but that's how it is." Brian said firmly.

"All we're asking is for you to tell us when Lisa will be ready to show us what she can do." Ronny said reasonably.

"I don't know everything and some of what I do know, I can't tell you."

"Which means..." Ronny said in a leading tone.

"Which means that I don't know exactly when Lisa's going to be able to show her stuff. It might be later today, it might be sometime tomorrow. A few different things have to fall into place first." Brian said seriously.

"Is there anything that we can do to make it happen any faster?" Clark asked curiously.

"Beau's part of it, so if he were here, it might speed things up, but I can't really say that for sure." Brian said hesitantly.

"What does Beau have to do with my ability to fight? We're not going to be doing some kind of combination thing like what Jesus and Louie are doing, are we?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"You won't be combining with Beau." Brian said carefully, then turned to look in the direction of the door that they had entered through.

The others followed his gaze and fell silent as they waited.

The faint sound of a door opening was heard, then the sound of footsteps.

"You guys weren't waiting on us, were you?" Slash asked uncertainly when he noticed everyone looking at him.

"No. Did Beau get to his class okay?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. No problem. What's going on here?" Slash asked curiously at the strange mood that he and Seth had walked in on.

"Brian, Lisa, Jesus and Louie were all able to show us some of their talents. If you two wouldn't mind giving us a quick demonstration of

what you've already learned, we can get to the business of developing some defensive strategies for your group." Matt said seriously.

"I don't know if I can make mine work again, but I can try." Slash said uncertainly.

"I can have one of the guys attack you, if you think that would help." Matt offered.

"Let me try it without the attack first." Slash said slowly.

"Whenever you're ready." Matt said simply.

"Did you guys get to use any mutant abilities?" Seth asked quietly.

"Yeah. We'll have to show you when we're done with testing." Lisa said excitedly.

"Louie's was great." Quaid happily added.

"I can't wait to see it." Seth said honestly.

"Okay. I'm ready to try." Slash announced.

"Whenever you're ready." Matt said encouragingly.

"Okay. There." Slash said as he made a dramatic pulling motion in the air, opposite where the group was standing.

As everyone watched, the air became darker and darker until a black fog was floating, nearly six feet across.

"Can you control it? Shape it? Maybe make it move?" Matt asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I think I can move it." Slash said, then the cloud of darkness began to float away from the group, toward the door.

"It's a good start. We'll be sure to try to do different things with it." Matt said seriously.

"Yeah. I'd really like that." Slash said happily.

"Seth? Lee told me that you've awakened a new ability. Would you be able to show us?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Sure. Are you ready?" Seth asked happily.

"For what?" Clark asked uncomfortably.

"This." Seth said as a flash of darkness seemed to erupt from his horns.

"What..." Clark began to ask, then realized that he wasn't in the gymnasium anymore.

"Why did you shift us to a quasi-dimensional husk?" Quaid asked curiously.

"Mostly because it's the only place I can get my ability to take me." Seth answered honestly.

"From what Lee said, him and Andrew are going to work with you to see if you can expand your ability." Matt said seriously.

"Good. I really want for my ability to be able to help the team. I don't know how useful this really is." Seth said frankly.

"I can think of a few times when it would have been nice to have a convenient back door that I could summon up out of nowhere." Matt said honestly.

"Come to think of it, so can I." Julia added with a smile at him.

"Is everyone ready to go back?" Seth asked as he looked around in the strange blue-gray light from his horns.

"Yeah. I think now that we've taken stock, we need to decide what we're going to do with what you've got here." Matt said seriously.

"Shouldn't Beau be included in this?" Slash asked cautiously.

"And Marc?" Lisa timidly added.

"We won't make a final decision without them." Matt assured her.

"Then we'd better get to it." Seth said before allowing another flash of his blinding power to flare from his horns.

[Chapter 12: What They Say]

"If you'll excuse me, I have a strict policy that after an adventure such as this that I take some time to do something painfully drab and ordinary, just to put things back into perspective for me." Julia announced.

"It sounds like you've done this before." Matt said with some concern.

"You might be surprised." Julia said with a secretive smile, then continued, "But I was just saying that I've discovered from bitter personal experience that I need to consciously maintain that balance in my life, lest either the adventure or the boredom seek to dominate it."

"Balance? I might have to try that one of these days." Matt said in a mock- considering voice.

"It doesn't seem like your style, but who knows? You might wear it well." Julia said warmly.

"I'll let you know if I decide to try it out."

"I'll look forward to it." Julia said with a serene smile before turning to leave.

* * * * *

"Would you like for me to use my ability to bring Beau back here so that he can help with Lisa's evaluation?" Brian cautiously asked.

"I wouldn't want for him to get thrown behind on his schoolwork by missing classes on account of us." Matt said seriously.

"It won't throw him behind, I promise. Let me show you!" Brian rushed to say as he took out his cards and dice.

"I don't think any of us game, but maybe later on you could come over to our place and we could learn how. I've always kinda been

interested." John slowly suggested as everyone moved closer to get a better view of what Brian was doing.

"I'd really like that, but I can't. My ability makes it so that *whatever* I do when I'm playing becomes real to some degree." Brian said as he quickly laid out a deliberate tableau of cards.

"So if you summoned a dragon in a game you could summon one for real?" Louie asked curiously.

"Yes. In a way. It might cause an explosion that looks like a dragon for just a second before it rained hellfire down on the entire block." Brian said as he rattled the dice in his hand.

"Yeah. Don't do that." Matt said slowly.

"I'll try not to, I promise." Brian tried to assure him.

"What are you going to do to Beau?" Lisa asked with concern.

"I'm going to look at his near futures, at some of the possible results, then choose one that looks good and push to make that particular one happen." Brian said in a slow, trance-like voice. As he spoke the final word, he spilled the handful of dice onto the floor.

There was a long moment of silence before Brian quietly said, "Oops."

"Oops? What oops? What did you do?" Matt demanded.

"I... um... Give me a second. I need to do this right now. I can still make it so no one gets hurt." Brian said in a rush as he gathered up the dice again.

There was a long, silent moment as everyone waited for Brian to announce that the crisis, whatever it was, had passed.

A siren suddenly sounded from all around them, causing the group to look around for any sign of a threat.

"Another second. I almost got it." Brian said in concentration.

"Attention all students. Please proceed to the nearest exit in an orderly manner and evacuate the campus. If you have classmates who have limited mobility or are unable to hear this announcement, please help them to find safety." Kurt's voice announced over the loudspeaker, blaring in the empty gymnasium.

"Brian? What did you do?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Just a wiggle and a shake..." Brian muttered in concentration as he rolled the handful of dice again.

"We should probably get out of here." Lisa said uncertainly.

As she did, the distant sound of emergency vehicles echoed through the cavernous space.

Brian began turning the top cards of four separate piles to reveal that they were the 6s of each suit.

Multiple sirens sounded, then silenced, as though they had pulled to a stop right outside the gymnasium doors.

"That's it. The gates are all open. We can go now." Brian said as he rushed to gather his cards and dice.

"Go where? We don't know what's going on." Matt said frankly.

"Chlorine gas leak. But it's in the science building. We're safe to walk out the way we came in, if you want to." Brian said honestly.

"In this gas leak, was anyone hurt?" Matt asked firmly.

"No. Not at all. Everything worked out just fine. And best of all, it made it so that Beau can go with us now, if he wants to. Classes have been cancelled." Brian assured him.

"Brian, we're going to have to take a good long look at your ability so you can make some decisions about how to use it responsibly." Matt said firmly.

"Yeah. I'd really like that. All this time I've been trying to figure it out all by myself. If I was using my chessboard just then, some people might have really gotten hurt." Brian said frankly.

"Are you guys still in here? They're evacuating the whole campus!" Beau's voice called in panic as he ran into the gymnasium.

"We're fine. Calm down. We were just trying to decide what we should do next." Matt said with an uncertain glance at Brian.

"Well that depends. How anxious are you to do a repeat performance of last night?" Beau asked frankly.

"How's that?" Matt asked cautiously.

"Does that mean that the news crew is already here?" Lisa guessed with dread.

"Yeah. I don't know how they got here so fast. They weren't out there when I left to go to class." Beau said seriously.

"What do you want to do?" Matt asked the group as he looked around, then explained, "You can walk out of here with your heads held high or you can choose to hide yourselves from them."

"I vote for hiding." Slash said immediately.

"Yup. I'm all for slinking away..." Seth said as he raised a hand to make his vote more or less official.

"...Like a whipped puppy." Lisa said with a nod and the raise of one fur-covered hand.

"Maybe once we've figured out how to use our abilities we can walk out in front of them and not care what they think about us. But right now, I don't want to have to face them. With the new school, then the shooting... it's just too much all at once." Louie finished quietly.

Quaid immediately put his arms around Louie and held him firmly.

//Whatever you decide is fine with me. I'm just along for the ride.//
Jesus said frankly into everyone's minds.

"Guys? Do you have any thoughts on the matter?" Matt asked his three housemates.

"Whatever we're going to do, we should do it. I'm pretty sure they don't call for an evacuation unless it's really serious." Clark said frankly.

"Do you want to scatter and meet in the park? The news crew probably wouldn't notice you as much if you weren't together as a group. I can get the bus and meet you there then we can go back to the mansion." Matt asked uncertainly.

"Or... Seth could shift us into the dimensional husk and take all of us out to the bus that way." Quaid said simply.

"Do you think you could take us that far?" Matt asked Seth with concern.

"Yeah. My ability doesn't make me tired or anything like that. As long as you stay within the light of my horns, there shouldn't be any problems." Seth said confidently.

"I could probably make a blackout cloud or two to mask our escape, if you needed me to." Slash quietly offered.

"We'll see what's going on when we get to the minibus." Matt said decisively.

"Ready?" Seth asked Matt, just to be certain.

Matt looked around to take stock of his charges before saying, "Do it."

* * * * *

"Time to go sideways." Seth said as consuming darkness erupted from his horns, engulfing all those present.

"Sideways?" Clark asked curiously as the darkness gave way to a blue-gray light which illuminated an enormous cavern.

"This world is the in-between. It's not here or there. It's the something else. The sideways." Seth said distantly.

"That's nice, but do you know how to get us to the bus from here?" John asked hesitantly.

"I've only done this once before, but it wasn't too hard. Just be sure not to touch anything when I make it really bright and black and white." Seth warned.

"Why not? Not that I'm wanting to, but just so I'll know." John asked cautiously.

"It'll cut you, really bad." Seth said honestly.

"I'll keep that in mind." John promised.

"I wouldn't switch over to that light except that I need it to be able to navigate. The dimensions are too different for me to be able to tell for sure if we're going the right direction." Seth explained.

"We should get going." Matt quietly interjected, then thought to add, "I'm going to need to call Julia and Kurt when we get to the mansion and let them know that we're all safe."

"I'm sure they're going to have lots of other things on their minds right now." Lisa gently added.

"I'll just leave a message for them." Matt assured her.

"Hold on while I get my bearings, then we can go." Seth said as he willed the light of his horns to flare to the point that he could identify where they were in relation to the gymnasium.

"I see what you mean now. It *looks* dangerous." John said seriously.

"Come on." Seth said as he changed the illumination back to blue-gray at a reasonable intensity.

"This is crazy, there's this whole other world laid right on top of ours." John said in amazement.

"I don't know if I'd really call it a world. I don't think anyone could live here." Seth said as he forged their path, then added, "I think that this is more like a... spacer. When one world doesn't fit exactly on top of the other, this is the little bit of expansion, the flex, the 'for good measure' little bit of left over."

"It helps when universes have something like this already built-in, then someone like me doesn't have to show up and fix things every time there's a new dimensional eruption... I mean, me, like I used to be." Quaid finished quietly.

"It really bothers you, doesn't it? Being made human?" Louie asked sympathetically.

"I existed outside time in a non-corporeal form. I could merge my essence with entire civilizations if I wanted to. I knew what it was like to be part of the infinite and the eternal." Quaid said distantly, then snapped back to the present and quickly said, "But this is nice too."

Louie broke into a grand smile at that and couldn't resist the urge to put an arm around Quaid's shoulders.

"We're coming up to the door now. I'm going to change the light so that we'll be able to push through it. Just stay with me and we should be fine." Seth said as the light became more gray than blue.

"So when it's stark black and white, it can hurt us, but when it's slushy gray, we can walk through it like it's overcooked noodles?" John asked curiously.

"Yeah. As far as I know. I haven't really had a chance to figure out too much yet." Seth humbly admitted.

"Quaid? It sounds like you know a lot about this dimensional stuff. Is there anything you can tell him about it?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Not really. I knew that it was here but as far as I know, no one's ever really had a reason to visit it before." Quaid said honestly.

As they finally exited the cavernous space, Clark suddenly stopped and gasped, "Holy... "

"...fuck." John whispered in awe, completing the thought.

"There's no sky!" Louie said as he stopped at John's side.

"There's a sky, there's just no light. You have to bring your own light to this place." Quaid said informatively as he fell into line.

"Where's the bus?" Ronny asked in a low, disturbed voice.

"It should be over that way, across the lawn. When we get a little closer, I can take a look at the overlay and be sure where we are." Seth said, sounding a bit anxious.

"Are y'all done gawking? I'm ready to get out of here." Matt said firmly.

//You and me both.// Jesus quietly added.

"Yeah. Let's go." Seth said as he started walking again.

* * * * *

"What's that over there?" Slash asked as they finished crossing the relatively flat expanse of ground.

"We can come back for sightseeing later." Matt said uncomfortably.

"I think it moved." Slash said firmly.

"What was it?" Matt asked as he stopped.

"Over there." Slash said as he pointed.

As everyone in the group watched, a lump seemed to rise up from the ground to form a mound a little taller than they were.

"Everyone, stand back. Let me take a peek at it." Seth said, then looked around to confirm that everyone was safely gathered around him.

A burst of bright light made their surroundings suddenly appear to be black and white.

Although the flash only seemed to last an instant, it was enough for Seth to get a sense of what was going on.

"I think that what we're seeing is this world reacting to an ambulance parking in the parking lot in our world." Seth said as he led the way around the newly-formed mound.

"It looks kinda like a cyst to me." Beau said slowly.

"*That's* a good reason not to go into medicine." Lisa said grimly.

"What's that?" Beau asked curiously.

"Everything you see reminds you of some horrible disease or condition." Lisa said frankly.

"Not everything..." Beau began to protest, but it died on his tongue.

Lisa looked at him inquiringly.

"Okay. Yeah. Mostly everything."

* * * * *

After some zigs and zags to avoid other cyst-like outcroppings, Seth called out, "We're close! Give me a second to find the bus."

The group was familiar enough with the process by now that they simply stopped and waited for the flash.

As soon as the flash had faded, Seth announced, "This is it."

"Are you going to send us back the way you brought us in?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Actually, I thought that I could return you into your seats in the bus. That way it's a lot less likely that the reporters will notice us." Seth said uncertainly, obviously seeking approval before enacting his plan.

"Send me first. That way if they notice us, I can make a blackout cloud to keep them out of our business." Slash volunteered.

The light around them turned slightly more blue as Seth said, "Just squeeze through this membrane and we'll be inside. I'll be right behind you."

* * * * *

Everyone felt relief when Seth and his light appeared in the dark cavern.

"Slash, I'll send you first so you can keep watch while I drop the others into their seats. I won't be able to see it if there's a problem, so it'll be up to you to keep things going until we're all together again." Seth said seriously.

"Do it." Slash said firmly.

Seth placed his hand flat on Slash's chest, then gave a slight push.

"Send me next. I can get the minibus started and back him up if he needs it." Matt said firmly.

"Okay." Seth said simply, then pushed on Matt's chest, causing him to seem to evaporate.

"Who's next?" Clark asked as he looked around the confined space.

"Everyone, hold still for a second. I need to take a reading." Seth said, then before Clark could react, there was a flash of bright light.

"Clark, come over here and when I push you, let yourself fall back." Seth instructed, then guided Clark into place before gently placing a hand flat on his chest.

* * * * *

The blue-gray tinted reality seemed to dissolve around him, giving way to the vibrantly colored real world, flooded with natural sunlight.

For an instant, Clark was reminded that the sun's light literally empowered him. The swell of relief that he felt wasn't just from escaping the pseudo-moonlight emanating from Seth's horns. The light of the sun actually buoyed his spirits.

Before Clark could think of what to say, John seemed to materialize from nothing as he dropped into the seat beside him.

"I think I'll just stick to doing fire." John quietly muttered.

There was a movement at Clark's other side and he turned in time to see Ronny fall into his seat.

"Watch out! It looks like the camera crew spotted us." Matt warned from the driver's seat.

"Open the door and let me see what I can do." Slash said firmly.

"Be ready to jump back in when I call you." Matt replied seriously as he activated the sliding side door.

"I'll be right outside." Slash said before stepping out.

* * * * *

"Let's see how much control I have." Slash muttered under his breath as he concentrated on the sensation of draining the air before him of the capacity to relay light.

An opaque cloud began to form and Slash worked to maneuver it to completely block the view from the other part of the parking lot.

"That's the last of 'em. Get in!" Matt called from behind him.

Slash gave one extra push of his power before backing into the minibus.

"Good work Slash. I would have lost my shit if I had tried to make a fire cloud that big for as long as you held it." John said frankly.

"I don't think I could have stopped that many people with my gravity either... at least, not without hurting them." Ronny said seriously.

"Guys. Just so you know, this is *exactly* what you should be doing after a confrontation. Slash did an excellent job and the rest of us need to think about how we would have handled a similar situation if the team were counting on us instead of Slash for backup." Matt said professionally.

"If it was just me, I probably wouldn't speak up about it but when Marc gets better, he'll also pay the price for my silence." Beau said in prelude, then explained, "For those of us without mutant abilities, the answer will always be the same. Hide and wait for everyone else to protect us."

"You can keep telling yourself that if you want to, but when I look at you I can see hundreds of possible futures. You're not nearly as helpless as you pretend to be." Brian said frankly.

//It's not our place to make him face himself. Human, mutant, or whatever, they have to accept their gifts when *they're* ready, not when we want them to.// Jesus responded seriously.

"What are you two talking about?" Lisa asked curiously.

"It's nothing!" Beau scrambled to say.

"He's part of our group. We have a stake in this. If Lisa's going to progress to the next level with her abilities, she's going to need Beau's help. If he's pretending to be Mr. Nicey Nicey normal human, none of it's going to happen. We'll basically be losing three members of our final roster." Brian said seriously.

"You say that you're not the leader of the group, but you sure seem comfortable telling people what to do." John said frankly.

"No. I'm not the leader. I *can't be* the leader. I can see what the future holds for us if I'm ever put in charge... when the pressure's on, some people have a talent for always making *exactly* the wrong decision. I'm one of them." Brian finished regretfully.

"Who's going to be our leader, then?" Slash asked curiously.

"It could go a few different ways. The only thing I can say for certain is that *any* of the rest of you would do a better job at it than me." Brian regretfully admitted.

There was a long moment of silence, until Beau finally asked, "What is it that you want me to do?"

"I don't know... that is to say, I don't understand *exactly* what it is that you *can* do. All I know is that you do it to Lisa and somehow you make it so that not only does she have her incredible strength, but also incredible skill, honed from years of diligent study and practice." Brian said carefully.

"Excuse me." Ronny said quietly to get everyone's attention, then calmly continued by asking, "How the HELL do you think a normal human could accomplish something like that?"

"Did anyone ever say he was normal?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Or human?" Clark asked reasonably, then explained, "It doesn't always show."

"Okay. That's enough. You said what you felt like you needed to say. Now that Beau knows what you think about it, he can take your feelings into account as he decides what he wants to do. If you care about how he feels, then I think the best thing you can do is respect his decision, whatever it is, and accept it as done." Matt said firmly.

"He's right. Things will work out somehow, no matter what you decide." Brian said quietly.

//Your secrets are your own and I'll never tell anyone what I know about you.// Jesus said seriously, then added more gently, //But if you *did* decide to tell people... I think they could handle it.//

They drove in silence for a few minutes before Beau finally asked, "Brian, what can you tell me about what I'm going to be doing to help Lisa?"

"Not much. If you decide to tell Lisa your big secret, she'll help you get what you need to eventually help her gain her fighting ability." Brian said carefully.

//You know a lot more about it than that.// Jesus said in a warning tone.

"I also know what happens if I say too much too soon." Brian said in return.

//You're not upset that I read your mind.// Jesus cautiously observed.

"It's not that different from what I do. Maybe just a little more direct." Brian said honestly.

//Do you ever get things that you didn't want to know?// Jesus asked curiously.

"Only all the time. I do what I can, when I can, and try not to dwell on the rest. I can't help everyone, fix everything, and stop all the tears... or any of the tears, really." Brian finished quietly.

* * * * *

"I've decided." Beau abruptly announced.

"What?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"We're a team, right? I mean, we've done it. We've all committed to it. We're not going to back out or anything?" Beau asked anxiously.

"I think we've all committed to stick with the team." Seth said quietly.

"Not all of us." Clark said from the back.

"We're about one minute away from the mansion. You can let us off there, then have your private team meeting." John said seriously.

"I didn't mean it like that..." Beau hurried to explain.

"Don't worry about it. We understand." Ronny assured him.

"Yeah. You've got team business to talk over. We totally get that." John said sympathetically.

"Would it be okay if we went to see how Marc is doing before you tell us what you decided?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"We didn't have any reason to go to the boathouse, did we?" Slash asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Matt finally said, "No. Not that I know of."

"Seth, do you have your phone on you?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Do you need to make a call?" Seth asked as he pulled the phone out of his pocket.

"No. But I thought you might want to pre-empt your parents and call them to let them know that you're okay before they hear about the gas leak on the news." Beau said seriously.

"They might start thinking that I'm being responsible and considerate and stuff. I don't know if I want to set the bar that high." Seth said with a teasing smile.

"Would you mind if I use your phone for a minute when you're done?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"You'll be free to use any phone in the mansion anytime you want." Matt quietly interjected as he pulled to a stop in front of the garage.

"You can borrow my phone whenever you like." Seth assured her.

"Thanks Seth. I appreciate that." Lisa said timidly as the door of the minibus slid open.

As the group got out of the minibus, Lisa quietly said, "Thanks for wanting to include me and Marc in this. I know that coming here had mostly to do with me, but I feel like being included in this will be something good for him." Lisa said softly.

"I really hope so. I can't be sure he'll want to join us, but if he does, I can promise that no matter what comes next, he'll have all of us on his side." Seth said passionately.

"Brian, is *he* going to be our leader?" Slash asked quietly, indicating Seth with his uncertain glance.

After a moment to consider, Brian quietly said, "More of a '*cheer*' leader, but in a few of the possible futures he ends up in charge and as far as I can tell, he does a pretty good job of it."

"Really?" Seth asked happily as he moved closer to insert himself into their conversation.

"From what I can see, your best bet is to keep your eyes open and pay attention to all the leaders around you. If you'll do that, you'll have everything you need to step in and take charge when it really matters." Brian said firmly.

"If you want to go on down to visit with Marc and have your meeting, I'm going to take the guys here and see if we can track down Quaid's grandpa." Matt said by the doorway.

"I still feel like you should be part of this." Slash said frankly.

"Of course you do." Matt said with a grin, then continued, "But no matter what you're feeling, it's time to take off the training wheels. I got you started, but now it's time for you to start being on your own."

"If you think we're ready, we'll give it a try." Slash said, trying to sound confident.

"I think you're ready to do *this*. One of us will be around to help you if things start to get exciting. You're not entirely on your own just yet." Matt finished with a smile.

"So what should we do if we need you?" Louie asked quietly.

"Tell Dr McCoy. He'll either call me or whoever else is available to help you. If you run into Scott, ask him if he's got a spare communicator for you. That way you can call for help directly if you need it." Matt finished seriously.

"I know who that is." Slash assured the group, who were mostly looking puzzled.

"Can I stay with Louie?" Quaid asked Matt quietly.

"Not this time. But there's a good chance that Brian's gas leak will make it so that they'll get to spend the night at the boathouse again." Matt said frankly.

"What did you have to do with the gas leak?" Beau asked Brian seriously.

"I gotta go. Are you gonna be okay?" Quaid asked Louie gently.

"Yeah. I've got Jesus with me. He'll make sure that I'm alright." Louie assured him.

"I'll see you later then." Quaid said sadly.

Louie stepped forward and gave Quaid a long firm hug.

No one in either group displayed any sense of urgency or impatience. All present were willing to give the boys as much time as they needed to say their goodbyes.

* * * * *

"Louie, if it's too bad, let one of us know and we'll find a way to get you and Quaid together." Seth said as they walked across the entry hall, to the elevator.

"I think I'll be okay if I don't think about it too much. It might help if you called me by my hero name." Louie finished with a note of hope in his voice as they boarded the elevator.

"Whatever you say, Cricket." Seth said with a fond smile as the door closed.

* * * * *

"Brian?" Beau asked quietly.

"Yes?" Brian timidly responded.

"Did you have something to do with the gas leak at the college?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I guess that kinda depends on how you look at it." Brian answered weakly.

"It sounds like a 'yes' or 'no' question to me." Beau said honestly.

"I didn't know it was going to happen. Okay? I was just able to find the outcome that we wanted and used my ability to encourage it to happen. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone or cause any damage." Brian explained defensively.

"That sounds like a 'yes'." Beau finally decided.

"Usually when I use my ability, everything just works out the way I want it to and there's no problem. But every now and then something goes wrong or someone gets hurt along the way. I see where I am and where I want to be, but what happens in between is mostly out of my control and I don't know about it until it happens." Brian cautiously explained.

"And you wanted a gas leak?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I wanted you here to help Lisa access her ability, the gas leak just cancelled classes for the day so that you could be here." Brian said carefully.

Beau noticed that the group had stopped in the hallway and after a moment to achieve his final resolve, he finally said, "When I was little, since before I can remember, there was a housekeeper and nanny who took care of me so that my mom could go back to work."

"You got a nanny and I got booted out on my ass. Sometimes life's not fair." Slash said bitterly.

"The nanny was a witch." Beau said simply.

"I don't think anyone will go running to the adults if you call her a bitch or worse." Seth said frankly.

"No. I mean that Mrs. Durtnal was *literally* a witch. The reason my uncle sent her to us was so that she could teach me how to use the dark arts." Beau quietly admitted.

"So you think that you can do magic?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Do you think that you can move us to another dimension?" Lisa immediately countered.

"Yeah. You've all seen me do it." Seth slowly responded, not understanding what Lisa was trying to say.

"I've seen someone do *real* magic too. If Beau says that he's been taught how to do magic, I have no problem believing him." Lisa said firmly.

Beau looked at her with surprise, then cautiously said, "Thank you. I've never told anyone before because I didn't think anyone could possibly understand."

"You don't have to worry about that with me. I'm totally on your side." Lisa assured him.

"Good." Brian said, then let out a dramatic breath before continuing, "That was half the battle."

"What's the other half?" Seth asked cautiously.

Brian looked around the group before carefully answering, "Getting Beau to cast the spell that gets Lisa her fighting ability."

[Chapter 13: Rhodes Warrior]

"I don't know what you think it is that witches do, but I promise you that I don't know any spells that would make someone a better fighter." Beau said emphatically.

"To tell you the truth, I *don't* have a clue about your power or capabilities. All I see is a possible outcome where you help Lisa gain that power." Brian said seriously.

"Can we go on in? I'd like to check on Marc." Lisa asked anxiously.

"Sure. Just remember to be quiet. Either Marc or Gar could be asleep right now." Beau said in a cautioning tone.

"Whatever you say, Doc." Seth said with a playful grin as they started walking down the hall again.

"As much as I'm looking forward to being called that someday, I can't do it until I've earned my degree. It wouldn't be right." Beau said firmly.

"I guess I can understand that." Seth easily accepted, then asked, "What about Tex?"

"Yeah. I guess. At least I've already earned that title." Beau happily agreed.

Brian smiled at the exchange and seemed to be satisfied with the outcome.

* * * * *

"Dr. McCoy? Is it okay if we come in?" Lisa quietly asked from the doorway.

"Your timing is fortuitous. Marcus has just awakened and I am certain that he would enjoy your company. However, you will need to maintain reasonable quiet since Garfield has fallen asleep." Dr McCoy cautioned.

"We really need to talk to Marc. Would you mind if we took him somewhere so that we don't have to be quiet?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Marcus requires rest. He cannot be moved." Dr McCoy said firmly.

"Just show him, Seth. It's a lot easier than trying to explain it." Slash said seriously.

"Okay. Yeah." Seth said as consuming darkness erupted from his horns.

* * * * *

"Where have you brought us?" Dr McCoy asked hesitantly as he looked around.

"This is the sideway. We're in the exact same place that we were before except on another dimensional plane... or maybe between planes, depending on who you ask about it." Seth carefully explained.

"The last I heard, the members of your class group only had passive abilities." Dr McCoy said cautiously.

"Um, yeah. You might want to take another look at that. I think that us being together might be changing us." Seth said seriously.

"What was it that you were going to ask me about Marcus?"

"We just thought that I could bring him here to the sideway. That way we could talk privately and have a team meeting without having to move him or worry about waking up Gar." Seth explained.

"So, are you saying that you can 'shift' Marcus without moving him?" Dr McCoy hesitantly asked.

"Yeah. In fact, I could shift him sideway right now if you wanted so that you can see that he doesn't have to move an inch." Seth said, then waited for Dr McCoy's decision.

"Very well, but I expect you to return him to his natural state the moment he shows the first sign of fatigue. He's been through an extensive trauma and needs his rest."

"Hey Jesus! Can you hear me?" Seth asked into the air.

//I wasn't paying attention, but I can now.// Jesus responded.

"It's now that's important. Will you ask Marc if it will be okay if I shift him sideways so that we can talk to him without waking up Gar?"

//Hold on. I'll ask him.//

"If he says it's okay, let me know when he's ready."

//Will do.//

"To whom are you speaking?" Dr McCoy asked curiously.

"Jesus. He's the rat riding in Louie's backpack." Seth answered easily.

//Don't worry Doctor. I don't have any plague germs or fleas or anything like that. I promise.// Jesus tried to assure him.

"Where *are* you?" Dr. McCoy asked as he looked around the dim blue-gray cave that they appeared to be in.

//I'm just a few feet from you, in your regular dimension.// Jesus answered easily, then continued, //Marc says that he's ready if the doctor says it's okay.//

"Can I?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Tell me again, what *exactly* will you be doing?" Dr McCoy asked cautiously.

"If you say it's okay, I'm going to shift Marc here to the same exact space as he is in your dimension. Because of that, he won't have to move at all."

"Do you intend to move his bed as well?"

"No. This pile of stuff right here occupies the same space as his bed. I guess the universes do that automatically."

"He also has medical devices, most notably a catheter, that probably need to be considered."

"I think that since our clothes come with us when we shift, that that should probably come too." Seth said seriously.

"If this doesn't work the way you expect, can you send him right back?"

"Yeah. All I'll have to do is touch him."

"Very well. You may try. But at the first sign of any trouble, I want you to abandon this plan and return him to his bed."

"Whatever you say, Doctor." Seth said confidently, then asked into the air, "Is he ready?"

//He's ready when you are.//

Seth leaned forward and laid his hand on a nonexistent arm.

Before their eyes, Marc resolved into being, complete with his sheets, blanket, and pillow.

"I hope that wasn't too jarring for you." Dr McCoy said in a leading tone.

"I didn't move at all. The rest of the world did." Marc said simply.

"I'm going to go get everyone else. I'll be back in just a second." Seth said quickly, then vanished before either of those present could respond.

* * * * *

It was silent in the darkness until Dr McCoy finally asked, "How are you feeling, Marcus?"

"Like I'm letting Lisa down when she needs me the most. She shouldn't have to face all of this on her own." Marc said frankly.

"You're letting her step up and be the strong one. This could be an important learning and growing experience for her." Dr McCoy said seriously.

Before Marc could respond, a flash of light heralded the arrival of Slash, Seth, Louie, Jesus, Beau, Brian, and Lisa.

"Marc? Are you okay?" Lisa asked as she moved to his side.

"Yeah. I think I'm probably as good as I could possibly be."

"You're not feeling any pain or excessive fatigue, are you?" Dr McCoy asked with concern.

"I'm feeling fine. I promise." Marc said soberly.

"Very well then. I will allow you to have this meeting on the provision that you return to MedLab immediately at the first sign of pain or fatigue." Dr McCoy said seriously.

"Yeah. You got it." Marc said solemnly.

Seth turned to Dr. McCoy and said, "I'm going to send you back. If you need us for anything, just call Jesus' name aloud and he'll hear you."

"Rest assured, I will do that."

At that, Seth placed a hand on the enormous doctor's chest and gave a slight push.

* * * * *

"So this is it? This is our team?" Slash asked appraisingly as he looked around.

"Not all of it." Brian quietly responded.

"Who are we missing?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"The one who will help Lisa make use of her natural abilities." Brian said seriously.

"I don't mean to be a problem, but I have no idea where we are, who *you* are, what we're doing, or what you're talking about." Marc said frankly.

"Seth has the ability to shift us to another dimension, he calls it the sideway. That's where we are. This is Brian, Slash's roommate. What we're doing is having a meeting of our group, the Meerkats, to plan on how we're going to stand together and help each other so mutant hating gunmen and TV news reporters won't be able to push us around." Lisa said firmly.

"And what we're talking about are mutant abilities..." Seth began to say, but was interrupted.

"Not just mutant." Brian quickly added.

"Right." Seth conceded, then continued, "But no matter if we're mutants or not, we have to know who has what ability so that when things get crazy, we'll all know who we can count on to do different things."

"So far, the biggest thing I can do is my blackout fog." Slash said simply as he made a small cloud in his open palm, as an example.

"He's been able to use it to stop news reporters from bothering us two different times now." Seth said with admiration.

"That's right. No matter how great our abilities are, they mean nothing if we can't use them under fire. Slash has already shown us that he can perform when it counts." Lisa said seriously.

"My mutant name is Cricket. What's yours?" Louie asked curiously.

"Slash, I guess."

"That's your *name* name. You need to have a *mutant* name that we call you when we're being a team." Louie said emphatically.

"I guess since I can only do the one trick, I can just be called 'Blackout'." Slash said uncertainly.

"Seth? What about you?" Louie asked excitedly.

"Like Slash said, I've only got the one trick. I guess you can call me 'Sideway'."

"Jesus is already called 'Vile', so what about Beau?" Louie asked seriously.

"I don't have any powers or anything." Beau protested.

"Seth already named you." Brian interjected with a grin.

"Huh?" Beau asked uncertainly.

"I did?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yes. When you wanted to call Beau 'Doc'." Brian said in a leading tone.

"Right. He said I couldn't so I called him 'Tex'." Seth said with a smile.

Beau thought about it for a moment and finally shrugged and said, "I been called worse."

"Do *you* have a team name?" Marc asked Lisa as he reached over to take her hand.

"No. Not yet." Lisa admitted, then quietly said, "I don't really have much of an ability so I figured that they could probably just call me something to do with my mutation, something like 'Bunny'."

"No way." Marc said as he squeezed her hand.

Lisa looked at him with surprise.

"I don't mind if it has to do with your mutation, but I won't go along with it being something that makes you sound small and weak. I *never* want you to feel that way."

"I've personally been to a monument to the largest rabbit anyone has ever seen. Back where I'm from, the genus *Lepus* are a little more respected than in most other places." Beau said frankly, then added with a teasing grin, "I've even heard tell of the rare and

dangerous Jackalope who is said to terrorize the West Texas ranchers."

"Would you like to be called Jackalope?" Marc asked Lisa gently.

"No. But I like the sound of Lepus." Lisa responded thoughtfully.

"Lepus?" Marc asked consideringly, then slowly said, "I like it. It's strong. It sounds worthy of respect."

"What about you, Marc?" Seth asked with a grin.

"I don't have any abilities. I mean, unless you want someone on your team called 'Bullet Sponge'." Marc said unenthusiastically.

"If Lisa can't put herself down with her name, you can't either." Slash said firmly.

"That's right. And I already tried the 'no abilities' thing. They wouldn't go for it." Beau said frankly.

"But I don't have anything special about me to give me a special name." Marc said honestly.

"Brian? You knew about Vile Cricket, do you know Marc's name?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"If we're using team names, you should address me as Chesser. And for Marc to get his name, he's going to have to talk to the expert." Brian said firmly.

"Who's that?" Beau asked with his impatience clearly showing through.

"I'm talking about the one of us who is most knowledgeable about superhero teams." Brian said in a leading tone.

"Oh. Okay. I got it." Seth said to Brian, then turned and asked, "Louie, what team name do you think that Marc should have?"

"Archer." Louie said simply.

After a moment to consider, Seth finally asked, "Why?"

"Because a lot of hero teams have someone who doesn't have special powers except for being a good archer. They're always an important part of the team and usually end up helping everyone do their best."

"I've never even *touched* a bow and arrow." Marc quietly admitted.

"Maybe not, but it might still be a good idea." Slash said thoughtfully.

"How's that?" Marc asked quietly.

"Whether it's a bow and arrow or a crossbow or even a gun, it's still someone with a weapon that doesn't depend on mutant powers to be effective. I think there's a place on the team for someone like that." Slash said seriously.

"Do you want to?" Louie asked hopefully.

After a glance at Lisa, Marc finally said, "Yeah. Okay. Why not?"

"Good. Then that's it, isn't it? We're a team now. Right?" Louie asked excitedly.

"Not quite. We're still one short." Brian said simply.

"C'mon, spit it out. Who is it, Chester?" Beau asked curiously.

"Chesser. And it's going to be up to you to make contact and decide what should be done to make things work out. Me telling you *anything* more will make it not your idea and completely change your motivation. What happens next *has to* be up to you." Brian said firmly.

"That's not going to work if I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing."

//Talk to Emily, then do what you believe is right.// Jesus suggested simply.

"So you know about all of this too?" Beau asked cautiously.

//Of course. Telepathy isn't like talking. It doesn't stop when you shut your mouth. I usually just ignore what doesn't have to do with me and keep the rest to myself.//

"What do you know about Emily?"

//I know that she's a ghost sent by your uncle to encourage and inspire you to learn your craft.//

"Yeah. Well, I just figured most of that out since I got here. But I have a feeling that my uncle doesn't do anything out of the goodness of his heart. He must have had a plan. I don't know what it is or was, but I'm pretty sure it involves backing me into a corner where I have no choice but to do whatever he says." Beau said seriously.

//Excuse me for asking, but does that have anything to do with this?//

"I don't know. I really can't be sure about anything at this point."

"So you're going to spend the rest of your life not doing anything just to spite your uncle?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"No. I'm just not going to make the mistake of believing that my uncle always has my best interest at heart." Beau said frankly.

//Fair enough. But what about Emily?//

"I've always trusted her, but now, knowing that she was sent by my uncle makes me automatically question everything she's ever done, for as long as I've known her."

"That *could* be what your uncle was trying to teach you. Maybe he'd rather see you learn to watch your back than blindly trust the wrong person... even him." Slash said frankly.

"Okay. So what do you expect me to do?" Beau hesitantly asked.

"Talk to Emily. In helping her, you'll also help Lisa." Brian said firmly.

"Sorry Chestnut, I don't think you have any idea of what kind of dark power we're talking about. Before you start volunteering me to do things, you should have *some* idea of the cost involved."

"It's Chesser." Brian reminded him, then continued, "You're right. I don't know about your power. But I *do* know what will be lost if you do nothing. *That* price is too high."

"Okay. I'll *talk* to her. That's all I'm promising for now. But if I end up needing to do some kind of complicated spell, I'm going to need supplies. I don't have *anything* with me. I never thought I would need it." Beau said honestly.

"After you've had your talk, let me know what you need. I may know someone who can help us find supplies for you." Lisa said quietly.

"What are we going to need to do next? I mean, as a team?" Seth asked slowly.

"If Beau's willing to listen to Emily, the first thing should be that, I guess." Brian finished uncertainly.

"Can he do that now?" Seth asked cautiously.

Brian looked to Beau to answer the question.

"I guess I could summon her but I doubt that I could do that here. I'd probably have to go back to our regular dimension to do it." Beau said uncertainly.

"Is there any reason you couldn't do that right now?" Seth asked seriously.

"None that I can think of." Beau said honestly.

"Call out to Jesus if you need for us to do anything." Seth said as he brought a hand up to Beau's chest.

"But..." Beau began to say, but dissolved from existence before he could utter another word.

"Jesus? Would you mind keeping a telepathic ear out for him, just in case?" Seth asked hopefully.

//I can *try*. But I have to warn you, there's an incredible psychic presence here. I suspect that he could mind-blind me in a heartbeat without even trying.//

"Just do what you can. If you lose contact, let me know and I'll bring us back." Seth said simply.

"Do you think you're in charge?" Louie asked Seth curiously.

"I'm in charge of the dimension hopping. Once everyone's where they need to be, I'll step aside and let someone else take over." Seth stated simply.

"Then who *is* in charge?" Louie asked curiously.

"I don't know. Is the new guy going to be our leader?" Seth asked curiously.

"I doubt it." Brian answered seriously, then added, "The leader should probably be someone alive."

"The new guy is *dead*?" Seth asked with surprise.

"Yes. That's how Beau fits into all this, his specialty appears to be Necromancy... death magic." Brian said uncomfortably.

"Is that the only reason that Beau's included with us?" Slash asked curiously.

"I can't answer that. We're all included because we're here and we fit together like pieces of a puzzle. If there's a bigger reason or someone else behind it all, I'm not aware of it." Brian said frankly.

"So this isn't some kind of 'game' scenario that you've concocted?" Lisa asked gently.

"No. Maybe there's someone bigger and better than me at work, but as far as I know, this is us being a team because we're stronger together than we are apart." Brian said frankly.

"I've been saying all along that I need for this to be real." Seth said quietly.

"You're not the only one. I'm chasing a dream and I'm already past the point where I can turn back."

"What point is that?" Lisa asked curiously.

Brian looked at her and considered for a moment before quietly admitting, "My only other future took place in that safe and secure windowless room that Jesus told you about. No matter how much I may end up regretting it, I made my choice. I can't go back."

"Do you want to go back?" Louie slowly asked.

"No. Not right now. I can just envision a future where I regret all of this." Brian said frankly.

"Do you see another one where you don't?" Slash asked curiously.

"At every crossroads I do my best to find the most favorable futures. Right this minute I'm living in the best one that I was able to find." Brian said frankly.

"Is there anything else that we should be doing while Beau's talking to Emily?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Brian? Do you have anything?" Seth asked seriously.

"Not really. I can't see past the decisions that Beau and Emily are going to make. Once they have committed to their courses of action, there will be new scenarios for me to inspire and influence." Brian said frankly.

"That sounds creepy as hell, you know that, right?" Slash asked hesitantly.

"I know that, but I'm not very good with... well, people. From what I've seen, when I'm honest I come off as creepy and weird but when I try to be what people expect me to be I come off as creepy, weird, *and* fake." Brian said regretfully.

"Fair enough." Slash easily accepted.

"What about you, Louie? Do you know of anything else that we should be doing right now to get our team set up right?" Marc asked curiously.

"If we're having a team meeting, then you should call me by my team name. Call me Cricket." Louie said firmly.

Marc reluctantly smiled, then said, "Okay, Cricket. Since you're our expert on superhero teams, what should we be doing to get our team started the right way?"

"Having Sideway on the team gives us a teleporter, not every team gets one of those. But having him makes us pretty high rank." Louie said thoughtfully.

"Plus it's good to know that if we get in too deep that we've always got a back door." Slash said frankly.

"Right." Louie enthusiastically agreed, then continued, "Another thing we've got is Vile, he's a telepath *and* a telekinetic. It's not as rare as having a teleporter, but usually only the best teams get to have psychics."

//It is true that it helps the team to have someone who can defend you against psychic attacks.// Jesus added seriously.

"Yeah. And with Vile Cricket, we have a speedster. The team doesn't always need someone who's super fast, but when they do, there's usually no easy way to work around it." Louie said consideringly.

"Wait. Who's Vile Cricket?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Would you like to give him an amazing demonstration?" Slash asked Louie hopefully.

//Do you want to?// Jesus hesitantly asked.

"Do I want to change into my superhero identity? Oh, let me think about it." Louie said with a broad smile and a hint of a chuckle.

//If we're going to do it, let's do it right.// Jesus said in prelude.

The others in the blue-gray space all devoted their full attention.

//When the people of Westchester are in trouble, who can they turn to? What force of good will rise up to defend and protect them?// Jesus projected in a dramatic voice, then a blur of black seemed to consume Jesus and Louie, reforming them into something that was neither human nor animal.

"Vile Cricket!" The combined being said with flourish.

"Wow. That's really... something." Marc said as he fought to make sense of what he was seeing.

"We don't really have any attacks yet, but we're fast and kind of strong, so if we practice, we'll probably be really good team members." Vile Cricket said enthusiastically.

"Are you Jesus or Louie?" Marc asked uncertainly.

"Some of both, really. We're still working on that, too." Vile Cricket said hesitantly.

"Not bad for only being the second time that you've transformed." Slash said encouragingly.

"We've definitely got to work with Matt about learning some attacks." Vile Cricket said as the black blur began to dissipate.

//It's all just dress-up unless we're able to do some damage when we need to.// Jesus said frankly.

"We'll be having defense training at seven in the morning. I trust Matt. I think he'll help you learn as much as you want to know." Slash said confidently.

"Yeah, and after school we're going to get to take driver training." Lisa told Marc enthusiastically.

"We will?" Slash asked suddenly.

"Yeah. Matt told us after you and Seth had already left to take Beau to class." Louie explained.

"Your class is Tuesday and Thursday with Clark, John and... I think he said Trey." Lisa finished uncertainly.

//Yes. That's what he said.// Jesus confirmed.

"Brian, Beau, and I will be having class on Monday and Wednesday." Lisa happily announced.

"I had always thought that we'd learn to drive together, but I guess that this way you'll get to drive me around wherever I need to go, like my own personal chauffeur." Marc said with a wistful smile, obviously trying to hide his disappointment with humor.

"Nope. Matt already said that you'll be in our Monday-Wednesday class as soon as you're ready to go back to school." Lisa finished with a giggle.

"We kind of got sidetracked there for a minute." Marc said, obviously trying to change the subject, "Louie, tell me more about how our team stacks up against other teams. What do we still need?"

"Call me Cricket. And even though we've got a really good start at being a team, right now, what we're missing is fighters. I mean, Lepus is strong and that's really good for us, but it probably won't do us much good if she doesn't know how to use her strength." Louie said thoughtfully.

"If everything goes right, Beau will be taking care of Lisa's situation. I'm a little more worried about Marc and Beau. While hand-to-hand would be good for them to know, it's probably not going to be enough if we end up standing against mutants with even a little bit of fire power." Brian said seriously.

"What do you suggest?" Marc asked thoughtfully.

"I actually think that Louie's probably right about the 'Archer'. I think that both of you would do very well to learn how to use a range weapon, maybe more than one." Brian said intently.

"Is this from you using your ability or something that you thought of?" Lisa asked curiously.

"I foresaw this exchange, but I haven't chosen any preferred outcome. I've just taken some time to think about it and decide what I think is the best way to protect the most vulnerable members of our team."

//What are the chances that Beau will be able to do for the rest of you what he's doing for Lisa?// Jesus asked curiously.

"There *is* no chance that I am aware of." Brian said simply.

"What does that mean?" Marc quietly asked.

//As I understand it, Brian's ability is to follow strands of possibilities to their conclusion, then determine which of those strands to empower and bring to realization.// Jesus said speculatively.

"Yeah. But he can also make people forget that he even exists. If he wanted to, he could probably walk out on us and we'd never even know that he'd ever been part of the team." Lisa said simply, then glanced in Brian's direction with question.

"Yeah. I could." Brian admitted.

"Jesus, do you think you could tell if Brian did that?" Marc asked cautiously.

//I might know it if he were *thinking* about doing it, but if he hit me with his power... I might just block the random unknown stranger out of habit.// Jesus said frankly.

"You don't have to worry about me leaving, I've got no place else to go." Brian said simply.

"Actually, I think that's what bothers me. If you're only staying due to a lack of other options, then we'd probably be doing you the

most good by finding more options for you and getting you somewhere that you'll be happy." Marc said seriously.

"No. I really *do* want to be here. I *chose* to be here. I'm just saying that if it doesn't work out for some reason that I don't have any other place to go. I've already burned those bridges." Brian said anxiously.

"How did you do that?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

"Back in Portland, where I'm from, I used my ability to erase myself from everyone's memories. No one remembers that I was ever there. I *can't* go back."

"Even your parents?" Lisa asked in a whisper.

"Especially my parents." Brian confirmed, then continued, "When they found out that I was a mutant, all they wanted me to do was hide it. When this place opened and I said that I wanted to go to a mutant school and learn how to use my ability, they threatened to cut me out of their lives... I guess everyone ended up getting what they wanted."

"So you travelled all the way across the country on your own to be a part of this team?" Marc asked dubiously.

"Being forgettable has advantages. Just keep your head down, your mouth shut, and travel with the herd. But yeah. One thing led to another and on to another, so I didn't really think about it in that way. I guess I did kind of take a leap of faith, didn't I?" Brian finished with a smile.

"Is it enough?" Louie asked as he looked at Marc seriously.

"Is what enough?" Marc asked curiously.

"Is what he went through and what he gave up enough for him to keep being part of our team?" Louie asked frankly.

"That's not up to me to decide." Marc immediately defended.

"What do you think would happen if you said that you didn't want Brian on the team? Who'd stand against you? Who'd stand with Brian?" Louie asked persistently.

"Why would you even ask that?" Marc asked anxiously.

"Even if you're not *the* leader, you're *one of* the leaders. I just want to be sure how you feel about the members of the team before I start thinking of them as my friends." Louie said honestly.

"Okay." Marc said in acceptance, then thought to ask, "What was the question again?"

"Has he given up enough to prove that he's serious?" Louie asked frankly.

"I honestly don't know why you think my opinion matters. But for what it's worth, I'd say that Brian's proven that he's serious about wanting to be here with us." Marc said as he watched for Brian's reaction.

"Louie probably thinks your opinion matters because you nearly died. Maybe he thinks that because of what you've been through, your place on the team is already assured. I can't say how it happened, but I agree with him that you're being looked at as one of the leaders." Slash said seriously.

"And you're another one." Marc countered.

"I guess so." Slash easily admitted, then added with a smile, "As Beau would say, I've been called worse."

"Beau's one too, isn't he?" Lisa asked curiously.

"Yes... I think so." Marc said thoughtfully.

"What about you, Jesus?" Slash asked curiously.

//No. I can't see me being a leader.// Jesus said frankly.

"I think that you're probably like me; not really a leader but willing to step up when it's something you're good at." Seth said seriously.

After a moment, Jesus quietly responded, //I will be honored to stand beside you as an advisor to the leaders.//

"Yeah. Sounds good." Seth said with a grin.

"How are you feeling Marc? Are you getting tired yet?" Lisa asked with concern.

"No. I feel wonderful right now, like we're doing something really important. Everything feels right." Marc said peacefully.

"Okay. I just don't want for you to get too worn out." Lisa said gently.

"I'll tell you at the first sign." Marc promised.

"I think Beau is going to be joining us again soon." Brian said distantly.

"Do you need more light so you can do your dice and cards?" Seth quietly asked.

"No. I'm not influencing anything that's happening right now. If Beau doesn't make all of these decisions completely on his own, it makes all of it meaningless later." Brian said seriously.

"Then how do you know that Beau is going to be joining us soon?" Seth asked curiously.

"Because I just saw one of the 'strands' of a possible future become stronger and several others fall away as no longer being possible. I think that means that Beau has talked to Emily and that she's helped him to make contact with 'Fallen'."

"Is that the new guy's name?" Lisa asked curiously.

"According to the strand that I'm seeing, that's his team name. In private, we'll call him 'Piotr'."

[Chapter 14: Offset Redemption]

"Let me see if I've got this right." Seth said slowly.

After a nod from Brian, Seth continued, "The new guy's name is 'Piotr' and his team name is 'Fallen'. Right?"

Brian nodded.

"And he's going to help Lisa use her mutant ability better?"

Brian nodded again.

"And he's dead?"

Brian once again nodded.

"Okay. I think I must be missing something." Seth finally admitted.

"Beau has an ability to do... *something*. Whatever it is, it's supposed to help... I guess." Brian finished weakly.

"You guess? You mean you don't know?" Lisa hesitantly asked.

"Not really. I've seen that if Beau talks to Emily that things have a chance of working out. I'm still a little fuzzy on the *how*."

"If that's true, then how sure are you that you're not responsible for what happened to Marc?" Lisa asked firmly.

"Maybe if I'd never come here, events might have played out differently. I don't know. All I can tell you for sure is that I didn't intentionally influence events so that Marc would be hurt. In my glimpses of possible futures, I didn't see anything happening to Marc at all. In fact, I don't think I ever really noticed him being there." Brian finished with an apologetic look at Marc.

"Does that mean I have the 'forgettable' ability, same as you?" Marc asked with a grin.

"I don't know. You might have a non-mutant variant." Brian said as a slight smile found its way onto his face.

"Considering all my other gifts, or lack thereof, maybe you could show me some forgetability tricks. It might come in handy." Marc said with a grin.

"I never... I didn't think anyone could ever look at my ability as having value. But if you're serious about it, I'd love to help you learn what I know about stealth and camouflage techniques. I've actually studied some things to try and augment my natural ability."

"Not just me. Unless Beau knows some tricks he hasn't told us about, he might be able to use your help too." Marc said seriously, then finished with a smile.

"Actually, there's a chance that any of us could use that ability. If something happens that we can't use our regular abilities for some reason, it might be good for us to know how to fade into the background until the danger has passed." Seth said thoughtfully.

"You could be right about that. Maybe we could talk to Matt about including that in our defense training." Brian cautiously suggested.

"Or... maybe Matt doesn't need to know everything about *all* of our training and abilities." Marc slowly suggested.

"Why do you think that?" Seth asked curiously.

"Don't get me wrong. It's not personal. Matt's been nothing but nice to me and Lisa. I'm just thinking that it might be best not to share every detail of our team with every person that we meet." Marc said seriously.

"He *did* say that we should take off the training wheels and do for ourselves." Seth said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. He really wants us to be on our own." Louie agreed.

//But doesn't he need to know about our defences to help us strategize for a danger scenario?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"That would probably be easiest, but it might not be best for us in the long run." Marc said thoughtfully.

Louie enthusiastically nodded, then continued the thought by saying, "With all the telepaths and witches and who knows what else running around, someday we might end up fighting Matt's evil twin or his clone or him under mind control. It happens in superhero comics all the time." Louie said seriously.

"Even though it's probably really unlikely that we'll have to face Matt's evil twin, that doesn't change anything. I think Marc and Louie are right. We should keep from telling anyone too much about us. That also includes Clark, John, and Ronny." Slash said slowly.

"And Gar." Marc added.

Seth regretfully nodded his agreement.

"So, if I'm getting this right, we're going to be doing our defensive training with Matt, and doing what he tells us, but then when he's not around, we'll teach each other and try to learn new things to give us an extra advantage when we need it." Marc said uncertainly.

"This is kind of the point of having a team..." Slash began to say, but was interrupted.

"...to exclude people?" Lisa reluctantly asked.

"To become more to each other than to outsiders. I see it as taking what's being given to us and making it our own. Try thinking of it as another way for us to become more than the sum of our parts." Slash said with increasing confidence.

"Don't teachers always want you to use what they teach you and take it to the next level so that someday you can go beyond their teaching?" Marc asked consideringly.

"Not the teachers I've had." Brian said frankly.

"Should we keep Dr. Hoffman out too? I really trust her and I don't want to lie to her." Lisa said anxiously.

"I'm not planning on telling her everything, but I don't think we have to lie either. If the subject comes up, we can just tell her that there are team things that we're choosing not to share outside the group." Marc slowly said.

"Yeah. And if there's something we need and Matt can't get it for us, she's someone else we can go to." Seth quietly added.

"What about Quaid?" Louie said quietly.

A few looks went around the group and it was finally Slash who said, "You're a member of the team. We can tell you what we think, but we can't command you."

"When I first got here I was afraid of everyone." Louie said distantly.

//Terrified.// Jesus interjected.

Louie smiled at the response, then continued, "But then I got Seth as a roommate, and he was really nice to me.

"Then I met Quaid and he wanted to talk to me and spend time with me and find out about the stuff I like and stuff like that.

"Quaid even showed me that I was in a safe place when we woke everyone up this morning and everyone laughed and thought it was funny.

"Now you're calling me your superhero expert and asking me what I think about stuff."

"So what do you want to do about Quaid?" Marc asked cautiously.

"I know how you feel about me telling him stuff, so I'll look at each thing and decide how much he needs to know about it." Louie said seriously.

"That sounds like an excellent way to go. I think that would be a good rule of thumb for all of us." Marc said seriously.

"Yeah. Just as long as we're all sure to let everyone know who we're letting in on things." Seth added earnestly.

"Right. No one needs to worry if they tell someone..." Marc began to say, but stopped at a distant, inquisitive look on Brian's face.

"What is it Chesser?" Marc asked cautiously.

//Tex is ready to come back if Sideway will bring him in.//

"Yeah. I'll get him." Seth said as his horns flashed brightly to reveal Beau's location in the room.

"Is that what you were reacting to?" Marc asked Brian quietly.

"Once all the decisions were made and committed to, a new series of futures presented themselves. I just wanted to take a quick look at them to see if any of them are time sensitive." Brian explained.

"Is there anything we need to worry about?" Marc asked cautiously.

"My power isn't absolute. I can't see all of everything. But what I'm foreseeing right now is the possibility of one or more gunmen coming for Beau. And if they come, they won't think twice about shooting whoever else gets in their way." Brian said urgently.

"Would it be better if I stayed away?" Beau asked as he stepped forward to join the group.

"No. We've had one shooting. That's more than enough. There's not going to be any more." Marc said firmly.

"I like that plan. Let's do that!" Seth agreed wholeheartedly.

"But this means that all of us are going to need to buckle down and get serious about our training." Slash said firmly.

"As inspirational as that sounds, I think it might be better if we let Matt and the X-Men take care of it." Lisa said anxiously.

"You see, that's the thing..." Marc said to her urgently, "...we can't be with Matt and the X-Men all day, every day. Our only choices are to live in fear and isolation or learn how to take care of ourselves."

"Or die." Beau quietly added.

"We're not really considering that as one of our options." Marc countered.

"Remind me later and I'll tell you some things about Necromancy. It might actually be more of an option than you'd think." Beau said frankly.

"Thank you. No." Marc said simply, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

"So, Beau, did you find out anything that will help me?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"Oh, yeah. It took us a few minutes to figure out what we were supposed to do. But after talking to Piotr, I think there's a pretty good chance that we'll be able to stabilize him and perform the necessary rituals."

"To do what?" Lisa asked seriously.

"It's kind of hard to describe without it sounding really creepy. I suppose that if you get technical about it, you could call it possession... but it's not as bad as it sounds." Beau hurried to assure her.

"I've got to be honest. The word 'possession' is really putting me off. Do you think you could explain it so that it doesn't sound like I'm going to become some kind of soulless monster trying to devour the brains of everyone I know and love?" Lisa asked weakly, trying to cover her nervousness with humor.

"That hardly ever happens." Beau tried to assure her, then before she could react he continued, "But what we'll actually be doing is making a... think of it as a cloak. When things get dangerous, you'll

be able to drape it over you and you'll have Piotr's basic skill set and years of experience."

"That seems a little bit unfair." Lisa said quietly.

"He's dead. He doesn't need them anymore." Beau said frankly, then thought to add, "Besides, he wants you to have them."

"He does? I mean... how? Didn't you *just* say that he was dead?"

"I summoned his spirit to talk to him. He's in a really bad place right now so I offered him my help and presented him with his options." Beau said in prelude, then continued, "Basically, I could leave him be, in which case, he would dissipate over time. I could cross him over, which isn't really an attractive option in his case."

"Why not?" Lisa felt compelled to ask.

"The afterlife of those who commit suicide is rarely a good one." Beau said regretfully.

"We'll just have to take your word for that." Marc said weakly.

"Yeah. You're the expert." Louie added with a grin.

"What we ended up doing was discussing different ways that we could give Lisa access to Piotr's ability; to use his exceptional strength and all the years of experience that go along with it."

"What did you come up with?" Marc asked cautiously.

"To put it simply, it's possible for me to imbue a physical item, let's just say it's a cloak for now, because that's symbolically how it works."

"How's that?" Marc asked slowly.

"When Lisa puts it on, Piotr will be spiritually standing behind her, not exactly controlling her, but encouraging her movements. Lisa will always be in control, but Piotr will be able to help her make the best decisions and bypass some of the mistakes that often come with having exceptional strength." Beau carefully explained.

"And when she takes the cloak off, he's gone?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Theoretically, yes." Beau reluctantly confirmed.

"What do you mean 'Theoretically'?" Marc asked firmly.

"The truth is, sarks don't last forever. They fail. It's not a matter of 'if' it will happen, but 'when'. I can't predict what will happen to Piotr's essence when the sark finally does fail, but he's willing to forego his other options so that he can help Lisa. He wants to pass his skills and experience on to someone who can make good use of them."

"So Lisa's just going to have a Piotr coat that she puts on when she wants to fight?" Slash asked cautiously.

"Something like that." Beau confirmed.

"What is Piotr going to do when he's not helping Lisa?" Marc asked cautiously.

"He will be bound to the sark. When it's not being worn, he will exist in a state of limbo, barely aware of the world around him or the passage of time." Beau carefully explained.

"That's horrible." Lisa gasped.

"I'm open to other suggestions." Beau said frankly.

"Can't you at least give him a gameboy or something like that to do?" Seth quietly suggested.

"He won't have enough of a physical essence to be able to play it. The most he might be able to manage is spelling words on the spirit board or maybe some bumps or knocks." Beau said seriously.

"Even if he's dead, he shouldn't have to be all alone. We need to find a way to include him on the team, even at times like this, when we're planning what to do next." Seth said passionately.

"It's not anything that I've ever thought of doing, but Piotr has a very powerful presence. If I'm careful to make the sark so that it's not too heavy, I might be able to embody him as a sheet ghost." Beau said speculatively.

"Sheet ghost?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. You know how a kid dresses up like a ghost and wears a sheet and says 'Boo!?' It's just like that, minus the kid." Beau explained.

"So you're going to make Piotr wear a sheet?" Seth asked cautiously, obviously feeling that he wasn't comprehending some essential part of their plan.

"Not a literal sheet. That would probably be too heavy for him. But for the purposes of our discussion, it's close enough." Beau said seriously.

"So when Lisa puts the sheet on, Piotr will... do what?" Marc hesitantly asked.

"If you're uncomfortable with the word 'possession', how about the word 'merge'?" Beau asked cautiously.

//If you think about it, that's *exactly* what Louie and I do when we become Vile Cricket.// Jesus said frankly.

"That *is* true." Lisa slowly acknowledged.

"Good. Again, using the imagery of a cloak or a veil you can imagine Piotr guiding and encouraging Lisa to make the best use of her strength in a given situation." Beau said seriously.

"So, does that mean that before he died, Piotr was super-strong too?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yes. His place on his team was pretty much what Lisa's place on our team is probably going to be." Beau said frankly.

"And he committed suicide?" Slash asked quietly.

"Yes. Although I don't have any reason to believe that one thing has anything to do with the other." Beau said honestly.

"Is it going to be safe for Lisa? What are the chances that whatever caused him to commit suicide are going to start working on Lisa, trying to get her to do the same thing?" Marc asked seriously.

"Piotr told me that when he was alive, he had problems... a disorder. It messed with his mind pretty bad and sometimes he made bad decisions because of it." Beau tried to explain.

"Is he better now?" Slash asked cautiously.

"From the way he described it, it sounds like what he had was some sort of a physical defect or imbalance. Now that he's been separated from his body, he doesn't have the compulsive urges that he had in life." Beau slowly explained.

"That's if you believe everything he tells you." Slash carefully offered.

"He didn't make exaggerated claims to make himself look better or berate himself to try and gain my sympathy. He told me what happened to him in fairly straightforward terms and I had no problem believing it. I can't *promise* that he's telling the truth, but I believe that he is." Beau said honestly.

"What do you need to be able to create your sheet-thing?" Marc slowly asked.

"Some silk or something else that's really light and airy. It will need to be as lightweight as possible." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Like this?" Seth asked as he pinched a sheet of something that looked like cobwebs from nearby.

"I don't even know what that is." Beau said honestly.

"Neither do I. But if it needs to be super-ultra light, this stuff really is..." Seth said seriously as he handed the wispy sheet of ephemeral strands to Beau.

"But if you change your light on it, will it turn into razor wire or wet ramen noodles?" Slash asked curiously.

"Yeah. I guess you're right." Seth said regretfully.

"No. This might actually work. I'm going to have to try a few things first to be sure, but there's a good chance that I'll be able to use your ability to alter states of matter in my spelling. This could end up being the perfect shroud for Piotr. Not only could it be more durable than cloth, but it would also be able to perform functions that a normal sheet or veil couldn't." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Can you do it right now?" Seth asked cautiously.

"No. I wouldn't be able to do anything with it. The first thing I'm going to need is magic supplies." Beau said seriously.

"Seth, if you'll let me out, I can go check on that right now." Lisa said seriously.

"I should go with you so that I can describe what I'll need." Beau hurried to add.

"If the meeting is breaking up, I think I'm ready to go back to the real world now. I'm starting to feel a little tired." Marc said quietly.

"Remember that Gar might still be asleep. We'll need to be quiet when we go back." Beau cautioned.

"We can change dimensions in the hallway, if that would be better." Seth cautiously offered.

"It probably would be. That way we aren't as likely to startle someone into making noise." Slash agreed.

"As soon as we're done getting Beau's supplies, I'll be back to stay with you." Lisa told Marc gently.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd really rather you go with the team to speak for both of us. When you come back later, you can tell me all about what you guys have been able to accomplish." Marc said hopefully.

"It's a deal." Lisa said warmly, then leaned in to give Marc a kiss.

The others smiled at each other and waited for them to finish.

As soon as Lisa stood, Seth stepped forward and gently placed a hand on Marc's arm.

As all watched, Marc faded from existence.

* * * * *

"Lisa, how sure are you that you can get me the magic supplies that I need?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I know someone who knows magic. That's about all that I can tell you." Lisa said seriously.

"Finding 'real' magic supplies can be a challenge." Beau once again cautioned.

"All we can do is ask." Lisa weakly responded.

"Do you two want to be next?" Seth asked seriously.

"You're really getting into this aren't you?" Lisa asked with an amused grin at him.

"This is what I can do that no one else can. I'm going to do my best so you guys will always know that you can count on me." Seth said earnestly.

"I'm right there with you. The thing I'm planning to do with Piotr might end up being the only big thing that I can find to do. So I'm going to pull out all the stops so that when it's all done, I'll know that I've done my absolute best."

"Are you two ready?" Seth asked seriously.

"Yeah. We'd better get this thing going."

"I'll follow you through that arch..." Seth said as he pointed, then continued, "As you pass through, I'll send you back so that you'll appear in the hall."

"Sounds good." Lisa said as she started walking with Beau at her side.

As they passed through the arch, Seth placed a hand on each of their backs, only for an instant.

* * * * *

"Do you know where we're going?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Back in there, to start with." Lisa said as she pointed back to the room where Marc and Gar were recovering.

As Lisa and Beau quietly walked in, they both noticed that Marc was already fast asleep.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to visit for a while yet. Both of my patients need their rest." Dr. McCoy informed the pair.

"I was actually looking for Tara. I needed to ask her something." Lisa said quietly.

"If I'm not mistaken, Tara is in her childhood development class right now." Dr McCoy said thoughtfully.

"I guess we can talk to her later. Do you know when her class lets out?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"The class that she's taking also functions as a daycare for the working parents around the school. I don't think anyone would mind if you stopped in to visit, although you might be asked to hold or feed a baby or two while you're there." Dr. McCoy finished with a smile.

"Do you think it'd be alright if we went in for a minute and asked her a couple questions?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind at all. I think that she might enjoy a bit of distraction at this point in her day." Dr. McCoy said speculatively.

"We're not familiar with this place, do you know what room she'd be in?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Certainly. The room we're using as a daycare is located down the hallway to the left of the main entrance, as you walk in, it's the second door on the right." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"Thank you Doctor. When Marc wakes up, be sure to let him know that I'll be visiting him later." Lisa said with a loving glance in Marc's direction.

"I have no doubt that he already knows, but I will be sure to relay your message nonetheless." Dr. McCoy said pleasantly.

Lisa looked to Beau, and seeing that he was ready, led the way to the door.

* * * * *

"I thought you were talking to someone about supplies." Slash said as Lisa and Beau walked into the hallway.

"We needed to find out where she is first." Lisa explained, then thought to ask, "Where are you guys going to be when we're done?"

"I don't know, but what I'd really like to do is find a place where we can practice with our abilities where we won't be in anyone's way." Slash said frankly.

"Now that Beau's made his decisions, I could use a few minutes with my dice and cards to help provide us the best options." Brian said seriously.

"Thanks for staying out of my stuff with Piotr. I feel a lot better knowing that everything that happened was 'real'." Beau said sincerely.

"That was the whole point of me staying out of it. But now it would probably be a good idea for me to use my influence before too many random things creep into our path. When that happens, it's usually not a good thing." Brian said reluctantly.

//You influencing the random factors causes them to want to align against us.// Jesus said speculatively.

"The more I use my power, the more off-the-wall random things seem to happen when I'm not using it." Brian admitted.

//I was wondering about that. It seemed like you were getting a benefit without paying a price. But now I can see that the price is that you're on a slippery slope. If you don't maintain a balance, you lose control and it buries you.// Jesus said thoughtfully.

"I don't have it all figured out, but it's something like that." Brian reluctantly confirmed.

//If you would like, there is someone who I can contact to find a place where we can practice our abilities.// Jesus said slowly.

"Who are you going to contact?" Seth asked cautiously.

//I believe Matt referred to him as 'The Professor'. I can sense his presence very strongly and I am certain that he knows exactly where we are and what we are doing.// Jesus said somewhat distantly.

"I think I know who that is. I met him on Thanksgiving. His name is Professor Xavier and this is his home. He's the one the Xavier Institute is named after." Slash interjected.

//Would you like for me to ask him?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"Yeah. See if he's got a place for us to practice. If he does, then we can go there while Lisa and Beau get their stuff worked out." Slash said seriously.

//Got it.// Jesus said simply, then fell mentally silent, at least to those in the hallway with him.

* * * * *

//Is this Professor Xavier?// Jesus asked hesitantly.

//Yes. And I have gathered that you are called 'Jesus'.// Professor Xavier cautiously responded.

//Louie was in a fragile state at the time due to a recent exorcism attempt by his family... never mind. The name kind of stuck with me and now I'm used to it.// Jesus said nervously.

//Understood.//

//You've been watching us, even at the Wagner school, you must be incredibly powerful.//

//Yes. Quite. Beyond that, I use a device to augment my natural abilities which allows me to extend my reach quite a bit.//

//I can see that being handy.// Jesus easily admitted, then cautiously asked, //So is there somewhere around here that my team can go to practice with their awakening abilities?//

//Yes. We have an area dedicated to just such a purpose. If you will go down the hall, past the elevator, the 'Danger Room' will be on your right.//

//'Danger Room'? Is that something we should be worried about?// Jesus asked hesitantly.

//Once your team has attained a certain level of skill, we may see value in using the equipment to challenge your teammates. But for now, it's simply an open space where they will be able to use their abilities without having to worry about breaking anything.// Professor Xavier assured him.

//I'll let them know. Thank you, Professor.// Jesus said respectfully.

//I understand your need to get everything organized and established. But when things are a bit more settled, I would like very much to invite your team to stop by for a visit and perhaps even train with the X-Men so that everyone can get a sense of each others' abilities.//

//I'll be sure to mention it to the team. I think that they'll probably enjoy that idea.// Jesus said pleasantly.

//Lisa's getting anxious, so I'll let you go.//

//Thank you again, Professor.//

* * * * *

//The professor said that there's a room at the other end of this hall where we can practice without having to worry about breaking anything.// Jesus said seriously.

"So you told him all about who we are and what we're planning on doing?" Slash asked with concern.

//No. I just asked him about the room. I think he was probably aware of us before we were aware of us.// Jesus said frankly.

"If you'll show us where you'll be, we'll go and do what we need to do." Lisa said anxiously.

//Just go back the way we came, past the elevator. The room we'll be using will be on the right.// Jesus said simply.

As the group started walking, Seth quietly asked, "So this professor guy knows what all of us are thinking right now?"

//He knows that we're here and why. As far as individual people and their thoughts, I doubt that he'd have a good reason to go that deep.//

"But he could if he wanted to, right?" Seth asked to verify.

//Yes.// Jesus confirmed, then added, //But so could I.//

"Yeah. But that's different. You're a real person to me. I *trust* you. I don't know this professor guy and where he's coming from. Knowing that he can root around in my brain makes me nervous." Seth said honestly.

//Well, thank you for calling me a 'real person', I will take that in the spirit that it was intended. As far as trusting the professor... I'm not going to tell you that you should. The most I can offer on the subject is that there's not much you can do about it. If Professor Xavier wanted to read you for some reason, I doubt very seriously that I could stop him. On the other hand, if he were trying to control you or mesmerize you with an illusion, I think I could probably detect that and I might even be able to disrupt it.// Jesus said thoughtfully.

"Do *you* trust Professor Xavier?" Beau asked cautiously.

//I don't particularly *distrust* him.// Jesus hesitantly responded.

"But..." Seth said in a leading tone.

//But what?// Jesus automatically responded, obviously playing dumb.

"But do you think he's going to try to murder us, steal our abilities, make us his mind slaves, recruit us, or make us cookies?" Seth asked impatiently.

//I can't say anything for sure, but from our discussion, I got the impression that he wants for us to form our team and to get comfortable with our abilities. Once that's all done, he would like for us to meet with his team and maybe even train with them a little, I suppose so that all of us can test our abilities against some new opponents.// Jesus finished thoughtfully.

"So no mind-enslavement?" Seth asked to be sure.

//Or cookies.// Jesus confirmed.

"Is this it?" Lisa asked as the group stopped outside a huge steel door.

//Yes. It's called the 'Danger Room', although I have been assured that this is simply a place where we will be able to forego restraint without having to worry about breaking valuable equipment.// Jesus said seriously.

"Good. Then we'll meet you back here." Lisa said seriously, then glanced at Beau to see if he was ready.

"We'll be upstairs in the nursery if you need us for anything." Beau added.

//I should be able to contact both of you telepathically if something comes up that you need to know about.// Jesus said seriously.

"Excellent. Good to know." Beau said with a smile before following Lisa back down the hallway, toward the elevator.

[Chapter 15: Forge and Fire]

"Tara? Do you mind if we come in?" Lisa quietly asked from the doorway.

"Lisa? What are you doing here? Is everything alright?" Tara asked with immediate concern.

"Everything's fine. Do you mind if we come in and ask you something?" Lisa asked more urgently.

"Yes, of course. Please come in." Tara said softly as she held a baby in her arms.

"Who are *you*?" A young teen girl asked breathlessly.

"My name is Lisa. What's yours?"

"I'm Clarissa and these are my friends Artie and Janine." Clarissa said in an awestruck voice, then added in a whisper, "You're really pretty."

"Thank you." Lisa said shyly.

Beau smiled at the interaction, then decided to take it upon himself to complete their mission.

"Lisa brought me here so that we could ask you something, but she seems to have suddenly developed a following." Beau quietly explained as he approached.

"What can I help you with?" Tara asked pleasantly.

"Lisa thought that you might be able to help me find some... supplies for a project that I'm going to be doing. A, um... witchcraft project." Beau finished reluctantly.

"What exactly are you needing?" Tara asked hesitantly.

"I don't have anything with me, so to start with, I'm going to need the basics. I'll need a cauldron, at least two braziers, most of the

standard herbs and maybe some extra mandrake root, if you can get it." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Would you like for that mandrake root to be harvested by dogs under the light of a full moon?" Tara asked professionally.

"That's nearly impossible to come by." Beau asked happily.

"I know someone I can ask." Tara said pleasantly.

"What about the more... religiously sensitive ingredients?" Beau cautiously asked.

"Before we go any further, I need to tell you that if you're going to be demon summoning, I'm afraid I won't be able to help you."

"No. No demons, but I *will* be using some of the same supplies." Beau said hesitantly.

"When will you be needing these things?" Tara asked cautiously.

"There isn't any emergency, but we'd like to do it as soon as we can. There's a lot of other stuff we won't be able to do until this gets done." Beau carefully explained.

"Stay right here. If you'll hold Thomas, I can get you the person who can speed all of this along." Tara said as she stood. After a moment of apparent indecision, Beau accepted the baby that Tara had been holding into his arms.

"This will just take a minute." Tara assured him before hurrying away.

Beau looked across the room to where a group of children and young teenagers surrounded Lisa and seemed to be hanging on her every word.

When she noticed, she quietly mouthed, "Sorry." to him.

Beau broke into a wide smile as he said, "Don't even worry about it. I got this."

The baby in Beau's arms looked up curiously at the sound, but didn't fuss.

Beau was immediately transfixed by the interested gaze of the tiny person that he was holding.

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"Andrew said that he can take you now if you're ready to go." Tara said as she returned.

"Now? Right now?" Beau asked in astonishment as he awkwardly transferred the baby into her waiting arms.

"Yes. That's the 'now' I was talking about." Tara said with a timid, teasing grin, then she added, "He said that he's at a good breaking point but he can't be away too long, so you'd better be ready to go when he gets here."

"Ready to go where?" Beau asked in confusion.

"Mizrith." Andrew's voice said from behind Beau, causing him to jump.

"Mizrith? Isn't that a demonic realm?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We can talk along the way. I don't want to leave Icheb in charge of the class for too long. Those kids will eat him alive." Andrew explained as a hole in reality opened in front of them.

"If you don't need for me to go with you, I can wait for you here." Lisa said from amongst her teen and pre-teen admirers.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Beau said before being whisked away in a blur of mist and movement.

* * * * *

"Where are we?" Beau asked as he tried to make sense of what little he was able to see in the meager light cast by slightly glowing crystals all around them.

"Mizrith, The Wizard's Cove... well, their ante-room. We'd better get inside before someone teleports in on top of us." Andrew said as he guided Beau to walk through a crack in the wall, which turned out to be a hallway.

"Are you saying that this is a magic shop located within a demonic realm?" Beau asked anxiously.

"Yeah. From what Tara was saying, you need some legitimate magic supplies. This is one of the best sources that I know of. You can get things here that don't even exist in our world." Andrew said as he led the way into a large crystal cavern littered with boxes, barrels and bags.

"BAA-JAA!" A dark-red being with a mane and long beard joyfully bayed.

"Jo-va Na'balim!" Andrew called back as he made a gesture in the being's direction.

"Baa-Jaa!" The being called less forcefully, but directed his attention entirely on Beau.

As Andrew leaned in to quietly instruct Beau in the proper protocol, Beau confidently responded, "Na-bleet!"

"Zhash-hu clenn?" The red being asked intently.

"Ga-zhash tu." Beau responded simply.

The shopkeeper seemed to be satisfied with the answer and went about his business.

"You're a Gypsy?" Andrew asked in surprise.

"The woman who taught me magic was." Beau said simply.

"You knowing her magic would have you counted as part of her clan." Andrew observed as they began walking around the shop, then thought to ask, "Did she also teach you Ottoman Z'nor?"

"She called it 'gutter Z'nor', but yeah, she's the one who taught me." Beau confirmed.

"Tara was saying that you basically needed an entire workshop of supplies." Andrew said frankly.

"Mostly, yeah. I don't have anything with me and the spell that I'm planning on doing is fairly complex." Beau said honestly.

"If you wouldn't mind me making some assumptions, I'm guessing that you don't want to ask for help or to get other people involved, but you won't be able to do what you need to do all on your own. So, as much as you'd rather not, you've decided to suck it up and ask anyway. How close am I?"

"Pretty close."

"Well, here's what I was thinking. There are a couple witches around Xavier's who would benefit from having a dedicated workshop. If you wouldn't be totally against the idea, we could pool our equipment, you could get the things you need for your spelling and when it's done we'd still have our workshop available for whoever of us needs it."

"From what Tara said, I'm guessing that you aren't going to have any demon summoners in your workshop." Beau said in a leading tone.

"No. I seriously doubt it. So far we've had basic elemental practitioners and we once had an astral witch helping us." Andrew said, then pointed at a bunch of dried herbs hanging off the railings.

"How would you feel about a necromancer?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Okay, I guess. It's not the power you have, as much as how you use it." Andrew said sagely.

"That's where we might have a problem. What if I want to cast a spell that you don't agree with?"

"I think I'm enough of an adult to at least listen to your reasoning before making any judgements about something like that." Andrew said frankly.

"I've run across the spirit of someone who is earthbound. He's completely separated from his body. He committed suicide, so that automatically means no assentation for him. He wasn't evil enough to be damned, so what's left for him is to slowly dissipate on the earthly plane and eventually fade into nothingness." Beau carefully explained.

"It's Peter, isn't it?" Andrew asked regretfully.

"He introduced himself as Piotr, but that's probably him." Beau confirmed, then continued, "He made a mistake. I think I can help him."

"Are you going to try to resurrect him?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"No. I'm a necromancer, not a god. He's long past the point where I could restore him to his own body, even if I *could* gain access to it." Beau said firmly, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

"So what are you wanting to do for him?" Andrew quietly asked.

"It may be possible for me to embody him within a physical object. That *should* keep him from dissipating." Beau said carefully.

"How is that any better than letting him fade away?" Andrew asked with genuine interest.

"It's because he's offered to help Lisa learn to use her strength. If I can pull it all together, Piotr and Lisa can develop a partnership that will not only help her to hold her own in a fight, but allow him to make a contribution and share his unique experience with someone who really needs it."

"If what you're describing were actually that easy, I imagine that there would be soul-possessed items everywhere you looked. What *aren't* you telling me?" Andrew asked as he stopped to look Beau in the eyes.

"It only works on earthbound spirits not wanted by either heaven or hell. The spirit has to be willing. In the case of the suicidal, they've already made that choice, so that usually makes them ineligible. And the final hurdle is that the magical cost is extremely high. Most witches, even dedicated necromancers, simply *can't* do it." Beau explained.

"But you can?" Andrew cautiously asked.

"I can." Beau said simply and confidently.

After a moment to ponder the response, Andrew seemed to snap out of it and asked, "So, what did you need?"

"A cauldron..." Beau began to say, but was interrupted.

"Got it." Andrew chirped.

"Two braziers..."

"Got it." Andrew said again.

"How about I tell you about the rarest items that I'm going to be needing and just assume that you already have most of the common ingredients?" Beau cautiously asked.

"We could do it that way. It'll probably be a lot faster." Andrew admitted.

"I'm pretty sure they're not going to want to take my American Express here. I don't know how I'm going to pay for it." Beau worried aloud.

"Mastercard only, I think. At least I've heard that it's from hell. But either way, you don't have to worry about it. Religious artifacts from Earth are extremely rare and valuable here. We've banked quite a few items that have been sold on consignment for us, so get what you need and don't worry about it."

"From what I see here, I could use some of that needle wood and a few of those enchanted bog bladders for the embodiment ceremony, but most of the rest of this is standard spellcasting

supplies. What I'm looking for is more specialized." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Pardon me for asking, but don't these types of spells usually require a sacrifice?" Andrew asked cautiously.

Beau stopped for a moment and seemed to be debating within himself before carefully responding, "I suppose that's true for a novice or for someone not born to the craft."

"Born to the craft?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Some people, like me, are born with a certain talent and capacity. The whole reason that my uncle saw to it that I learned necromancy was because it would have been too dangerous to leave me untrained. Let's just say that I'm at a level where I can use my own magic to fuel a spell like this."

"But something like that would have to severely impact your life force." Andrew said speculatively.

"You brought us to a magic store hidden within a hell dimension. Did that severely impact *your* life force?" Beau asked firmly.

"Of course not. But my portal ability isn't magical. It's a mutant ability." Andrew said seriously.

"Who's to say what's magic and what isn't. You were born with your capacity and I was born with mine." Beau said simply.

"Okay. Then how about you get the non-standard things so we can get back to our own realm?" Andrew asked hopefully.

"Sounds good. Do you know where they would keep something like bone chips?" Beau asked as he looked around.

"There's a whole graveyard section through the doorway on the other side of that mystic orb display." Andrew said as he pointed.

"Those don't really do anything, do they?"

"They sparkle. That's enough for some people."

* * * * *

"Do you need to go in there?" Andrew asked as he pointed to a dark hallway at the far side of the room.

"Is that where they keep the really dark stuff?" Beau asked cautiously.

"That's what the shopkeeper told me. I've never had a reason to go in there. I'm a fire mage. Most of the graveyard stuff has nothing to do with me."

"Well, it *does* have something to do with me. Even though I would rather not have to, I'll probably need one or two things from in there." Beau said uneasily.

"Go ahead. I'll be over looking at the minerals. I've been meaning to replenish my supplies for a while now and haven't gotten around to it." Andrew said as he pointed in the direction of where he would be going.

"Are these baskets for us to use?" Beau asked uncertainly.

"I'm pretty sure they'd sell you one if you wanted it, but I think they provide them so that you'll buy more." Andrew said before walking away, toward the mineral section.

"I'll just be a few minutes." Beau said as he picked up a basket and placed his needle wood and bog bladders in it before heading toward the nondescript doorway at the side of the room.

* * * * *

After checking the mineral section, Beau found Andrew near the sales clerk, looking at a display.

"What do you think of this?" Andrew asked as he held up a thick leather strap with clear glass globes attached to it with metal, claw-like clasps spaced about six inches apart.

"What is it?" Beau asked slowly.

"The orbs can be empowered with several different spells that you will be able to call up with a touch and a few words." Andrew explained.

"What do you want me to do with that?" Beau asked hesitantly.

"I just thought that you might be able to use something like this when your team is called into action." Andrew said simply.

"It sounds great, but if it does all that, why doesn't everyone have one of those things?"

"Once you set them, they'll only work for you. It uses your own magic to fuel it and each one is one use only. Once you've used it, you have to reinstall the base spell and recharge the orb."

"So why would I want something like that?" Beau asked slowly.

"In a tight situation you'd be able to call up a complex spell in less than a second." Andrew said frankly.

After a moment to consider, Beau quietly said, "I'll take two."

* * * * *

The basket that Beau had been working to fill ended up not being nearly as full as he had expected.

When he and Andrew stepped up to the counter, Beau was amazed. Andrew stood toe-to-toe with the Manticore shopkeeper without so much as flinching as he bartered over the final total of the purchase and the value of the payment. Beau was able to follow along with about half of their negotiations.

In the end, a price was agreed upon. Andrew shook Na'balim's claw, then goodnaturedly clapped him on the shoulder.

Andrew asked Na'balim a question that Beau couldn't quite understand.

Upon receiving a favorable response, Andrew made a motion and their stack of purchases vanished.

Andrew noticed his surprise and said, "I delivered the stuff to my bedroom at home. Once we've had a chance to talk to the professor, we'll know where we'll be setting up to perform your ritual."

"You don't have to bother with that." Beau said anxiously.

"Listen. Like it or not, I'm involved. Until we know each other a *little* better, I'm going to include myself in your ritual spelling. That way I can point it out if you're making a mistake or back you up if you fall short in some regard." Andrew said seriously.

"I guess since I'll be using your supplies, we'll do it your way." Beau reluctantly responded.

"Try thinking of it this way, when we're done, we'll have a place where any of us can go to cast a spell, dedicated to that singular purpose." Andrew said pleasantly.

"I don't really cast all that much. That's part of why I didn't bring anything with me." Beau quietly explained.

"None of us really cast very often, I guess that's why we haven't set up a workshop before this."

The shopkeeper growled a long complicated phrase which Beau loosely interpreted to mean 'we're done'.

"Ready?" Andrew asked cheerily.

"Where are we going next?" Beau asked cautiously.

"We'll see if the professor is available to talk to us." Andrew answered simply as he led the way to their arrival point.

"If he has a place for us, are we going to go there next?" Beau asked curiously.

"We'll go to look at it for a minute, but then I'll have to get back to my class." Andrew said as he entered the hallway.

Beau noticed when Andrew moved tightly to one side of the hallway to allow an oncoming person to pass.

Beau fought to hide his surprise as he met the man's eyes.

"Reverend Lin." Beau said in icy acknowledgement.

"Beau. How is your lovely mother doing?" The man responded equally coldly.

"She's fine. I'll be sure to tell her that you asked." Beau said in a tightly controlled voice.

Reverend Lin nodded, then continued on at a deliberate pace.

"A friend of yours?" Andrew quietly asked as they resumed their way down the hallway.

"My family has dealt with him a few times over the years." Beau said darkly.

"Are you surprised to see him here?"

"I'm surprised to see *me* here." Beau said frankly.

"I don't know much about your type of magic, so I don't know if there's a way for you to get here on your own. If not, there's a possibility that Seth might eventually be able to create a portal here for you." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"I don't know how that would work. But I guess we'll all figure it out together."

"Ready?" Andrew asked as they stopped.

"Yeah."

* * * * *

"Professor, I'm here with Beau Collins to speak with you, if you have a moment." Andrew said aloud so that Beau would be aware of what was being said.

//I'm not in a position to receive visitors just now, but please feel free to ask what you will of me.// Professor Xavier said into their minds.

"Beau has a project that he would like to work on and I was wondering if it might be possible to take over one of the out-buildings to use as a workshop for the magic practitioners." Andrew asked seriously.

//There is a maintenance shed to the south and west of the main building that isn't being used, but has been preserved, since it is an original construction. It's rather small, but may be adequate for your needs.//

"We'll port over and I'll let you know." Andrew said into the air.

//Be sure to bring the young lady, Lisa, up-to-date on the situation as soon as possible so as to spare her undue concern.// Professor Xavier cautioned.

"Yes. We'll do that now. Thank you Professor." Andrew said as he made a gesture toward a portal forming before them.

"That looks like a really handy talent to have. I know that there are some portal spells within necromancy, but I've never really looked into them." Beau said as he followed Andrew through the rupture in space.

* * * * *

"Did you get what you needed?" Lisa asked when she saw Andrew and Beau walk into the room through a seemingly solid wall.

"I actually got more than I expected to. I had planned on having to 'make do' for some of the harder to find items, but Andrew knows this really great shop that has just about anything you could want." Beau said happily.

"Actually, to someone not involved in the craft, it's probably an uninteresting place." Andrew told Beau quietly.

"I bet that's why they have those mystic orbs." Beau said with a grin.

"Probably." Andrew conceded, then turned to Lisa and continued, "We're going to go check on a building to see if it's in good enough shape for us to use it for a workshop. Would you like to come along?"

Lisa looked at her young entourage and debated for a moment before finally saying, "Yes. Since you're doing this to help me, I want to help out as much as I can."

"Great." Andrew responded happily, then turned to Tara and said, "Thanks for getting me. I think this is going to end up being great for all of us."

"I think it serves the natural order." Tara said contentedly.

Andrew made a motion as he led the way through a seemingly solid wall.

Beau and Lisa exchanged a look before hesitantly following.

* * * * *

"It's dusty in here." Lisa choked out while her eyes adjusted to the much dimmer light.

"The professor said that no one's used it for a long time." Andrew said as he walked to the nearest window and moved the stiff drapery aside.

There was a long moment of silence, until Beau finally said, "It's wonderful."

"This is really nice. We have a couple of sturdy tables and several racks of shelving..." Andrew trailed off as he looked around.

"If we move those crates, we'd have plenty of room to cast a circle. What do you think the ventilation is like? Would we have to worry about burning braziers or smudge pots in here?" Beau asked speculatively.

"There are windows that you can open in the eaves. That should provide all the ventilation that you'll be needing." Andrew said consideringly.

"It's just the one room, isn't it? It looks like there isn't any plumbing or heat in here." Lisa said slowly as she looked around.

"There's no water, but look at this." Beau said as he folded back a heavy sheet of canvas.

"I think I saw one of those in a book before. Isn't that a pot-bellied stove?" Lisa asked curiously.

"Back in Texas we had one of these in a hunting cabin where me and my dad went. Dad showed me what to do and let me take care of the fire the whole time we were there." Beau said with a smile at the memory.

"So, do you think it's good enough?" Andrew finally asked.

"The only way it could be more perfect is if it were made of gingerbread!" Beau said with a smile.

"Not helping the rep." Andrew said sternly, then added, "Just sayin."

Beau laughed aloud at Andrew's expression.

"I have a class that needs my attention right now and I doubt that Tara or Dawn are going to be available before lunch either. I'll do my best to fill both of them in on what's going on so that they can be thinking about what they'd each like to contribute to the cause." Andrew said seriously as he made a sweeping gesture toward the nearest wall.

Lisa and Beau followed as Andrew led the way.

* * * * *

"Do you expect to be here or where can I find you when I have some free time this afternoon?" Andrew asked seriously as he indicated the nursery door they were standing beside.

"There was a gas leak or something at the Wagner school, so they cancelled classes today. Since no one's told us where we have to go, our team has gone to a place called the 'Danger Room' to work on their attacks and defences. I guess unless someone comes and gets us and tells us to go somewhere else, that's where we'll be." Beau said frankly.

"There or in MedLab." Lisa timidly added.

"Isn't Matt or my dad with your group?" Andrew asked with concern.

"No. But that's because Matt was trying to give us space so that we could have a team meeting on our own. It was really good of him to do that and we really appreciate the thought." Beau hurried to explain.

"Even so, it sounds to me like you're at a point where it might be really good for your group to receive some instruction. I agree that coming together and forming your team is an important thing that you need to work out on your own. But past a certain point, it's best if you have someone with experience present to help guide you, in the most productive direction." Andrew said seriously.

"Um, sure. Okay. We've had our meeting and I'm pretty sure that the guys have had enough time to try out their abilities. It's probably time for us to get started." Beau said thoughtfully.

"I'll find Matt and send him your way." Andrew said simply.

"Thanks." Beau said sincerely as he met Andrew's gaze.

"I'll see you this afternoon. The Danger Room's right there." Andrew said as he pointed to a misty vortex hanging in space beside them.

"If you don't mind, we'll go downstairs the old-fashioned way." Beau hesitantly suggested.

"Whatever you like." Andrew said easily, then vanished in a blur, right before their eyes.

"Things used to be so simple." Beau said as he started walking toward the main entry hall at a casual pace.

"Do you miss it?" Lisa asked curiously.

"No. I guess simple isn't as nice as it sounds. It's probably better for us to be challenged." Beau said unenthusiastically.

"Yeah. It sounds like one of those things that's supposed to be 'good for you'." Lisa said sourly.

"'Builds character'." Beau added with a slight nod.

"Sounds awful." Lisa quietly admitted.

"I don't know. We seem to be with some good people. It could end up being fun." Beau said honestly.

"But what are we left with when the fun ends? What are we learning that we're going to need to know?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"I don't know. Maybe how to be part of a team. That's probably a good 'real world' skill to have." Beau said speculatively.

"I don't know if that's the same." Lisa said uncertainly.

"Sure it is. Learning how to listen to other people, how to make yourself be heard, how to follow instructions, how to be a leader... it's all good stuff to know, no matter what kind of job you end up doing."

"I guess that's true." Lisa reluctantly admitted as the elevator opened at their approach.

* * * * *

After getting aboard the elevator, Beau cautiously added, "Because of my necromancy, I've always planned on being a doctor. That way, if I can't save their life, I can at least see to it that they end up going to the right place. So, I guess going through all of this might give me a few more choices than I had before."

"That's definitely true in my case. I've been living in my mom's basement since my mutation got so bad that it couldn't be ignored anymore. If it wasn't for Marc, I'd probably still be there. I'd given up any hope of ever doing anything with my life."

"And now?" Beau asked as the elevator door opened.

"I don't know. I mean, I know I'm going to do something and it might even be something great, but I don't have a plan." Lisa fought to explain.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Beau asked curiously.

"Good, I think. You see, I had a plan before..."

Beau nodded to encourage her to continue.

"It sucked." Lisa curtly added.

Beau broke into a smile, then asked, "So no plan is better than a plan that leads you straight into defeat?"

"At least this way I have a *chance* to succeed... even if it's totally by accident." Lisa said as they slowly ambled down the hallway.

"I'm not sure that everyone would agree with your logic, but it works for me. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you."

"I'm not a very brave person. I'll let everybody know." Lisa chuckled as they arrived at the Danger Room door.

* * * * *

"So, what have we missed?" Beau asked as he led the way into the room.

"Louie and Jesus have been working on their Vile Cricket transformation. It's looking more and more like something 'on purpose'. Brian's been on his own doing his dice and cards." Seth explained, then happily added, "Slash and I have been working on... it's not an attack, but... just look."

"Ready?" Slash asked Seth cautiously.

"Yeah. Do it!" Seth said happily.

As Lisa and Beau watched, a large black cloud seemed to erupt out of nowhere and completely engulf Slash and Seth.

It hung in the air for a moment and when it began to dissipate, there was nothing and no one there.

"I know it's not a big trick, but it masks our escape. If someone doesn't already know what our powers are, that will give them one less hint." Seth said happily from behind the pair, slightly startling them.

"I think that's a really good idea. For right now if we get into any trouble at all, the smartest thing we can do is run away. Until we've been able to develop some fighting moves, we should come up with as many escape moves as we can." Beau said seriously.

"Thanks Beau. I was afraid you'd think it was stupid and didn't really help." Slash said honestly.

"It's just like Seth said, making a blackout cloud gives our enemies one more thing to have to deal with and hides what we're really doing. Right now we can use it to hide our escape, but later on we'll probably use it to hide us coordinating an attack." Beau said seriously.

"How did your things go? Did you get what you needed to help 'Piotr'?" Brian asked as he approached the group.

"I got some of the things, but even better than that, it looks like we've got a place where we can do the ritual." Beau happily announced.

"I didn't know that was a problem." Slash said honestly.

"It's not a *big* problem. But sometimes the cleanup can take some time. Some of the herbs really stink, sometimes there's burn marks on the table or the floor and chalk never wants to come completely

up. It's really better if you can have a place that you use just for your ritual magic." Beau said honestly.

"You're a lot more comfortable talking about this stuff now, aren't you?" Slash asked cautiously.

"I guess so. I'm used to hiding it, but I don't feel like I have to do that around you guys." Beau said honestly.

"Because we're all freaks, too?" Louie asked simply.

Beau was stunned by the question, but finally answered, "I prefer to think of us as 'unboring'."

[Chapter 16: Remembering Ending]

"What are we doing now?" Slash asked cautiously as he looked around the group.

"Andrew said that he was going to find Matt and send him down here to help us. I guess we should wait around for that." Beau said uncertainly.

"I'm interested to see what Lisa can do with the equipment they have in here." Seth said frankly.

"I'm interested to see what *you* can do with it." Lisa said with a teasing smile in his direction.

"I'm probably not strong enough to even turn it on." Seth said with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Nobody is turning on anything until someone shows up who knows how to use this stuff." Slash said firmly.

//Who put you in charge?// Jesus asked curiously.

"My friends and family live and work here. I don't want to mess things up for them by acting like an ungrateful little punk." Slash said seriously.

//Okay. I guess I can see that. Besides that, it's not like I really had my heart set on wrecking the place anyway.// Jesus said with a note of humor under his words.

"Brian, have you got a minute? I've got an idea." Beau said slowly.

"Sure. What can I do for you?" Brian asked attentively.

"Slash, I'm going to need you, too." Beau said thoughtfully.

"What are you up to, Beau?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Hold on. Let me see if we can make this work before I tell you about it." Beau said seriously.

Lisa watched with concern as Brian, Beau, and Slash huddled together to talk quietly amongst themselves.

* * * * *

"Is everyone here? Andrew said that you guys were ready to start your training." Matt asked as he walked into the Danger Room.

As Slash was about to answer, he saw Clark, John, Trey, Ronny, Bobby, and Robert filing into the room behind Matt.

"Yeah. We finished our meeting. What we do next is kinda up to you." Slash said frankly, then cautiously asked, "What's everyone doing here?"

"Clark, John, and Ronny came in with me earlier to help me with your evaluations, but we've got everyone here now because it's time for all of you to be in class." Matt said simply, then added, "Actually, we're a little past time."

//Professor Xavier asked me to tell everyone that Lee and Quaid are on the way to the Danger Room.//

"Why wouldn't he tell us himself?" Matt asked cautiously.

//The first reason is that he and I can talk together easily. It's like the difference between talking normally and screaming across a crowded room. The second reason is that he knows that there are people among us who don't trust telepaths in general or him specifically.//

"I never thought that there was anything wrong with telepaths." Seth said honestly.

"Some of my best friends are telepathic." Louie said with a grin.

Seth glanced at Lisa, then focused more on Brian.

"I've honestly never had a reason to worry about a telepath before. As far as I know, my power works on them the same as everyone else. So if I ever felt threatened by them, I could just make them forget me." Brian said simply.

Seth looked to Slash inquiringly. The look in Seth's eyes was one of trust and admiration, but there was also a certain measure of fragility.

Slash was very aware of his next words, being extra careful not to give a false impression.

"I think I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I have never once had the slightest problem with any telepath."

"You can stop guessing. He was talking about me." Matt said informatively.

"We're new here and we don't know who to trust. If there's a reason that you don't trust the professor, we'd like to know." Beau said frankly.

"It's nothing you need to worry about." Matt said in prelude, then explained, "I'm from a parallel dimension. The Charles Xavier from my world was a homicidal monster. Even though I know this isn't him, I'm still not comfortable with him rooting around in my mind."

After a long moment Beau finally said, "That actually sounds pretty reasonable to me."

//Unless there is a pressing need to do otherwise, the professor intends to contact our team through me.// Jesus informed the group.

"Is there a way for you to link us up so that the team can hear each other telepathically?" Lisa asked thoughtfully.

After a long moment, Jesus finally answered, //The professor assures me that what you're describing is a legitimate psychic technique, albeit a high-level one. In time, it is possible that I may be able to master it. The professor wants to work with me to help me develop my abilities to their fullest.//

"Yeah. That sounds like 'im." Matt said frankly.

* * * * *

"Are we late?" Lee asked as he hurried into the room with Quaid following a step behind.

"No. You're right on time. I was just about to explain that the teacher isn't here yet." Matt said as he looked back toward the door.

"Aren't you going to be teaching us?" Clark asked cautiously.

"I will for driver's training and self-defense. But your teacher today will be the one evaluating your academic grade level so that we can be sure that each of you will end up in the right classes." Matt said informatively.

"Who's going to be our teacher then?" John asked cautiously.

"Mad Mordigan." Matt said simply.

"Who's that?" John asked, even more slowly.

"She's an education expert from the Wagner Institute. That's all I know about her." Matt said simply.

"And her first name is 'Mad'?" Clark asked uncertainly.

"Maybe it's short for Madeline." Lee suggested.

"Or maybe she's a villain who's going to try to make us her henchmen or mind slaves." Louie interjected.

After a long silent moment, Slash quietly said, "Probably not."

"I think with a name like 'Mad Mordigan' that she pretty much *has to* be a bad guy." Louie said firmly.

"It'd be nice if it was that easy to tell who the bad guys were." Matt said wistfully.

"You know, sometimes being the 'good' guy or the 'bad' guy comes down to what you believe is right and wrong." John said firmly.

Ronny glanced at him for a moment, then continued the thought, "If you fight because of a 'truth' that other people are too stupid to

see, that doesn't make you a bad guy. You're trying to do the right thing, even if you may be doing it the wrong way."

"For some, it would appear that there is virtue in defending such a truth from the tyranny of the majority consensus." Trey quietly added.

"That may be true of the 'bad' guys, but just remember that sometimes a person who seems to be the good guy was really just going through the motions, basing all his decisions on what felt good to him in the moment and doesn't really care about how anyone else feels." Bobby said regretfully.

All the Meerkats noticed as Robert put an arm around Bobby and held him tenderly.

"So what are we supposed to do until the teacher gets here?" Slash asked into the silence that followed.

"Did you have all the time you needed for your team to talk?" Matt asked curiously.

"Yes. Thanks for letting us talk for a few minutes. It really helped." Lisa quickly confirmed.

"Yeah. We're more of a team than we were when you left us." Seth said confidently.

"Okay. Let's see about that. While we've got a few minutes, why don't you show me something?" Matt asked with a grin.

"Meerkat three!" Beau called out to the group as he took a sudden step backward.

Matt readied himself for an attack, although he didn't go so far as to extend his claws.

There was an explosion of darkness to his left which immediately engulfed Seth, Slash, and Beau.

To his right, an unstable black blur appeared for only an instant before moving in a dark streak into the rafters.

A movement out of the corner of Matt's eye drew his attention for less than a heartbeat. Lisa's oval, fur-covered face was timidly smiling at him, before fading away into an abyss of half-remembered nightmares from his past.

Matt blinked as he was brought back to the present, standing alongside the former Xavier students, Lee, and Quaid.

"How was that?" Slash asked from behind him.

Matt extended his claws as he turned to assess his situation.

The Meerkats were standing together, waiting for his evaluation.

"You threw me off, no doubt. I expected the speed and the dark, but I didn't know that you'd be playing mind games with me." Matt slowly admitted.

"We can't be sure of how effective it's going to be in every situation, but with all the other distractions going on, it's like it gives us another avenue of attack." Brian excitedly explained.

"You did good." Matt said, mostly to Brian, sensing that he needed to hear it the most.

"Until we can learn how to do some damage when we attack, that's about the best we can do." Slash eagerly explained.

"Let's see if we can't get you a few more 'combat avoidance' strategies worked out before we devote too much time to attacks." Matt said seriously.

"'Combat avoidance'? Is that the part where we run away like scared little kids?" Beau asked curiously.

"We'll work to develop your strengths a little more before we worry too much about your weaknesses." Matt said diplomatically.

"And our strength is running away like scared little kids." Slash pressed.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Matt finally confirmed.

"I can accept that." Beau said frankly.

A glance around the rest of the group found them to be in agreement.

* * * * *

//The professor is asking us to go upstairs. He would rather not invite the visiting teacher into the inner sanctum of the X-Men until he knows her a little better.// Jesus told all those present.

"How much do we have to keep hidden from this new teacher? I mean, is she a total normie? How much does she already know about us? How much does she need to know about us to do her job?" Slash asked Matt firmly.

//It seems that while Ms. Mordigan couldn't be counted among the mutants or witches, neither could she be described as anything resembling normal.// Jesus said slowly.

"So how much should we tell her?" Louie asked cautiously.

//Some people have obvious mutations, so of course such people will acknowledge those. Anything else will be left to your own discretion, for the most part.// Jesus said seriously.

"Does the professor say how we are to explain being Borg?" Trey asked curiously.

//Tell her the facts that she needs to know to do her job in regard to you. Leave the rest vague and allow her to fill in the blanks with assumptions and speculations.// Jesus responded simply.

"Wait. Is this teacher just coming here to do this evaluation? Because if she is, why are we even worried about what she thinks about us? Once she's done we'll probably never see her again." Ronny asked suspiciously.

//She's on staff at the Wagner Institute and will be playing a major role in providing the proper instruction for all the different educational levels of all the incoming pre-college students.//

"So there's a chance that she'll be one of our teachers?" Lisa asked speculatively.

//Yes. And even if she isn't, she'll probably have frequent contact with all your instructors so that she can coordinate their teaching strategies in regard to you. For that reason, it might be a good idea to consider how you want to present yourselves to her from the very beginning.// Jesus carefully suggested.

"Why don't we just get to know her as our real selves?" Seth asked cautiously.

"I guess that depends on how weird you want to feel around her. If you pretend that your horns are all that makes you different from regular people then that's probably how she'll treat you." Slash said simply.

//I don't know about that, but it *might* be good practice for you to have to be discreet. If nothing else, it will give you a chance to get your story sorted out before you're in a situation where it really matters.// Jesus quietly suggested.

"He might be right about that. You'll be surprised at how fast you run out of different ways to say 'it's none of your business'." Slash said frankly.

//She's being taken to the library to wait for us.// Jesus said informatively.

"All of us?" Clark asked uncertainly.

//Yes. All the students who have arrived in the past few weeks need to be evaluated to determine who needs testing. Your group will be evaluated together and the Xavier students will be evaluated separately.// Jesus said seriously.

"What about me?" Quaid hesitantly asked.

//No final decision has been made regarding your education. Perhaps if you discuss your situation with Ms. Mordigan, she might

recommend one school or the other as being better suited to provide for your needs.// Jesus carefully suggested.

"Was that you saying that, or the professor?" Quaid asked dubiously.

//Mostly him, but it sounds like a good idea to me, too. As much as I want you and Louie to be together and be happy, what I want more is what's best for you.// Jesus said frankly.

"We should be going or Ms. Mordigan will have to wait for us." Trey said to the group.

"Do you know where we're going?" Clark asked curiously.

"Yes. In fact, I know of a way to get there using secret passageways. Would you like to do that?" Trey asked with a mischievous grin.

"Will that take a lot more time than just going up in the elevator?" John asked cautiously.

"Approximately two point three additional minutes." Trey answered matter-of-factly.

"Is there going to be a lot of climbing or anything dangerous?" Bobby quietly asked as he looked at Robert with concern.

"Nothing more strenuous than traversing a secret staircase." Trey assured him.

"Sounds good. Let's go." Clark said happily.

"Mr. Logan? Would you prefer to lead us?" Trey asked respectfully.

"I'm not from here, remember? Even though our universes have some of the same things, there *are* still some differences. If you know the way, it's best if you lead." Matt said frankly.

"This way." Trey said as he led the way deeper into the Danger Room.

* * * * *

The group watched as Trey expertly keyed in a sequence on an invisible keypad on a nondescript wall.

"How did you ever find that there?" Ronny asked curiously.

"I sometimes do maintenance work in the mansion and have been given access to the various service crawlways." Trey said as the hidden door revealed itself.

Without further explanation, Trey led the way through the doorway and into a hidden hall.

"It has its own light!" John said with surprise.

"I turned the light on when I opened the passage. That was what one of the numerical sequences did." Trey said informatively, then thought to add, "I can turn off the light if you would rather."

"No! I wasn't complaining. I was just surprised that the secret passage you were taking us through had lights. The last time I..." John trailed off, then looked back at Matt regretfully.

"You know what I was just saying about not being from this universe?" Matt asked John seriously.

John hesitantly nodded.

"If something happened between you and the other me that you feel bad about, you don't need to suffer over it with me. You and me, we're good. We got no problem. Right?" Matt asked to confirm.

"Right." John said quietly, then finished with an appreciative smile.

Ronny couldn't help but smile at their exchange.

* * * * *

"Jesus, can you tell where the teacher is in the library?" Seth asked cautiously as he stopped at the door.

//Yes. She's sitting at one of the tables at the side of the room, opposite where we will be entering.// Jesus said simply.

"Is there any way for us to get out of this tunnel without her seeing us?" Seth asked seriously.

//There is an access point located in the hallway. We'll have to backtrack two rooms, then take a left at the intersection.// Jesus said informatively.

"Hold on. Give me a second." Seth said before disappearing in a flash of darkness.

"Okay... Um, does he do that often?" Bobby asked uncertainly as he looked around.

"Yeah." Slash said simply, then added more urgently, "He's really new to being a mutant, so take it easy on him about how enthusiastic he gets about it. I think he desperately wants for us to think he's as good as the rest of us, even though he's so inexperienced."

"I can relate." Ronny said simply.

"I found a shortcut!" Seth said as he appeared in their midst.

"This is a big group. Can you get everyone at once?" Slash asked cautiously.

Seth looked around and considered for a moment before finally responding, "Yeah. No problem."

"Okay. Then let's not keep the teacher waiting." Beau said with a grin.

Rather than respond verbally, Seth loosed his power and the world seemed to dissolve around them.

* * * * *

"Right through here." Seth said as he led the way.

"He likes to take charge when we cross dimensions. It's kind of his thing." Slash quietly explained to Bobby and Robert.

"Among the Borg, no *one* takes pride in their work. Likewise, none would step forward to demonstrate their expertise." Robert said simply.

"So you're saying that it's a good thing and we should just leave it be?" Slash asked, mostly rhetorically.

"Yeah. And if he turns out to be good at it, you might even decide to give him support and encouragement." Robert added with a smile that *could* be interpreted as being teasing.

Before Slash could think how to respond, Seth was quickly and efficiently guiding the members of their group through a fleshy blue-gray curtain.

* * * * *

Once the group was assembled, Seth let loose a single blinding burst of his power and all present were suddenly standing in the hallway outside the library.

"Um... okay..." Bobby said with astonishment as he looked around.

Two girls, one fully teenage and the other on the cusp, were standing in the hallway, watching the group with wide-eyed expressions of awe.

"So much for keeping secrets..." Clark trailed off with a slight grimace.

The younger girl timidly waved at Lisa before taking the older girl's hand. As everyone watched, both girls suddenly vanished.

"...Or maybe not?" He added uncertainly.

"That was Kitty and Clarissa... basically Kitty Junior. You don't have to worry about them. From everything that Lance told me, they're good people. They're some of the people around here that you can trust if you need to." John said seriously.

"Robert, what is the status of your womb?" Trey asked firmly.

"All systems functioning within normal parameters. Don't worry, Big Brother. I've been monitoring." Robert assured Trey quietly.

Trey gave a single nod to convey his approval of his brother's response.

//Ms. Mordigan is waiting.// Jesus reminded them.

"Yeah. We're going." John reluctantly responded, although he didn't go so far as to actually start moving.

"C'mon Quaid. Let's show 'em how it's done." Lee said as he extended a hand in Quaid's direction.

After a moment of hesitation and one desperate look back at Louie, Quaid finally went to his grandfather and accepted his hand.

It was easy for all to see that Quaid was as proud as he could be to lead the group into the library.

* * * * *

"Sorry to keep you waiting. The kids kind of gathered into two separate groups and it took a minute to get them together." Lee fought to explain.

"The kids? How old *are* you? Sixteen?" The woman asked as she stood.

"I'm old for my age." Lee said dryly.

"I don't care what class you put me in, I just want to be with Louie." Quaid announced firmly.

"And you are..." The teacher said in a leading tone.

"I'm Quaid Summers and no matter where you put me, I'll do a good job. So you don't even have to worry about that. All that really matters is that me and Louie get to go to class together." Quaid said firmly.

After looking at her legal pad, then looking at the second page, she finally looked at Quaid and said, "We've started off on the wrong foot. My name is Ms. Mordigan, some people call me 'Mad' Mordigan. I'm here to discover what each of you know and what you don't know, then develop a strategy that makes sense for each of you individually and also for you as a group."

"I want to be with Louie." Quaid said firmly.

"Sometimes you don't get what you want." Ms. Mordigan said sagely.

"You get it even less if you don't ask for it." Quaid countered as he matched her gaze.

"True enough, I suppose." Ms. Mordigan said with a quick smile, then added, "I'll keep your wishes in mind as I make my decisions."

"Thanks. That's what I was really asking for." Quaid said seriously.

Ms. Mordigan gave Quaid one last look before addressing the entire assembly.

"Since it seems that you have naturally formed into two groups, perhaps you could sort yourselves into those groups for me now so that I can see any commonalities that you might be using as a sorting criteria." Ms. Mordigan said seriously.

The Meerkats automatically pulled together. Everyone else formed their own group, pretty much by default.

Quaid stood with his grandfather, unsure of what to do. Lee didn't make any move, silently lending his support to whatever Quaid ultimately decided.

"I just want to stay with Louie. I don't really care about all the rest of this." Quaid told Ms. Mordigan seriously.

"Don't you want to get the best possible education, tailored just for you, so that you can get a good job and whatever kind of life you decide that you'd like to have?" Ms. Mordigan asked with concern.

"No. Not really." Quaid said honestly.

"Education and stuff is important, but you've got to decide what's *most* important. Right now, for me the most important thing to me is being with all my new friends, not just because they make me happy, but also because I feel safe with them. If you want me to learn new stuff, I can't do it when I'm scared and worried and always watching my back."

"That's a good point. And you are..." Ms. Mordigan said in a leading tone.

"Louie." He answered shyly.

"Of course you are." Ms. Mordigan said with a smile and a barely restrained chuckle.

"Can I be in Louie's class?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"You know what? Why not! We'll find a way to make it work. Get over there with Louie so we can get this evaluation going." Ms. Mordigan said with amusement.

As Quaid happily hurried to join the Meerkats, Lee walked in the opposite direction to stand with Matt.

"And you are?" Ms. Mordigan asked firmly.

It took a moment for Lee to realize that Ms. Mordigan was talking to him.

"I'm just here to help out with the kids. I know that I may not look it, but I've already graduated from high school." Lee assured her.

"And you are?" Ms. Mordigan asked again, this time even more insistently.

"Lee Wells." He finally answered.

Ms. Mordigan looked over her legal pad of notes for a moment, then looked back to Lee and carefully said, "I was told that I had one

teenager who was attending with a full regimen of college classes that wouldn't be you, by any chance, would it?"

"No. That's Beau." Lee said as he pointed.

In response, Beau raised a hand.

"Oh yes, here it is. Beauregard Murdoch Collins... what a solid name. May I call you Beauregard?" Ms. Mordigan asked with a smile.

"Why?" Beau asked dubiously.

"I like the *feel* of it. Besides that, the name is so... I can't come up with another word for it, 'solid' is the best way that I can describe it. I feel like when I call you by your name, I'm investing in your strength, lending to your stability." Ms. Mordigan fought to explain.

"Sure. If you want to call me *that* I have no problem with it." Beau said uncertainly.

"Excellent! Now, Beauregard, let me see here... you're in entry level college classes with a focus on pre-med... you seem to be doing exceptionally well with things being as they are. I see no reason to try and fix something that already seems to be working, so I suppose I'll just ask if there's anything you can think of that would make your learning experience more productive." Ms. Mordigan finished professionally.

"No. I don't think that things could have worked out more perfectly for me. I was able to get used to things on my own and develop a good work routine. Then these guys showed up so I won't have to worry about stressing out from studying all the time." Beau said frankly.

"And may I presume that the students that you've grouped with are those who just arrived?" Ms. Mordigan asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I mean Clark and the guys are great, but they've already made their place here. They have their friends and families and each of them have a complex history of relationships. The rest of us

need to find our own ways. We're developing this new thing that's all our own." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Well, isn't that lovely. Yes. I think you'll do just fine." Ms. Mordigan said happily, then looked back at her legal pad for a moment before cautiously asking, "Slash?"

"Yes ma'am?" Slash hesitantly responded.

"Does that mean that you've decided that you'd rather not use your formal name?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"Yes ma'am." Slash said hesitantly.

"Would you tell me your real name? I don't *need* to know it, but I think it will help me to understand what you find objectionable." Ms. Mordigan explained.

"I've had my name officially changed, so it's better than it used to be, but the name I had when I first arrived here was Josiah Andrew Hailey-Keith." Slash said quietly.

"How... pastel." Ms. Mordigan said with a slight cringe.

Slash nodded in whole-hearted agreement.

"If you'll tell me one thing, I think I'll have a pretty good idea of what I should do for you." Ms. Mordigan said in prelude.

"What's that?" Slash asked cautiously.

"What's your favorite color?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"Right this minute it's electric purple, but my favorite usually changes a couple times a year." Slash said honestly.

"Excellent. I like that answer." Ms. Mordigan said with a smile, then added, "I can see by these transcripts that you shouldn't require much testing to see that you are placed in the proper classes to provide you the best opportunities. May I assume that you would like to remain grouped with Beauregard, Quaid, and Louie?"

"Yeah. It makes sense because we're getting used to helping each other. I think that we can accomplish a lot more as a group than each of us could on our own." Slash said frankly.

"You know, that's the same thing I was telling Dr. Hoffman. Although I don't know of any surefire way to inspire such a group dynamic, I recognize the advantage of it. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help you, or your group, to achieve that unity." Ms. Mordigan said seriously.

"Honestly, I think you're doing it right now by listening to what we want before deciding things for us." Slash said as he met her interested gaze.

"Tell me Slash, would you rather put in a little extra work to be included in the high school junior level or would you rather set things on cruise control and take the easier classes at the sophomore level?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"I don't mind doing a little extra work if there's a point to it." Slash said honestly.

"Remember that you'll have help whenever you need it." Brian said from the group.

Ms. Mordigan looked at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, then slowly said, "I didn't see you there."

"Yeah. I get that a lot." Brian said easily.

"And you are?" Ms. Mordigan slowly asked, appearing to be strangely uneasy.

"Brian Nassar." Brian answered in a neutral tone that seemed to evaporate once heard.

"You know that feeling you get when you encounter someone that you've met before but you can't quite place where from?" Ms. Mordigan asked somewhat distantly.

"Oh? Do I remind you of someone?" Brian asked with a slight smile.

"No. Quite the opposite. You don't remind me of anyone. Ever. It's the strangest thing... I don't know how else to describe it." Ms. Mordigan said anxiously.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just a painfully average kind of a guy." Brian said with a benign grin.

After another anxious moment, Ms. Mordigan looked at her legal pad and said, "You *are* listed here, even though I would have sworn that you weren't."

"Does it say if they were able to get my transcripts from Oregon?" Brian asked curiously.

"Yes. Of a sort. We have a list of grades, but nothing more. There aren't any conduct or achievement evaluations of any kind included for you." Ms. Mordigan said uneasily, then added more quietly, "Would you feel comfortable picking up where you left off with high school senior classes?"

"Not really. I mean, I'd *like* to continue being a senior, but the schools where I'm from were really crap. I mean, ask anyone. They're some of the worst in the country... in fact, I think they're even ranked below a few of the third-world countries." Brian rambled.

Ms. Mordigan made a note before saying, "We'll have you tested and see that you get put into appropriate classes for your education level."

"Thank you." Brian said with a slight smile of accomplishment.

"You're welcome... I can't believe this, I forgot your name." Ms. Mordigan finished with astonishment.

"I'm Brian. Thanks again." Brian said before taking a step back to disengage from the conversation.

After a moment to see if anyone else was going to volunteer to go next, Lisa finally quietly asked, "You already know about Marc, don't you?"

After a look at her legal pad, Ms. Mordigan asked, "Marc Stanton?"

"Yes. I just wanted to be sure that he wasn't going to get too far behind in his school work because he was hurt." Lisa said timidly.

"I've been told that he won't be physically able to do any type of school work for at least another week, so I thought that I'd get everyone else situated, then come back to him when he's ready to face some new challenges." Ms. Mordigan explained.

"Thank you. I just wanted to be sure that he wasn't forgotten." Lisa quietly responded.

"I'm guessing that you're Lisa Brogan." Ms. Mordigan asked with an inviting smile.

"Did someone warn you about me?" Lisa asked anxiously.

Ms. Mordigan shook her head, then explained, "You're the only girl in the class. I was just using my astounding deductive reasoning skills."

Lisa giggled despite herself, then said, "Okay. I just thought someone might have told you to watch out for the rabbit monster girl."

"No one said any such thing." Ms. Mordigan assured her, then gently asked, "Has anyone been giving you any trouble, dear?"

"No. When someone *did* try, everyone stood up for me. It was really great!" Lisa quickly assured her, then added, "I'm worried because I'm just not good at meeting new people. Sometimes I can't help but automatically think that no matter what I do, the worst is going to happen."

"I'd call that a very healthy and realistic defense mechanism. Just so long as you can accept it when your preconceived notion isn't true, I think it should serve you well." Ms. Mordigan said seriously.

Lisa timidly nodded to indicate that she had heard.

"According to what I have here, it looks like you've been homeschooled for the past three years. Is that right?" Ms. Mordigan asked seriously.

"Yes ma'am." Lisa timidly acknowledged.

"Well, it looks like they did a pretty good job of it. If these grades are representative of your ability, you should fit well into high school junior classes." Ms. Mordigan said pleasantly.

"You should know, during those three years, I wasn't ever really around... anyone... I mean strangers. I stayed at home, in our basement, mostly." Lisa timidly admitted.

"Have you been having any problems since you've been here?" Ms. Mordigan asked with concern.

"No. Not at all. I mean, everyone's been so nice to me. I just don't know how I'll handle it if one of these days they're not for some reason." Lisa hurried to explain.

"I'll tell you a little secret." Ms. Mordigan said as she leaned nearer to speak more quietly, "You're not alone. All of us have to face rude and abrasive people occasionally and each of us deal with them the best that we can. All I can tell you is that for me, personally, I find it better to try to endure and overcome such situations rather than avoid them."

Lisa thought about the words for a moment, then slowly nodded her acknowledgement.

After a glance at her notepad, Ms. Mordigan looked at the Meerkats speculatively for a moment, before focusing in on Seth and asking, "Seth Oronokos?"

"Yes?" Seth asked cautiously.

"By the look of this, you've just started high school as a freshman. Is that right?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Yes. But I stopped going when my mutation got so that I couldn't hide it anymore." Seth said frankly.

"I assume that you won't have a problem like that here, will you?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"No one here cares if I'm a mutant or not. Even though I still feel a little weird about it, I don't try to hide it anymore." Seth explained.

"Good. As I understand it, that's exactly the effect the Wagner Institute is trying for." Ms. Mordigan said pleasantly, then looked at her legal pad before continuing, "Your school records are a bit vague. I think, to err on the side of caution, that we'll have you go through the academic grade level testing, just to be sure that you get properly placed."

"Sounds good. Just let me know what you need for me to do." Seth said happily.

"If you'd like to have a seat at one of the tables, I'll bring you a placement test as soon as I've finished my assessments." Ms. Mordigan said as she indicated the tables to her right.

"Me too?" Brian asked uncertainly.

Ms. Mordigan looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then down at her pad, to help jog her memory.

"Yes, Brian. Go ahead and take a seat and I'll be right with you." Ms. Mordigan said uneasily, then turned her attention back to the Meerkats and asked, "Before I move on, did I miss anyone?"

//I don't need to be tested, but you should probably know that I'm here. I'm not always the most pleasant surprise.// Jesus quietly said into her mind, as he pushed out of the backpack and peered over Louie's shoulder.

"You're a..."

//...Telepathic rat.// Jesus helpfully supplied, then added, //Or you can think of me as Louie's emotional support companion, if that makes it easier for you to handle.//

After a moment to consider, Ms. Mordigan finally said, "Yes. Thank you. That actually *does* make it easier."

//Good. My name is Jesus. It's an absolute pleasure to meet you.// He said with practiced formality.

"Yes. For me as well." Ms. Mordigan sputtered at the unexpected courtesy.

Without further conversation, Jesus ducked back down inside the backpack where he could relax until he was needed for some reason.

"Quaid and Louie, why don't you go ahead and take seats? I'll get you placement tests as soon as I'm done talking to your other group."

Quaid and Louie smiled at each other, then went to the nearest table to sit together.

Ms. Mordigan watched them go, then turned her attention to the remaining people in the room.

[Chapter 17: Duochrome]

"Who would like to start?" Ms. Mordigan asked as she looked at the group of six boys.

"I guess I will." One of the boys said as he stood forward.

"And you are?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Clark Kent." Clark said uncomfortably.

"According to this, you're a sophomore in high school."

"Yes ma'am."

"How do you feel about that? Have you noticed if your classes seem to be too hard or too easy for you?" Ms. Mordigan asked professionally.

"No. I think everything's been fine. Since I got here, most of my challenges have been outside of class. School is probably the easiest thing I do all day." Clark said with a smile.

"I've been warned not to dig too deeply into the students' non-academic activities, so I'll leave that aside and ask if you feel like you would benefit from being tested." Ms. Mordigan asked seriously.

"I get decent grades and I don't feel like the work's too easy for me, so I think I'm probably right where I need to be." Clark said honestly.

"A lot of what I'm doing today is my best guess at what's going to suit each of you. That doesn't mean that we can't change things if they aren't working out for some reason. If I know there's a problem, I can make adjustments." Ms. Mordigan said more to the group than to Clark specifically.

Regardless, Clark nodded in acknowledgement of the message as he took a step back to allow someone else a chance.

"Who's next?" Ms. Mordigan asked as she looked over the group.

"I am. My name is Trey O'Seofon Summers." Trey said very precisely.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you. Although I've been given an evaluation of your interests and knowledge, I have no grade history for you."

"My previous education was not in this format." Trey said simply.

"What format was it in?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Digital." Trey said seriously as he looked her in the eyes.

"Trey and Robert are both Borg, which means that they have machine enhancements." Lee said as he stepped to Trey's side.

"Is that what it means?" Ms. Mordigan asked with a knowing smile, then continued, "Although Wagner's has stepped forward on behalf of mutants, it appears that we might be gaining more diversity than we had anticipated."

"How do you mean?" Matt asked curiously.

"Never mind. It's not like I have room to talk." Ms. Mordigan said dismissively.

"Both Trey and Robert can learn by plugging into a computer and downloading the information that they need." Lee said carefully.

"With that ability, wouldn't they be capable of memorizing whatever they needed to know and testing out of whatever grade they were put in?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Yes. That is, if they wanted to. I think the reason that they're here is to develop a set of skills that the Borg normally don't have, that being, to learn by *doing*." Lee explained.

"Interesting. So any test that I gave them would probably be meaningless in trying to gauge their academic level." Ms. Mordigan said speculatively.

"I'm sure that they're off the charts. They're not here to learn as much as they're here to learn *how to* learn. It will do them good to learn how to gather and process information in a non-technical way." Lee said seriously.

"I can't imagine how that's going to work but it should be interesting to find out." Ms. Mordigan said with a smile.

"It seems that you understand my purpose better than I do." Trey said to his grandfather respectfully.

"That's why I'm here with you. I want to see that all of you get the education that you're needing." Lee chuckled.

After looking at the younger teenager with visible mechanical components, Ms. Mordigan cautiously asked, "May I assume that you are Robert and that you're here for the same reason?"

"Yes, I am Robert. And while I share in my brother's interest in exploring alternative learning techniques, my overriding interest is in developing what talent I have in poetry and songwriting." Robert said very deliberately.

"I should mention that my primary interest is Engineering." Trey helpfully added.

"I'll keep that in mind." Ms. Mordigan said absently as she made a note, then added, "I think that we'll place you by age for the moment, then make adjustments as needs to be."

"The rest of this should be easy." John said as he stood forward.

Ms. Mordigan looked at him inquiringly, silently asking him to expound on his statement.

"All that's left is me and the Drake brothers. We're all locals and have been here for a while. You shouldn't have to go digging for our records and I'm betting that we're all up-to-date on our tests." John said simply.

After a look at her legal pad, Ms. Mordigan finally said, "Right you are. The three of you have all your academic testing current. So as long as none of you feel that you've been judged unfairly, you can continue on at the grade level as you have been."

After a few looks to each other and unconcerned shrugs, all three seemed to have reached silent consensus.

"That wasn't nearly as hard as I expected it to be. Give me a moment to get test booklets for those who will be testing, then the rest of us are going to go on a little field trip." Ms. Mordigan said as she dashed away.

* * * * *

As the group left the mansion, Ms. Mordigan turned right and led the way across the beautifully manicured lawn.

"I noticed the activity out here when I arrived and thought it might be fun to see what's going on." Ms. Mordigan said as she led the way around the side of the mansion.

"There's no way you could have seen back here from the driveway." Trey said informatively.

"Okay. I might have been snooping a little. I just thought that I might be able to come up with something more interesting for you to do than sitting around, watching other people take tests. To be honest, I expected that more of you would need testing." Ms. Mordigan said as she crested a rise to overlook the playing field.

"Our field trip is to watch the B team play soccer?" John asked dubiously.

"We could go back to the library and watch the others take tests, if you'd rather." Ms. Mordigan offered uncertainly.

"No. This *could* end up being more fun to watch." Ronny cautiously ventured.

"I don't know about that. Back in the library, we've got Quaid taking a written test. That *could* be hilarious too." Slash said with a grin.

"You may very well be right about that." Ms. Mordigan easily conceded then thought to ask, "But what can you tell me about the B team?"

Before anyone else could answer, John hurried to explain, "Even our little group split itself in two. The students at this school did the same thing. The first team figured out how to work together early on and ever since, they've been looked at as a group. The B team was what was left over."

"Of course, that happened a long time ago. *This* B team has gone through a lot of changes since it first formed. A few people have proven themselves and moved onto the A team, others graduated or moved on to do other things. As far as I know, Mira is the only one who's been here as long as I have." Bobby said as he looked over the group on the field.

"So which group from Wagner's is the B team?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"That's completely different. Us guys from Xavier's, we're part of Xavier's A Team, kind of the 'junior' rank. We're just on loan. The Wagner group is their first class. They're their own thing... at least that's how it seems to me." John trailed off with an uncertain look at Bobby.

"I think the first class is always special." Bobby assured him.

"You know, from everything I've heard about mutants on the news, I thought watching a group of them in a competition would be more... eventful." Ms. Mordigan said slowly.

"I'm pretty sure they know that we're here, so they're probably keeping a lid on it." Ronny said simply.

"Yeah. That'd make sense. One of the first things they taught us was to hide our differences as much as we can around regular people." Bobby said frankly.

"Besides that, not everyone here is a mutant. I mean, *I* am, but some of the others aren't. Whatever you believe about mutants may not apply to all of us." John added.

"Or any of us." Clark interjected, then explained, "There's a lot of misinformation and a few very potent lies going around about mutants."

"You can understand why that is, can't you?" Ms. Mordigan asked seriously.

"I understand about being afraid of the unknown. But I don't get why people make up lies and spread them around, just to hurt people they don't even know." Clark said honestly.

"Human nature, I suppose." Ms. Mordigan said sadly, then added, "Hopefully enough people will see the reality of what's going on and eventually our collective better angels will prevail."

"But how many people are going to be hurt and killed before that finally happens?" John asked darkly.

"I'm doing my best to bring about change by supporting a place where mutants can grow and thrive *within* society alongside other people." Ms. Mordigan quietly explained.

"Sometimes working alongside people is harder than just working against them." John said frankly.

"Yeah. If you can paint *them* as being totally bad, it makes everything else easy to justify. Because if you stand against someone totally bad, then that makes you totally good and always right, no matter what kind of horrible things you decide to do." Ronny said seriously.

"I suppose that's a way of looking at it." Ms. Mordigan said slowly.

"What's another way?" Ronny demanded to know.

"At ease, Sprout." Matt said firmly as he joined the group.

Ronny turned his impassioned gaze on Matt.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence as Ronny realized how impressed Matt wasn't.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Clark asked Matt, obviously trying to both break the tension and change the subject.

"Just wanted to meet with Xavier 'bout your training schedule. We're gonna need to borrow some of his people, so I wanted to be sure of who's available." Matt calmly explained.

"Are you going to want us training with the Wagner team or the Xavier's team?" Clark asked seriously.

"It looks like Wagner's team is going to need your..." Matt glanced at Ms. Mordigan before diplomatically saying, "...talents. Once things have stabilized and a few more of the variables are known, we'll reevaluate."

"What about those of us who have no such talents? Is there a reason for us to participate?" Trey asked reasonably.

"I'm going to be counting on you to train Beau and Brian in hand-to-hand while I focus on the more challenging team members." Matt said with another glance in Ms. Mordigan's direction.

"Please keep in mind that Robert is not in suitable condition to participate in such training activities." Trey said firmly.

Before Matt could respond, Ms. Mordigan asked, "Is there something wrong with one of the kids?"

"Nothing to worry about, but Trey's right, Robert won't be able to participate in our physical training for a while. Maybe I'll recruit him to help me keep track of the progress of his classmates."

"Thank you. I should be able to provide meaningful illustrative statistical analysis." Robert said confidently.

"I had a feeling..." Matt said with an affectionate grin directed at the younger teen.

"Is it okay if I sit over here with you guys?" A teenaged snake-man asked as he slithered up to the group.

"Sure Steve, slide on in here." Bobby answered for the group, then said, "Everyone, this is Steve. Steve, this is Ms. Mordigan from the Wagner school and a few of the new students, Lisa, Beau, and Slash. I think you know everyone else."

"I know of them. You and John are the only ones that I've ever talked to before." Steve said timidly.

"Just about everyone else showed up in the last few weeks. They haven't had a chance to make the rounds yet." Bobby explained.

"I guess that's what we're doing right now. Bringing the new guys to meet you." John quickly offered.

"Yeah, right. Don't be pulling my tail." Steve said wearily.

John laughed, then said, "Fine. We're actually taking a little walkabout while the rest of the new Wagner students do their aptitude testing."

"That makes more sense." Steve said frankly, then added, "Well, there's not much to see here. We were playing soccer, but Mung got excited and accidentally turned the ball to stone."

"Is the game cancelled?"

"No. Mira is getting us another ball from the fieldhouse. I just came over here to see what you were up to." Steve said frankly.

"Maybe since everything's stopped anyway and since we don't have anything else going on, you could talk to your teacher about having a little game between your class and ours." Bobby suggested with a smile at the thought.

"Sorry. *Not* a good idea. We're used to being around Mung, so we can spot it when he's about to lose control. It really wouldn't be safe for you to be on the same playing field with him." Steve said frankly.

"To be honest, the Wagner students probably need some more time to learn about how to work with and around each other before we go challenging anyone else." John said seriously.

"I would expect the teachers to be realistic and take such precautions, but I'm glad to see that you are aware of the need to be wary of your gifts." Ms. Mordigan said thoughtfully.

"Gifts? Look at me lady. What kind of a 'gift' do you think it is to be different from everyone else?" Steve asked in an anguished voice.

Although the members of their group were uncomfortable doing so, all of them nonetheless followed Steve's suggestion and evaluated his appearance.

The way he had himself coiled he appeared to be an equivalent height to the members of their group, but uncoiled, his body would probably measure over fifteen feet long. His upper body looked mostly like any other skinny teenage boy, with the exception of him being completely bald and the shocking appearance of his slitted yellow eyes.

"I'll grant you that." Ms. Mordigan slowly responded, then countered, "But what kind of gift do you think it is it to be *exactly* the same as everyone else virtually, indistinguishable from any random stranger on the street?"

"What I'm always telling the kids is to be the best that you can be. That doesn't have anything to do with being a mutant or not. It's all about challenging yourself to be your best while also accepting that you can't always be good at everything." Matt said sagely.

"Except for Felicity. She *is* good at everything. If you don't believe me, just ask her. She'll tell you all about it." Steve said frankly.

"That brings me to the other part of my advice. No matter which cards fate dealt you, there's one thing you should try to keep in mind..." Matt trailed off introspectively.

They were hanging onto his every word, waiting for him to dispense his pearls of wisdom.

"...just... don't be a dick about it." Matt finally said, then explained, "Some's got it better or worse than others. Be happy or sad for them, but fight the urge to 'one up' people. Whether you're the best or the worst, it only leads you to a bitter, lonely place."

"Yeah. I totally get that." Steve said wearily.

"Are you alright, Steve?" John asked with concern.

"I guess so. My poison sacks are full right now, so that's kind of uncomfortable for me. It always puts me in a bad mood." Steve said frankly.

"Is there anything you can do to make it better?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Yeah. Dr. McCoy is going to collect my venom after classes today. He uses it to make lots of different serums and cures and junk. Real mad scientist stuff."

"I guess it's good that it can be used to help people." Slash offered uncertainly.

"Yeah. Maybe. But it's not like I'm actually doing anything. I just produce it... like the way a cow produces milk. She's not doing it out of the goodness of her heart. It's just a convenient biological fact." Steve explained.

"So, does it feel like you don't get a choice in the matter?" Ms. Mordigan asked sympathetically.

"Not much of one." Steve said honestly.

"And what if you *did* get a choice?" Ms. Mordigan asked in a leading tone.

"I think that I'd still do the same thing and help people. I guess that it's just that because my sacks are pulled so tight, all I want to do is whine and complain for a while."

"Yeah. I know that feeling." Ms. Mordigan commiserated.

Steve looked at her with surprise at the statement.

"We all have our venom sacks, some are just more metaphorical than others." Ms. Mordigan explained.

Steve glanced at the activity on the playing field before saying, "Mira's back. I've got to go."

"If it gets to be too much, be sure to let your teacher know." Ms. Mordigan said professionally.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." Steve hurried to say over his shoulder as he turned to leave.

"Okay. But if at some future time you're not, come over to Wagner's and find me." Ms. Mordigan called after him.

Steve glanced at her strangely for a moment then gave one small, almost imperceptible nod before slithering away.

* * * * *

"Shouldn't you go and check on the guys taking the test?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

"That young man, Lee, seems to have earned the trust and respect of the others so leaving him to proctor the test seems like a good idea on many levels." Ms. Mordigan said easily.

"But aren't you worried that one of the guys might cheat?" Lisa hesitantly asked.

"This isn't that kind of test. It's just to get a sense of which educational skills they've already mastered and which ones they might still need to work on." Ms. Mordigan said informatively.

"But do you think that *they* know that?" Beau asked curiously.

"How do you mean?" Ms. Mordigan asked with interest.

"Your test may be designed to test what reasoning and skills they already have, but if they don't know that it isn't a regular test, they might try to fake it or bluff their way through it." Beau said seriously.

"Sometimes I really hate the modern educational system. To take something as wonderfully exciting as learning and turn it into a dismal chore. It's a crime against humanity."

"Is speaking such heresy where you got the nickname Mad?" Matt asked with a grin at her.

"It's not the origin, but it probably serves to confirm its validity." Ms. Mordigan said as she suppressed a chuckle.

"So you're not worried if Quaid and Louie cheat on their tests?" Beau asked curiously.

"Not really. But at the risk of sounding like a teacher, if we found out that they *did* cheat, I can see how this could be approached as a learning opportunity." Ms. Mordigan finished with a smile.

"It looks like the game's started." Slash quickly interrupted.

All attention was suddenly focused on the players on the field.

* * * * *

"It might be a better game if they had more people." Lisa said slowly as she watched both teams struggling to accomplish anything.

"Overcoming difficulties together is an excellent step in team building. While it might not be the most thrilling thing to watch, it more than makes up for it in practicality." Ms. Mordigan explained.

"What's that girl doing?" Slash asked slowly as he strained to see.

"Something she's not supposed to, I think." John said seriously as he saw the girl suddenly encased in shiny silver armor.

"Because I'm here?" Ms. Mordigan guessed.

"Maybe. But one of our exercises is to do stuff like this without using any special mutant abilities. Us being here might not have anything to do with it." John explained.

"We're going to have to do that too." Lisa said quietly.

"I can see the point of it, so that makes it not so bad." Beau said frankly.

"Yeah. I'd rather play for a reason than play just to play. Chasing a ball around a field usually seems kind of pointless to me." Slash interjected.

"What's going on now?" John suddenly asked.

"I think Mung turned the ball to stone again." Bobby said uncertainly.

"Why don't we go back to the library and check on the progress of the others? If they're approaching a good breaking point, we might all take a break together before starting the next round of testing." Ms. Mordigan said as she stood.

"How long do you expect it to take?" Lisa asked curiously.

"This could easily extend late into the afternoon. Perhaps Lee or Matt would like to go with you while I proctor the next battery of tests." Ms. Mordigan suggested as she led the way away from the practice field.

"We could do that." Matt immediately responded.

"How sure are you that the rest of us don't need to be tested?" Lisa asked curiously.

"I made the most reasonable assumptions with the information given to me. If it turns out that I was wrong, I'll bump you up or

hold you back, as need be until each and every one of you are discovering the challenges and rewards of receiving an adequate education."

"That settles it. Radical talk like that could get you thrown out of the teachers lounge."

"Do you think my idealism makes me... unconventional?" Ms. Mordigan asked playfully.

"Unconventional? Try mad as a swan." Matt finished with a grin.

"Mad as a swan? I've never heard that one before. I think I like it." Ms. Mordigan said with a smile.

"Maybe it's something unique to my universe. All I know is that in your case it seems to fit."

"*Your* universe? Why do I get the feeling that you're not talking about this in a fanciful or even metaphorical sense?" Ms. Mordigan asked slowly.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you go ahead and believe whatever it is that makes you feel best about the whole situation? Just let me know what works for you and I'll go along with it." Matt finished with a smile.

"What I *want* to believe is the truth." Ms. Mordigan said firmly.

"Of course." Matt immediately responded, then quietly added, "Just be sure to let me know *which* truth when you've settled on one."

As Ms. Mordigan started to lead them toward the side of the mansion, Matt caught her attention, then pointed at a door at the back.

Without comment, she altered their course to walk past some strategically placed rocks.

"Ms. Mordigan? Would you mind very much if when we get to the library, I go and check on something for a few minutes?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"Most likely we'll have to wait for our test takers to reach a good breaking point. There shouldn't be an issue if you need to attend to something else." Ms. Mordigan finished with a smile.

"If that's the way it is, would you mind if I stay out here for a couple minutes and catch up to you in the library?" Slash asked hopefully.

Matt glanced at him for only an instant, then to the conveniently placed pile of rocks before saying, "I can stay with him if you're worried about the kids going off on their own."

"While I don't necessarily have a problem with it, I'm not sure how Professor Xavier is going to feel about us allowing unescorted children to have the run of *his* home." Ms. Mordigan said frankly.

"He runs this place like a boarding school, which means that he's got kids running loose around here all hours of the day and night. As long as the kids behave respectably, I know he won't have a problem with it." Matt assured her.

"As long as you're sure." Ms. Mordigan said warily.

"Well, if it ends up not going well, we can always claim temporary insanity." John said with a grin at Ms. Mordigan.

"Or permanent." Clark added with a laugh.

Ms. Mordigan smiled at the exchange, then said, "Being branded as 'insane' isn't always as much fun as it sounds. You'd better be sure that you can handle living with the stigma before you go down that path."

"Considering where we live and go to school, I'm pretty sure that anyone who was going to judge us already has." Bobby said frankly.

"And there's a lot of people who think that mutants are just genetic mistakes, which automatically makes us stupid. Thinking that we're crazy really wouldn't be too big of a leap in reasoning after that." Matt added seriously.

"If people are going to be thinking about us like that anyway, maybe you could show us how to deal with it." Lisa asked hopefully, then quickly explained, "I'm not used to being around people, so I really don't have a clue about how I should react."

"It never occurred to me that I might be able to help students by relating my personal experiences. While I see how that might be rewarding, I can also see the potential hazards of exposing my personal life to that degree." Ms. Mordigan said anxiously.

"It *does* kind of make it fair game for us to talk about." Clark said informatively.

"It sounds to me like you're going to have to trust us." Ronny said with an impish grin.

"I'm reluctant to allow my professional life to have that much access to my personal life. Keeping them separate has allowed me to escape into one when the other gets to be difficult to deal with." Ms. Mordigan quietly admitted.

"Sounds like a good time to have someone nearby who'll listen to your problems with you and maybe even give you a hug if you need it." Matt said honestly.

"I'm not in the habit of letting anyone get that close." Ms. Mordigan reluctantly admitted.

"Is it okay if I stay here? I won't take too long. I promise." Slash nervously interrupted as he indicated the pile of rocks.

"Yeah. But you don't need to hurry. Unless I miss my guess, Lee will probably be out here with you about three minutes after we show up in the library." Matt said with a grin.

"What's going on? Is it something I should know about?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"*Officially*, nothing is going on at all. But the truth is that Slash and Lee both smoke. As long as they confine their activities to this pile

of rocks, no one has a problem with them coming out here every so often to indulge their cravings." Matt said frankly.

"You know that those things will kill you, don't you?" Ms. Mordigan asked Slash seriously.

"So will the gunman outside my dorm room." Slash said frankly, then added, "The difference is, this makes me *less* tense."

"Fair enough. But if you ever feel like quitting, let me know. I've got a list of resources and I can go over them with you so that we can find the best strategy for your situation." Ms. Mordigan said as she looked him in the eyes.

"Yeah. Let me get a little more settled into the dorm and then... maybe. I'll think about it." Slash told her sincerely.

"I'll be there whenever you're ready." Ms. Mordigan assured him before turning and leading the remainder of the group into the mansion.

* * * * *

"What are you doing out in the hall?" Matt asked with concern as the group approached the library.

"We've got a telepath and whatever the hell Brian is in there. I have a feeling that they probably knew that you were coming back before you did." Lee said frankly.

"How are they doing?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"They're all fine. A few minutes ago Jesus announced that everyone needed to finish what they were doing so that they could take a break with you. They've just about finished their workbooks and are mostly just waiting for you to arrive." Lee explained.

Before anyone could question further, Brian opened the door and stepped into the hallway as he loudly asked, "What did you just do?"

"Why? With what? What are you talking about?" Matt asked uncertainly.

"Everything was going just the way it was supposed to, then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the strands of fate have all withered away and been replaced with ones that were never supposed to be there." Brian anxiously blurted out.

"Ms. Mordigan doesn't need to be hearing about your withering strands. Remember where you are and what you're doing." Matt said firmly.

"That was true before, but now everything's changed. I don't know what you just did, but somehow she's taken Andrew's place on our final roster." Brian implored them to understand.

"What did she do to Andrew?" Beau immediately asked.

"Nothing. Andrew's fine, as far as I know nothing's happened to him... well, except that now he won't be as involved with our team. If nothing else changes, the most he'll do is help you and Lee and Seth with your ability training now and then." Brian explained a little more calmly.

"Hold on." Ms. Mordigan said firmly to stop the back and forth.

Surprisingly enough, that seemed to have the intended effect.

"This young man, whose name I can't remember for some reason, has just said something that sounds suspiciously like prognostication or prophecy. Is that what we're talking about here?" Ms. Mordigan asked uncertainly.

"As I understand it, what Brian sees is less of what *will* be and more of what *could* be." Matt carefully explained.

"That sounds horrible, being able to envision a thousand possible ways that things around you could go wrong..." Ms. Mordigan said thoughtfully.

"That sounds like every single day of going to school for me."
Ronny said frankly.

After a moment, Bobby added, "I never looked at it that way, but you really *can* predict about ninety-nine percent of what's going to happen on any given day."

Ronny looked at his brother with surprise at the supportive observation.

"Thanks guys. It really *is* like that. I've never had my ability explained better." Brian said appreciatively.

"Okay. But since we've got this vision into the future of things, what can we do with it?" Ms. Mordigan asked, then hurried to amend, "What *should* we do with it?"

"Brian? You've got the most experience with this and you're the only one who can see what the probable outcomes are..." Matt was saying when he was suddenly interrupted.

//Ahem. I wouldn't say that he's the *only* one. Anything he sees, I can see if I bother to look.// Jesus projected into their minds.

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that. I'd be really interested to hear your point of view." Matt said into the air, since Louie and Jesus weren't in the hallway with them.

//Slash needs to be included in this, so Lee needs to go and get him.// Jesus said firmly.

"If you knew we were coming back, doesn't that mean that Slash is within your range? Can't you just call him?" Lisa asked curiously.

//There's a range difference between sending and receiving. Even so, I *could* call him. But that wouldn't solve the problem of Lee jonesing for a cigarette and psychically driving me up the wall.// Jesus explained.

"Sorry." Lee said weakly.

//Don't be sorry. Just go smoke, then bring Slash back here with you. We'll wait.// Jesus projected in a firm, no nonsense tone.

"Okay." Lee timidly agreed before hurrying away.

"So the rat tells you what to do?" Ms. Mordigan asked uncertainly.

"So far from what I've seen, we've all kind of been taking turns at being in charge. Depending on the situation, the person who can handle it best steps up." Lisa said frankly.

"Let's go have a seat and relax for a few minutes before we have our meeting." Matt said as he motioned toward the library door.

As Ms. Mordigan turned, she was confronted by a stranger and quickly said, "Hello. I'm Mad Mordigan, I don't think we've met."

Brian rolled his eyes, then turned to walk back into the library.

[Chapter 18: Nothernness]

"We're done!" Louie happily announced as Matt and Ms. Mordigan led the group into the library.

"Both at the same time? You weren't helping each other, were you?" Matt gently accused.

Quaid looked at him piteously for a brief moment before slowly saying, "It's just a coincidence."

Matt didn't have the will to engage with him over the minor point and was just as happy to let it go.

Quaid gradually smiled when it became obvious that Matt wasn't going to dispute his claim.

Clark and John shared a look of amusement at Quaid's triumph.

"How are you doing, Seth? Are you anywhere near a good stopping point?" Matt asked cautiously, careful not to disrupt any train of thought that Seth might have going.

"Give me two minutes and I'll be done with this." Seth said confidently.

"How about you Brian? Are you about done?" Matt asked the teenager standing nearby.

"What? Oh, yeah. I finished already." Brian said distractedly, then asked, "What did you do to change fate like that?"

"I haven't *done* anything. Whatever happened, I probably didn't cause it." Matt said honestly.

"The flow, the great tapestry, the fated world that spreads out before us and develops in a constantly evolving pattern... whatever you want to call it, somehow you've changed the pattern into something that it was never intended to be. That's not supposed to happen." Brian fought to explain.

"It sounds to me like you might have found someone who isn't tethered to fate. When you've got someone like that around, just about anything can happen." Quaid said thoughtfully.

"Someone like you?" Brian cautiously ventured.

"No. Well, at least I don't think so... I mean it's not impossible. But being how I am now, I can't really tell how firmly connected and entwined I am in your reality's timeline. Being here like this isn't something that I did, it's something that was done to me. I'm still trying to figure it out." Quaid said seriously.

"But do you think that you did or undid whatever it is that's freaking Chesser out so bad?" Louie asked curiously.

"No. All I've been doing is sitting here, taking a test." Quaid answered honestly.

"So, does that mean that someone *else* could have changed fate?" Lisa suggested uncertainly.

//Leave it be.// Jesus said firmly into all their minds.

"But why? What's going on?" Louie asked curiously, evidently surprised by Jesus' sudden demand.

//Louie, what you're doing right now, asking me that, it's the exact opposite of leaving it be.// Jesus responded with tender amusement.

"Do you know who caused things to change?" Matt asked Jesus firmly, letting it be known with his tone of voice that he wasn't in the mood to be toyed with.

"This sounds like something internal to the Meerkats. Perhaps not all of us need to be privy to this information." Trey suggested in a deliberate tone.

//Thanks for the thought, but it doesn't make a difference.// Jesus said simply, then continued, //Brian, back me up here. Will me

telling what I've discovered cause *anything* to turn out better for *anyone*?//

Bobby unobtrusively placed an arm around Robert's shoulders which, to the casual observer looked more informal than affectionate.

"No. In fact, it will make it so that the new paradigm can't function properly. Since we're already past the point where we can turn back, it would lead to the eventual dissolution of the Meerkats." Brian slowly responded in a distant, trance-like voice.

//So there's nothing to be gained if I tell. Right?// Jesus pressed.

"Right. If you speak of it, nothing good happens." Brian confirmed.

"I don't understand. Do you know what caused whatever happened... to happen?" Seth asked confusedly.

//Not exactly. I only know what I accidently picked up from Chesser. You'd have to ask him.// Jesus said simply.

Seth turned his inquisitive gaze toward Brian and waited.

"The closer I look at things, the less I can change about them. I just know that even though we did everything that we were supposed to do, the outcome that we *had* been working toward isn't possible anymore." Brian anxiously explained.

"So what do you want us to do now?" Seth asked curiously.

//I guess that's the question, isn't it? In this new paradigm or whatever it is, what choices do we really have?// Jesus asked reasonably.

"It sounds to me like we can either keep going or... not, I guess. Does anyone have any other ideas?" Seth asked as he looked around.

When Seth's gaze fell on him, Clark immediately put up his hands and said, "We've got no say in this. This is all yours."

"If turning back isn't an option, then I guess moving forward is all we can really do." Beau said speculatively.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I can call my mom and go home whenever I want to. I'm here because I'm *choosing* to be here. So when you're saying that we have no other choices, remember that stopping, quitting or even refusing to do *anything* outside of regular schoolwork are also real and legitimate choices." Lisa said firmly.

"She's right. It's not like we're getting paid or anything." Seth weakly offered.

"That's true. But we still have to be prepared for the possibility that sooner or later someone is going to show up gunning for Beau. Us coming together as a team really *does* make sense for all of us for a lot of reasons, but us doing it *now* is because most likely they're coming after him and we need to be prepared." Brian injected into the conversation.

//Yeah. That's right. That *is* why we're doing this.// Jesus confirmed.

"Guys, you don't have to do this for me. I can just go back to Texas. I've got people there who will watch my back." Beau said seriously.

"You're not listening." Brian said with exasperation, then looked Beau in the eyes as he firmly said, "This whole thing with Lavinia Loomis doesn't have anything to do with us becoming a team. The only thing it changes is the timing of it."

There was a long moment of silence before Louie cautiously asked, "Who's Lavinia Loomis?"

The inquisitive gazes were evenly split between Beau and Brian, silently asking them to disclose what they knew.

"She's a witch hunter." Beau finally answered.

"Really? I didn't even know that there was such a thing." Matt said frankly.

"Not in this century, anyway." Ms. Mordigan quietly added.

"So it's for sure? The gunshot really *was* intended for you?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"I guess so. If Loomis is involved, I'd be her most likely target." Beau said slowly.

"So does that mean that it's not someone from your family trying to kill you?" Louie asked curiously.

"One of my relatives probably set her on me. They're a little too high and mighty to get their hands dirty." Beau said frankly.

"So you knew who was after Beau all along?" Lisa asked Brian curiously.

"I don't always know what I know." Brian said weakly.

"So it's like what you were saying before about not looking too close or you can't change things?" Louie asked curiously.

"Yes. That's exactly right. Something about me observing a thing can kind of cement it into place. It's best if I only see enough to get the gist, then move on." Brian said with relief at Louie's succinct explanation.

"So, not only are you saying that this young man has the ability to foresee the future, but he can also somehow affect it. Is that right?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"I don't think we're supposed to be talking about this." Louie said uncertainly as he looked to Matt for guidance.

"Well, if Ms. Mordigan is taking Andrew's place as an advisor for the team, then she probably needs to know what it is that she's getting into." Matt said frankly.

"If I'm going to be a part of this team of yours, you should really refer to me as 'Mad'."

"Okay, Mad. Welcome to the Meerkats." Brian said with a smile.

Ms. Mordigan stared at him for a moment, apparently trying to place where she knew him from, then seemed to come back to herself and cautiously said, "Thank you, but I'm not sure that I understand what your ability really is."

"I can see possible outcomes and influence one to be more likely to happen than another." Brian carefully explained.

"But I'm guessing that you couldn't influence things so that I could win a million dollar lottery?" Ms. Mordigan asked to be sure.

"If it's a lottery that you didn't buy a ticket for, there probably aren't any random chances for me to influence. I can't make something out of nothing, but I *can* influence what's already possible." Brian carefully explained.

"So, what if I *did* buy a ticket for the lottery?" Ms. Mordigan asked with genuine interest.

"If you bought a lottery ticket I *could* look at it with my ability. I can't promise that I'd be able to spot a chance for you to win, but there's nothing to stop me from trying." Brian said honestly.

"If that's the case, then why aren't you being privately tutored right now while you sit on your bags of money?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"Because of a windowless room." Brian anxiously responded, then quietly explained, "There are people who would very much like to have access to my ability. If they ever get a hold of me, I'll never see the sky again."

"And no one will remember that you were ever here." Seth quietly added.

Brian nodded his agreement to the assessment.

* * * * *

"So Beau, what do we still have to do to get my thing taken care of?" Lisa asked curiously as she looked around to see who was listening.

"As far as I know, we're waiting on Andrew." Beau said honestly.

"Since we're not taking tests, do you think it'd be alright if we went down there and did some cleaning and got the fire going and things like that? That way, when Andrew's ready we'll have everything else we need set up." Lisa asked hopefully.

"We could ask. It sounds good to me but we need to see what Mad has planned for us to do next." Beau said frankly.

"Actually Beauregard, my only plan was to give the test takers a break and maybe check on the possibility of a mid-morning snack." Ms. Mordigan said honestly.

"We can handle the snack!" Bobby immediately volunteered.

"If you don't have anything better planned, is there any way we could have our snack at the... workshop?" Beau finished uncertainly as he looked to Lisa for her opinion on his choice of signifier.

"The gingerbread house." Lisa said firmly, then explained, "Anyone who knows about it will know what you're talking about and everyone else can just think that we're talking about a cute little cottage somewhere."

"We should probably talk to Andrew and Tara about it before we give the workshop a name." Beau said uneasily.

"Or we could just call it 'The Gingerbread House' until someone comes up with a better name for it." Lisa countered.

"I guess..." Beau said uncertainly.

"It doesn't matter. We're going off topic." Lisa cautioned, then asked, "What are we doing next?"

"If you can tell us where this gingerbread house of yours is, the guys and I can catch up to you with the snacks." Matt said seriously.

"What about the new paradigm that you were so worried about a couple minutes ago?" Ms. Mordigan asked uncertainly.

"It's done. There's nothing we can do to change it. Now all we can do is wait to see how it works itself out." Brian said frankly.

"Okay. Where's the gingerbread house? I've missed some meals in the last few days, so I'm ready for an extra snack." John finished with a smile.

"Andrew kind of took us in and out of there without showing us where it was. I have no idea how to get there on foot." Beau cautiously admitted.

//According to the professor, all you have to do is go out the south door then down to the soccer field. From there, go to the southwest. He says that it's kind of remote, so don't give up too soon.// Jesus said seriously.

"Meerkats, you can go on ahead and talk about team things with Mad as you go. The rest of us will catch up to you." Matt said decisively as he started toward the door.

"What about Slash and Lee?" Louie asked suddenly.

"You'll be passing the rock pile on the way out. You can pick them up as you pass by and fill them in along the way." Matt said easily.

"Okay. We'll meet you at the gingerbread house." Beau said as he started to follow.

"I don't think we're going to have to come up with another name for it." Lisa said with a self-satisfied smile as she followed.

* * * * *

"Did you guys have enough time to feed your addictions?" Beau asked as he approached the decorative pile of rocks.

"Yeah. I guess we got to talking and lost track of time." Lee timidly responded.

"We've decided to give the guys a break from testing and get some fresh air. Y'all want to join us?" Beau asked with a little extra touch of his ever-present Texas drawl.

"Sure." Lee easily accepted for both of them.

"This way." Beau said as he started off toward the track and field area.

* * * * *

"It looks like the game's been cancelled." Beau observed when he saw the B-Team sitting on the grass in a circle.

"Either that or they've taken the 'huddle' concept to the next level." Lisa said frankly.

Before anyone could respond, Steve slithered away from his team and approached at high speed.

"Hey Steve, what's going on?" Ms. Mordigan asked pleasantly.

"They're having this big summit meeting about Mung's level of responsibility when it comes to his training and control." Steve said as he coiled himself in front of the group.

"Don't you need to be over there, giving them your opinion?" Lisa asked curiously.

"There's nothing I could say that I haven't said a dozen times already. They'll probably have a more productive meeting with me over here." Steve said frankly.

"We're going to check out a building that we're going to be setting up as a workshop. You could come with us if no one would have a problem with it." Brian suggested hopefully.

//Professor Xavier has cleared it so that if you want to go, your teacher will be told that you have permission.// Jesus said informatively.

"Whoa! You've got a telepath on your team? That's awesome! Which one of you is it?" Steve asked as he looked around excitedly.

//Me. I'm over here.// Jesus quietly answered.

"What? Where? Who said that?" Steve asked as he twisted and arched his lower body up slightly to see over and around the group.

//Here. In the backpack.// Jesus said as he poked his head out of the backpack to look at Steve.

"Really? Seriously?" Steve asked in surprise as he slithered back slightly.

//What's the matter? Are you grossed out by me?// Jesus asked curiously.

"No. That was just unexpected. But wouldn't that be cold-blooded? *Me* judging *anyone* for not looking human enough?" Steve laughed.

//I don't think there are many of us who are too worried about being 'human looking'.// Jesus said frankly.

"Not anymore, anyway." Seth added with a grin.

"*I'm* over it." Slash said simply.

Lisa easily nodded her agreement.

"Are Matt and the others going to catch up to us?" Lee asked to verify his understanding.

"Yep. That's the plan." Beau confirmed.

"Then we'd better get going." Ms. Mordigan said simply, then added, "Steve, you're welcome to come with us if you want. Like the rat said, Professor Xavier's already cleared you." Ms. Mordigan said invitingly.

//The rat?// Jesus asked indignantly.

"Sorry. I meant to say 'emotional support companion'. I just forgot your name." Ms. Mordigan said defensively.

//My name is Jesus! It'd really be tough to come up with a *more* memorable name than that.//

"Maybe some of my forgetability leaked out on you one of the times when you were reading my mind." Brian suggested teasingly.

//Sure. Let's just go with that so that we can keep everything nice and friendly// Jesus said playfully.

"Thank you, Jesus. I won't forget again." Ms. Mordigan said with exaggerated deference.

Jesus responded by disappearing into the backpack.

"Now what is this about 'forgetability'?" Ms. Mordigan asked Brian directly.

"What's my name?" Brian asked her simply.

"I... I don't know. I can't quite remember." Ms. Mordigan responded slowly.

"That's my natural ability working on you. It makes people forget about me." Brian said frankly.

"That sounds like a terribly lonely way to be." Ms. Mordigan said honestly.

"Yeah. But it's what I've got. From what I can see, I can either hate it or possibly find a way to make it work for me." Brian said seriously.

"That's awesome." Steve said with true appreciation.

"Thanks." Brian timidly responded, obviously not accustomed to receiving compliments.

"So, Steve, you wanna go with us?" Seth asked hopefully.

"Did you say that Bobby and John are going to be there?" Steve asked cautiously.

"Yeah. They're going to get some snacks for everyone and meet us there." Lee confirmed.

"Are they part of your team?"

"Right this minute they kind of are, but as soon as we can stand on our own, they'll probably be going back to the X-Men." Beau carefully explained.

"That's so awesome! The B-Team's been around forever and the best we've ever been able to do is stop bickering long enough for two or three of us to combine our moves to accomplish something... and that was only, like, twice." Steve said frankly.

"We need to get going. Come with us if you want." Lee said encouragingly.

"I need to check..." Steve began to say as he looked back toward the B-Team in time to see his teacher waving him to go on.

"I guess I'm ready." Steve said uncertainly.

"Is this part of the new paradigm?" Ms. Mordigan asked Brian uncertainly.

"If you think about it, everything that exists in the current timeline is part of the new paradigm, but to answer your question, 'yes', this is different from what was originally destined." Brian said carefully.

"What's going on?" Steve asked curiously at the vague conversation going on around him.

"It's nothing to worry about. We're just checking out a little building that Professor Xavier said that we can use for a project." Beau said dismissively.

"You need to tell him." Brian said firmly.

"Tell him what?" Beau asked curiously.

Brian looked around the group before continuing, "Some of us only have pieces of the puzzle of what's going on. Matt gave us this opportunity to meet as a team and talk about things that we don't need to be talking about in front of the others... especially Bobby."

"What can't we talk about in front of Bobby?" Louie asked curiously.

"We'll get to that. But right now what we need to do is get Mad, Lee, Quaid and Steve brought up-to-date on everything that's going on." Brian said seriously.

"If you say so. Go ahead." Beau encouraged.

Brian laughed before saying, "Nice try. But I'm not going to try and describe what you're going to be doing with your voodoo, or whatever it is."

"Vodun, and that's only one part of what I do." Beau said frankly.

Brian smiled, obviously feeling that Beau had just proved his point for him.

"Fine." Beau said with a brief eyeroll for Brian's benefit, then directed more of his attention toward Steve before saying, "I'm a born-witch, which means that I inherited my power rather than going out and seeking it. The 'workshop' that we're going to check out is going to be a place where I can go to practice my magic."

"And Professor Xavier's alright with that?" Steve asked curiously.

"Yes. It turns out that there are a few other witches around so he was completely onboard with giving us a place where we can practice our craft. I guess you could think of it as being *our* danger room." Beau carefully explained.

"It makes sense. Since he's opened his home to give mutants a place where they can exist without being hunted or experimented on, why wouldn't he do the same thing for witches?" Steve asked speculatively.

"Thanks Steve. Putting it that way makes me feel a lot less weird about the whole thing." Beau said with a smile, then added more seriously, "The reason we're wanting to get the workshop set up right now is because there's a good chance that I can use my magic to help Lisa gain full access to her abilities."

"You can do that?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"I hope so." Beau said uneasily.

"Brian, how much do they need to know about it?" Lisa asked firmly.

"Pretty much anything you don't want to tell them is the stuff that they really need to know." Brian told her frankly.

"Yeah. That sounds about right." Lisa said wearily, then stoically continued, "Beau does death magic. He's going to fix it so that I can get the skill of someone who trained all their life, then died before they ever really got a chance to use what they'd learned."

"Wow... I um, wow. I don't know if I could do something like that. I mean, that sounds creepy as hell." Steve said honestly.

"I don't know either. But I'm determined to find out." Lisa said frankly, then continued, "If it turns out that I can't make myself do it, then I'll back out. But what it comes down to is being strong enough to be part of something big or being outside of it, always wondering what would have happened if I'd been braver."

"I wish I'd been given a choice like that." Steve quietly mused.

"How's that?" Lisa asked curiously as the group ambled along at a casual pace.

"When I was evaluated, I was automatically put on the B-Team. Me being braver or better in some way wouldn't have made a difference. It's not like I tried and failed. I just never got my shot." Steve said regretfully.

"Can I tell him?" Louie asked hopefully.

"Tell him what?" Seth asked curiously.

"Sure. Go ahead." Beau said with a smile.

"Steve. You're here with us right now because this *is* your shot." Louie said seriously.

//We don't go around telling strangers about Beau's magic or how Lisa's going to get her abilities. That kind of stuff belongs with the team members.// Jesus said frankly.

"Wait. What does that make me?" Quaid asked cautiously.

//As far as I'm concerned, you're already as much a part of this team as anyone. You make Louie happy, so I'm automatically on your side.// Jesus said simply.

"You got my vote too!" Louie happily proclaimed.

Beau couldn't restrain his smile at the announcement, but then thought to ask, "Brian? How does this affect your forecast?"

"It doesn't." Brian said simply, then explained, "As far as I can tell, Quaid exists *between* the strands of fate. Him being a member of the team or not doesn't change my forecast at all."

"Are you saying that I can't change anything?" Quaid asked cautiously.

"No. I'm saying that I can't see you changing anything. I can predict what's most likely going to happen, but you can change how things turn out whenever you feel like it and I won't see it coming." Brian fought to explain.

"You can see the future?" Steve asked Brian with surprise.

"Yeah. Lots of them." Brian said simply.

"Does Quaid get a team name?" Louie suddenly asked, brimming over with excitement at the prospect.

//He will if he chooses to be on our team. It's entirely up to him.// Jesus said seriously.

"Team name?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's not as much about secret identities as it is a signal to tell us that we're on the job, talking about team business. It also helps us when we're using communications that we can't be sure are secure." Slash injected into the conversation.

"Steve, before you make your decision, you need to know that another one of our team members, his name is Marc, he's been shot. It's possible that if you join us that you might be shot at too." Seth said seriously.

Slash nodded his agreement, then added, "That's the main reason that we're trying to get our team formed and up to speed as quickly as we can."

"Chances are that the shooter is really after me, but considering what happened to Marc, I wouldn't bet on any of you being safe from her." Beau said tiredly.

"That's the one thing I've got going for me. I've been rated at level 6 invulnerability. My scales can stand up to bladed weapons and most bullets, although I'd rather not test that out if it's all the same to you. Even if they don't pierce, they still hurt." Steve said frankly.

"Yeah. None of us wants that." Slash assured him, then continued, "And we're all trying to make the best out of whatever we've got to work with."

"At least you've got *something*. I don't have *any* special abilities." Quaid told him frankly.

"Why are you going to a mutant school if you're a normal human?" Steve asked curiously.

"Well, to start with, it isn't *just* a school for mutants. There's other kinds of people here, people like Beau, who might have problems with the normies if they knew what he really was." Quaid said seriously.

"Also, Quaid's not a human... or, at least he wasn't born one." Louie quietly added.

"You're not human?" Steve asked dubiously.

"I guess I kinda am now. I mean, it's not bad. It's better than being dead." Quaid said unenthusiastically.

"But you'd rather be your old self?" Lisa guessed.

"No! That's not it at all! I don't care about being all kinds of crazy powerful like that. It usually sucks and it's really lonely." Quaid quickly explained.

"But..." Lisa slowly prompted.

"But if I don't have *any* power at all, then why would I join the team? The best help I could give you is to stay away so you don't have to worry about endangering yourselves protecting me." Quaid said reluctantly, obviously loathed to speak the words.

"If there was any lesson to be learned from being powerless, I'm pretty sure that you've learned it by now." A gruff voice said from behind the group.

As they turned, Lee cautiously asked, "What are you doing here, Matt? Where are the guys?"

"I'm not Matt. I'm the Logan from *this* universe." He said with a grin, then focused on Quaid and said, "Your Aunt Jean and I decided that you need to bring something to the table if you're going to be part of the team."

"What are you giving me? Laser eyes?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"What the... you little... no. No laser eyes!" Logan barked.

For a long moment, Quaid unflinchingly held his gaze.

Logan took a slow breath before calmly saying, "After talking it over, your aunt Jean and I decided that to help put you on an even

footing with the people around you that we'd give you one of our x-genes; just one, either mine or hers."

"So that means that I can have claws and super strength and wicked cool sideburns?" Quaid asked hopefully.

"I don't know. You might." Logan said with a grin, then continued, "We're just going to introduce the x-gene into your system, which will make you a mutant. How the x-gene will manifest in you is anyone's guess."

Quaid smiled widely, then noticed Lee standing nearby, watching with concern.

After a moment to consider, Quaid cautiously asked, "So, does that mean that if I get your x-gene that it might make me wild and hurt the people I care about or maybe even forget my friends?"

"That *could* happen." Logan reluctantly admitted.

"I'd rather not have abilities than do anything to hurt or forget my new friends and family." Quaid regretfully announced as he avoided looking directly at Lee.

"That's alright. Would you rather inherit your aunt Jean's genes?" Logan finished with a grin.

"Yeah." Quaid quietly agreed, then quickly added, "It's not that I don't want to be related to *you*, but I can't take the chance. It's too important."

"Don't worry about it. Here in a few minutes you're probably going to start hearing or seeing things that aren't there. Be sure to let Jesus and the professor help you until you can get a handle on whatever your ability's going to be." Logan explained.

"So you don't know what's going to happen?" Brian asked curiously.

"I could know if I looked, but I won't. What fun would that be?" Logan said with a grin at him.

"But what if something goes wrong? You can prevent him from having to go through a lot of worry and pain if you'll tell him what's coming." Brian said anxiously.

"I could also prevent him from living and growing and learning to make the most out of what life hands him." Logan said frankly.

"I knew it! I told you! I told you we'd meet him! He's Matt's evil twin!" Louie triumphantly announced.

Logan smiled at Louie's assertion, then looked to Quaid and quietly said, "If you want, I can still make you completely human with no x-gene at all. I got no stake in this. It's entirely up to you."

"No. Don't do that. I'll do like you said and try to make the most out of whatever it turns out to be." Quaid quickly confirmed.

"I think you already know that if you get into trouble, your aunt Jean and I probably won't be able to bail you out." Logan said seriously.

"It's my dad, isn't it?"

"Don't worry about him. In fact, I'll tell you a little secret. I think I've seen signs that he's coming around. Now, I don't want to make any predictions about him turning over a new leaf, but I guess what I'm really telling you is that there's a reason for you to hope that things with him can be better." Logan said quietly.

"I don't care. I'll never forgive him. After what he did... no. I'm done with him." Quaid said firmly.

"I'm not asking you to forgive him. I'm just letting you know that he's capable of changing. You don't have to assume that he is and will always be the same monster that you remember him to be." Logan said seriously.

"Do you think that it somehow makes it not as bad because there's another version of Itchy living here? Well it doesn't. I loved my best friend and didn't want anything for him but for him to grow up and be happy. Even though the new Itchy is my brother and I love him

too, it doesn't undo what my dad did. I won't forgive, I won't forget and I WILL hate him forever." Quaid said with absolute certainty.

"By the way, how are things going with Itchy 2.0?" Logan gently asked.

"Okay. He's busy a lot of the time, but at the end of the day, we get to hang out together for a while and... it's nice." Quaid finished with a smile at the thought of his older brother.

"I've got to get going now. You know how it is. We've gotta keep the baddies off your backs." Logan said frankly.

"Yeah. I know. Thanks for that. I really *do* like it here." Quaid said quietly.

Logan stepped forward and placed one hand on Quaid's shoulder before pulling him into a brief, firm hug.

Before the moment could drag on too long, Logan flared into a burst of silver light and vanished.

* * * * *

A long silence fell over the group which was finally broken by Ms. Mordigan asking, "So that was the Matt from another dimension?"

"No. *That* was the Matt from *this* dimension. The Matt you know is from another dimension, he just lives here now." Slash calmly explained.

"He seems to be incredibly powerful. It's nice to see that he's making sure that you're going to be alright." Ms. Mordigan told Quaid frankly.

"We're nothing alike in any way, but I still feel like he understands me better than anyone, anywhere... anywhen." Quaid quietly admitted.

"Is anything happening yet?" Louie asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I can feel it awakening inside me. It's mental, there's no doubt about that." Quaid said slowly.

//You're experienced with having psychic abilities, aren't you?//
Jesus asked curiously.

"Yeah. but you don't have to yell about it. I'm right here." Quaid answered irritably.

//I wasn't yelling. You're changing. You're becoming more attuned to telepathic communication.// Jesus gently explained.

"You're becoming telepathic?" Steve asked with surprise.

//It's too early to tell. The ability to 'receive' telepathy is different from the ability to 'send'. We'll have to wait and see what develops for him.// Jesus explained.

"Yeah. Um, no. I don't feel the telepathy growing so much now. Maybe it'll pick back up later. Right now, I'm getting more of a telekinetic thing going on." Quaid said slowly.

//Professor Xavier is monitoring what's happening.// Jesus said informatively.

"Yeah. I can feel him there..." Quaid said under his breath, then he turned toward the mansion and said more loudly, "Hi Professor!"

//Don't mind me. Proceed.// Professor Xavier responded in all their minds.

"This is wrong." Quaid muttered to himself.

"What's that? Do we need to run for cover?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I don't know yet... No promises..." Quaid said haltingly.

"Keep us posted, will you?" Beau asked hopefully.

"I'll do my best." Quaid weakly offered.

"Is there anything we can do to help you?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"You're here, standing with me through something that might end up being dangerous. That means a lot to me." Quaid said sincerely.

//Before we get too much into that, tell me about your emotional state. How much of what you're feeling do you think is what *you're* feeling?// Professor Xavier asked cautiously.

"Empathy? I can't promise that I don't have any of that going on, but I'm not noticing any foreign emotions." Quaid assured him.

//What about the rest of you? Is anyone noticing feeling uncharacteristic emotional states or unusually intense emotions?// Professor Xavier asked the group.

//I think that I've been around the Meerkats enough to notice something out of the ordinary with their emotional states. I'm not detecting any empathic leakage from Quaid at all. His shielding is expertly formed. It's actually quite elegant.// Jesus concluded with a note of satisfaction.

"You guys might want to step back a little bit. I've got... something about to happen and I don't know what it's going to be when it finally shows up." Quaid slowly warned.

//Can you narrow down if it's telepathic, empathic or telekinetic in nature?// Professor Xavier asked hopefully.

"Telekinetic, for sure. Psionic force." Quaid answered in a short, chopped tone.

//Do you have any indication of how it's going to manifest?// Professor Xavier asked urgently.

"Cube." Quaid fought to say.

As the single word left his mouth, an ethereal blue/white cube, about a foot tall, appeared directly in front of Quaid, levitating in mid air.

After a moment, Slash finally said, "Yeah. That's a cube."

"I think that's it for now. I guess that's my ability." Quaid said in slow concentration.

"You can make a cube?" Steve asked dubiously.

//It appears that Quaid is able to make a stable construct out of psionic force. Just off the top of my head, I can think of a number of uses for such a thing. You appear to have been given a tremendous gift. Use it well.// Professor Xavier said sagely.

"Yeah. I'll try." Quaid said weakly as he stared at the cube floating in front of him.

"The future of the team as a whole just became a whole lot more secure. Even though I can't see *you*, I think you're going to be alright." Brian said in concentration.

"Quaid, are you okay to start walking again or do we need to contact Matt and the others to let them know that we'll be late?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I got this." Quaid assured him.

//As it happens, the 'snack' preparations turned into more of a production than anyone anticipated. Rest assured, you will have sufficient time to reach your destination before your snacks arrive.// Professor Xavier said with amusement.

"Steve? Do you already have a team name?" Louie asked curiously.

"All of us were given code names, but we never really used them for anything." Steve said frankly.

"Really? What's yours?" Louie asked excitedly.

"Nightfear." Steve said simply.

"That's really... it doesn't have anything to do with you... I mean... with snakes." Seth finally choked out.

"Unless snakes is what you have nightmares about." Lisa quietly suggested.

"For the A-Team, the code names usually mean something. For us, I guess they were kind of a way so that we could *pretend* that we were as good as them and *play at* being X-Men." Steve said uneasily.

"The Meerkats is a whole other team. You can have another name if you want to." Louie quietly offered as they walked.

"If you'd asked me yesterday, I probably would have said that I wanted to change it. But it really doesn't matter to me now. I guess I'll keep it like it is." Steve said honestly.

"What about you Quaid? What kind of team name would you like to have?" Louie asked hopefully.

"I don't know. I never really thought about it. What do you think my name should be? I mean, you're our expert." Quaid asked with a loving smile at him.

"I can see why Steve doesn't care and I think that's a really good choice for him. But for you, I think you should have a name that has something to do with who you are." Louie said slowly.

"What did you come up with?" Quaid asked curiously.

"Godling."

When Quaid didn't immediately react, Louie hurried to say, "If you don't like it I can come up with something else for you."

Quaid looked lovingly at Louie and quietly said, "Don't worry. It's perfect."

[Chapter 19: Thistledown]

"Before we get there, what is it that we're not supposed to tell Bobby?" Seth quietly asked as they followed a more or less path to the southwest of the playing field.

//Sooner or later Bobby is going to find out that the final member of our team is actually a friend of his who recently passed away. It would probably be best if we weren't the ones to reveal that to him.// Jesus said carefully.

"Peter's alive?" Steve asked with surprise.

"No. That would make everything a lot easier." Beau said regretfully.

"Just what is it that you're telling us, then?" Ms. Mordigan asked uncertainly.

"Basically, I've recruited Piotr's spiritual essence to join our team. Although we don't know exactly how everything is going to turn out, the more general plan is for Piotr to help Lisa learn how to use her abilities." Beau carefully explained.

"From what I've heard, Peter and Bobby were really close friends." Slash quietly added.

"They were. I used to see them in the morning, out running the track before classes." Steve said sadly.

"If they were so close, then why aren't you telling Bobby that his friend is back... at least in some sense of the word?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"When I talked to Piotr about it, he asked me not to tell Bobby. If possible, he'd like to explain it himself once things have settled and he has more of a handle on his situation." Beau said anxiously as he awaited their reactions.

"I'm sorry if this is a stupid question, but are you talking about

talking to ghosts?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"This situation is unusual. There aren't a lot of earthbound spirits and what few there are usually fade away without anyone ever noticing them. Because of who and what I am, I can sense spirits and communicate with them when very few others can." Beau carefully explained.

"Was that a 'yes'?" Steve cautiously asked.

Ms. Mordigan was sure to make eye contact with Steve before giving an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Listen, just like with my medical studies, necromancy has some industry specific terminology which may mean something different to me than it would to the layperson. It's for that reason that I resist using technically inaccurate wording." Beau fought to explain.

"I'm pretty sure that means 'yes'." Ms. Mordigan quietly confided.

Steve nodded his agreement to her assessment.

"So what does that have to do with what we're doing here?" Slash asked curiously.

"We're setting up the workshop so that I can install the spirit into a physical vessel. That way Lisa will have access to it when she needs it." Beau said frankly.

"You think of Fallen as an it? Not a him?" Louie asked curiously.

"I'm hoping that enough of the person that Piotr was will come through so that I can think of the final result as being a sentient being and a member of our team, but right now, to cast this spell correctly, I need to create the facade of a void of spiritual energy within a physical object so that hopefully the entire spirit will instinctively bond to it and become fully attached." Beau carefully explained.

"What are the dangers in what you're suggesting?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"The most likely failure would be if the spirit were damaged or even destroyed. They're incredibly fragile." Beau said frankly.

"What are the dangers to us?" Lee asked firmly.

"Possession, I guess." Beau said as he matched Lee's determined gaze, then explained, "Even though it's highly unlikely, the amount of trouble that it causes makes the one in a million chance still seem a little too risky."

"That could really happen?" Ms. Mordigan asked with concern.

"I'm planning to take a disembodied spirit of a once living being and force it into an inanimate object that it was never meant to inhabit. If there's some way for the spirit to find refuge in a living body then it will naturally do that."

"But you believe that you will be able to put the spirit into something non-living?" Ms. Mordigan cautiously asked.

"Yes. I have that ability. I just can't swear that I won't damage the spirit in the process." Beau confirmed.

"Is that it?" Louie asked excitedly as he pointed at the small building ahead of them.

"Probably. I've never seen it from the outside." Beau said honestly.

"It's beautiful." Lisa said delightedly, then added, "Even though it's not made of gingerbread, it's still as close to a storybook cottage as I've ever seen in real life."

"What are we going to be doing?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"I think at first we're probably just going to explore. We might do some cleaning, if we can find the cleaning supplies that we'll need." Beau said as the group arrived at the door.

"That is, if we can get in." Slash said as he tugged on the door handle.

"I didn't think about that. Does someone need to go back and get

the key from the professor?" Lee asked curiously.

//The professor says that our team has multiple methods at our disposal for getting past a locked door, any of which would be faster than dispatching someone with a key.// Jesus said seriously.

"I can do it!" Seth automatically volunteered.

"No. Let me!" Quaid immediately called as a transparent cube formed in the air, right in front of him.

"Hold on. Why don't we let Mad decide?" Lee suggested.

Ms. Mordigan was caught off-guard by the suggestion, but soon enough gathered herself and responded, "Let me know how each of you would get us past the locked door and I'll decide which way is best."

"I can just phase us through the door. It'll only take a second." Seth stated simply.

"I can move the door out of the way." Quaid said matter-of-factly.

"You just got your power, like, a minute ago. How can you know how to use it already?" Louie asked curiously.

"Because I had psionic powers before. I didn't have a lot of reason to use them, but I always knew how to if I wanted to." Quaid said reasonably.

"Can you really move the door?" Louie asked curiously.

"Yes and no. I can move my cube. So all I've got to do is create my cube with the door inside, then just move the cube out of the way and the door will go with it." Quaid said simply.

"Would that damage the door?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Not as long as I move the door frame too. If I tried to move only part of the door, I'd be more likely to break it." Quaid quietly admitted.

"If you're not worried about damage, I could kick the door in. It might not be pretty, but it'd be fast and easy." Lisa said frankly.

"What about you, Beau? Do you have any spells that could get us in?" Seth asked curiously.

"None that I could do in a reasonable amount of time. Most of my stuff takes a lot of preparation and supplies." Beau said honestly, then thought to add, "Besides, the only spell that I can think of to use to pop the door open could just as easily disintegrate the entire building."

"Yeah... um, no. Let's not do that." Seth said slowly.

"What about you, Brian? Do you have some special power that could get you past a locked door?" Slash asked curiously.

"Not really. But I could wait for someone else to open it, then follow them in without them noticing." Brian said honestly.

"I guess that's almost as good as doing it yourself." Seth said with a grin at him.

"I don't know. That attic window looks like it's cracked open a little bit. I might be able to climb up there and get in that way." Steve said speculatively as he stared upward.

"You can climb?" Seth asked with surprise evident in his voice.

"What? Do you think that just because I don't have legs that I'm not able to climb?" Steve asked in offense.

"Well... yeah." Seth reluctantly admitted.

"Watch this." Steve snarled defiantly, then proceeded to scale the vertical wall with little more effort than slithering across the open lawn.

"It might not be safe for him in there." Seth said suddenly, then seemed to vanish in a blur of darkness.

"Is this more what you had in mind when you thought about being

around a group of mutants?" Lisa asked with a teasing grin.

"We're certainly getting closer." Ms. Mordigan admitted, then cautiously asked, "Did Seth just teleport himself inside?"

"It depends on what you mean when you say teleport. I think he probably slipped out of this dimension, then took a couple steps to get past the door, then slipped back in." Lisa cautiously explained.

"It looks like Steve was able to get in without a problem." Lee said as he remained focused on the window in the eaves of the little house.

Before anyone could comment, a blur of darkness flared and revealed Seth standing before them.

"The deadbolt lock on the door needs a key no matter which side you're on." Seth quickly announced.

"If you can go back in and open a window, we could probably all get in that way, as long as we help each other." Beau said as he looked at the ground level windows consideringly.

"Or I could phase us through the door." Seth said frankly.

"Okay. But we still need to at least think about how we'd each try to get past the locked doors using our own abilities." Lisa said seriously.

"Yeah. We might have to split into teams sometime or Seth could get knocked out or killed or something." Louie said honestly.

"Please don't say that." Lisa quietly asked.

"Okay." Louie easily agreed.

"Not talking about it won't make it not happen. Preparing for it might." Quaid told the group deadly seriously.

"Let's talk about it inside." Seth suggested.

"Meerkat one." Beau said firmly.

Lee was surprised when Louie took hold of his arm and started guiding him to the center of their group.

Ms. Mordigan was equally surprised when Lisa took firm hold of her shoulders and nearly carried her toward Seth.

There was a sudden explosion of darkness which an instant later was shredded by blue-gray light emanating from Seth's horns.

* * * * *

"This way." Seth said authoritatively as he stepped forward.

"Why have you shifted us to the nygo-husk?" Ms. Mordigan slowly asked while travelling with the herd through the fleshy membrane.

"It's just the best way I know to get all of us past the locked door." Seth reluctantly admitted.

"What do you know about the nygo-husk?" Lee asked curiously.

"Nothing. I must have heard about it somewhere." Ms. Mordigan quickly explained.

"As Steve would say, 'Don't be pulling my tail'." Beau said in a voice devoid of humor.

"Who's to say where you learn certain things. It must be something that I picked up in my travels." Ms. Mordigan said nervously.

"We can wait here for as long as it takes. We need to know who you really are and what you know about the husk dimension." Lee said seriously.

"What if I don't have anything to tell you?" Ms. Mordigan asked challengingly.

"If waiting here isn't a problem for you, then I suppose that we could wait it out in hell, at least until the demons notice our presence." Lee said as a portal suddenly enveloped the group, revealing them to be in a nightmarish wasteland of heat and noxious vapor.

"The sky's on fire." Louie whispered.

"You get used to it." Lee said as he casually put a comforting arm around Louie's shoulders.

"Your people aren't meant to have this power; not for at least a few hundred more generations." Ms. Mordigan warned as she looked around nervously.

"Who are your people?" Lee asked simply as Quaid approached from Lee's other side and was promptly pulled into a hug.

After a moment to consider her situation, Ms. Mordigan finally opened her mouth to answer.

Before she could utter a word, Brian firmly said, "We don't need to know that."

Lee looked at Brian with surprise at the interruption.

"Her people have enemies. Leave it at that." Brian said seriously.

"You're using your prognostication to help me?" Ms. Mordigan asked with surprise.

"I'm using it to help us. It just happens to be helping you, too." Brian stated simply.

//Steve is beginning to worry about where we went.// Jesus announced into all their minds.

"I'll go tell him what's going on." Lee quickly volunteered.

"Don't bother. We're done here." Brian said seriously, daring anyone to contradict him.

After a tense moment, Lee quietly said, "Go ahead Seth. Take us back."

"I don't know how to get us back from here." Seth reluctantly admitted.

"Sure you do. Just change the frequency, either to that of the husk

or to our real world." Lee carefully explained.

"Right. The frequency's different. I should have noticed that." Seth said intensely.

"Whenever you're ready. We don't have to rush this part." Lee said gently, so as not to jar Seth out of his concentration.

"I sure do hope this works!" Seth said nervously.

"We'd be perfectly fine with waiting while you get all the bugs worked out." Beau said frankly.

Lisa and Ms. Mordigan immediately nodded their agreement.

"You go on ahead, Seth. We're right here with you." Slash calmly assured him.

"Thanks." Seth said gratefully as a burst of blue-black light erupted from his horns.

* * * * *

When the blinding blackness faded, the group found themselves inside the small cottage.

"I was beginning to worry. Where were you guys?" Steve asked, sounding to be more than a little unnerved.

"Through the looking glass." Slash said without humor as he looked askance at Seth.

At Steve's confused look, Ms. Mordigan told him, "It could take a minute to explain. I'll tell you later."

Steve cautiously nodded his agreement to the plan.

"How did you get all the way over there?" Lee asked Quaid, who had been at his side before they appeared in the cabin.

"I guess when we came back, the table was in the way, so I materialized beside the table instead of inside it." Quaid said speculatively.

"I should have thought of that. I'm sorry Quaid. I never even thought that I might phase you into the middle of something." Seth said repentantly.

"It's okay, but less solid things might not move me out of their way. You should probably look before you leap." Quaid said seriously.

"So, is everyone okay?" Steve asked uncertainly as he looked around.

"Yeah. I think so." Lee said as he moved around the table to Quaid's side.

"Now that we're in here, what are we supposed to do?" Louie asked curiously.

"I was planning on us cleaning this place up, but I don't know how much we're going to be able to accomplish with all of us in here." Beau said frankly.

"Plus, if you start kicking up the dust, it's going to get really miserable, really fast." Lisa interjected.

//The professor just told me that he gave Matt a key to the door. Maybe we can just plan things until he gets here.// Jesus suggested.

"Honestly, if we can find a way to manage it, we could just take the furniture out, clean the room, then clean the furniture before we put it back." Beau said seriously as he looked around consideringly.

"With what?" Quaid asked simply.

Beau looked at Quaid to expound on his question.

"Unless you've got some cleaning supplies in your back pocket, I don't think we have anything to clean with here." Quaid said frankly.

"I'm not seeing any cleaning supplies on the shelves, either." Lisa cautiously added.

"Maybe we could get the professor to send some cleaning supplies

with Matt and the guys." Louie suggested.

//They've already left the mansion. It'd be a lot of trouble for them to double back.// Jesus said frankly.

"Vile Cricket could probably go there and back before they get here." Louie suggested.

"Sounds good. Why don't you take them out, Seth?" Lee asked pleasantly.

"Yeah. Sure." Seth said easily as he stepped forward and placed a hand gently on Louie's shoulder.

Louie, Jesus and Seth all disappeared in a smudge of darkness.

"Come on, Quaid. Let's see if we can't give them a run for their money." Lee said as he opened a portal in the air before them.

"But I can't move fast like Vile Cricket." Quaid warned him.

"Maybe not. But maybe your cube can." Lee said frankly.

"I didn't think of that." Quaid said with a smile of surprise.

"Come on. Let's find out." Lee said as he offered his hand.

When Quaid took hold, Lee pulled him through the cloudy portal and it closed behind them.

"Does anyone else want to race up the hill to Xavier's?" Beau asked into the silence that followed.

"You've never seen me run. I probably couldn't beat Vile Cricket in a sprint, but I might be able to take him in a marathon." Lisa said frankly.

"You've never seen me slither at full speed either. I don't know if I'll win against you, but you'll know you were in a race." Steve countered.

"So super speed is another thing that neither of us has to offer." Brian said regretfully.

"It looks that way." Beau quietly responded.

"What was your name again?" Ms. Mordigan asked as she looked at Brian uncertainly.

"Isn't there something you can do about that?" Beau asked Brian uneasily.

"Usually people adapt to my passive field after being exposed to it a few times." Brian said as he looked at Ms. Mordigan curiously.

"Excuse me, but have we met before? I could have sworn..." Ms. Mordigan cautiously trailed off, obviously unnerved by the experience.

"Yeah. Um, give me a second. I need to talk to the guys about something real quick." Brian said distractedly, then turned to Steve and asked, "Steve, will you stay with Mad for a minute while we try to figure something out?"

"Sure." Steve immediately agreed, then thought to ask, "But where are you going? Aren't we locked in?"

"We're going to be right over there by the wall, but I think that between Slash and me it'll be like we aren't even here." Brian said frankly.

As Brian led Beau, Slash and Lisa to the far side of the room, he quietly asked, "Would you give us some cover?"

Steve watched as a dark cloud formed, completely obscuring the group from sight.

A moment later he was wondering to himself what had caught his attention in the shadowy corner of the room.

* * * * *

"So I'm hiding us while you're making them forget us?" Slash cautiously asked as he worked to make a sheet of darkness to conceal them.

"Not exactly. I'm just inspiring them not to think about us. They still remember who we are... except for Mad, maybe. My ability seems to work differently on her." Brian finished thoughtfully.

"So, do you think you can do something so that she'll remember you?" Beau asked seriously.

"Probably, yeah. I'll do that when we go back. But before I do, I just wanted to talk to you guys to make sure that I should." Brian said anxiously.

"Why wouldn't you?" Beau asked curiously.

"Mostly because she's not who she says she is. She's not what she says she is. She's not human. She's not even from Earth." Brian said nervously.

"So? What's the big deal about that? Quaid's not from Earth and you don't seem to have a problem with him." Beau observed.

"Yeah, well, from what I've been able to see, Quaid is more of an exception than a rule." Brian said frankly.

"Okay, but I know of some other 'non-humans' hanging around here. With your ability, you've got to already know about them." Slash cautiously added.

"I can see what you're saying, and you're right. They're not a big deal... but somehow she's different." Brian said darkly.

"In what way?" Slash cautiously asked.

"When I look at Mad all I can see is little bits and pieces that don't really connect with what's going on around her. All I know is that it's said, 'where her kind go, trouble follows'." Brian said with frustration.

"Did you ever figure out what caused the change in fate?" Beau asked curiously.

"No. With Quaid around it's really easy to blame everything on him, but what he said was right. I was right there with him taking a test.

If he did something that changed fate that drastically, I would have noticed it when he did it." Brian said seriously.

"What if Mad has the ability to alter fate, like Quaid does?" Beau asked cautiously.

"No... not like Quaid. The most I can do is see the results of his actions after he's done something. I can't see his potential actions at all. He's outside fate, she's definitely inside." Brian tried to explain.

"So, you can see her potential actions?" Slash cautiously asked.

"Yes... sometimes... splinters and shards... not everything and not for sure." Brian said with difficulty.

"What if she can alter fate AND can control how much you can see?" Beau slowly asked.

"That would fit the facts. But I don't get the sense that she's doing any of this consciously. I guess it could be something that her species can do instinctively." Brian said thoughtfully.

"How would that work?" Lisa asked curiously.

"I guess that she could show up somewhere and alter fate just enough to make it seem like she just naturally 'belonged' there, almost like she'd been there all along. That's kind of what she did with Andrew and it's probably what she did when she arrived on this planet." Brian said thoughtfully.

"So what do you want to do about her?" Beau asked seriously.

"Should we do anything? I mean, none of this sounds like she's doing anything to hurt us." Lisa carefully added.

"I guess that's true, but everything might not be what it looks like on the surface." Slash interjected.

"I think that if I can have a few minutes to look deeper, I should be able to see if there are any cracks in what's being revealed to us. I can go pretty deep when I really try." Brian said as he took his cards

and dice out of his pockets.

"I can stay here with you and keep the shadow up so you won't be interrupted." Slash said seriously.

"Yeah. That sounds good. I don't know if I'll be able to come up with any answers, but I'll probably have a better idea of what questions to ask. This shouldn't take me too long and I should have a lot better idea of what's going on with her when I'm finished." Brian agreed.

"We'll go and keep Steve and Mad company while we wait for everyone else to return." Lisa said thoughtfully.

"And we can keep our eyes and ears open for any clue as to what Mad is and what she wants with us." Beau added.

"Yeah. What could a person in authority want with a group of super-powered teenagers willing to believe her and do anything that she says?" Slash asked sarcastically.

"When you consider that the 'person in authority' isn't who or what she claims to be... what's not to trust?" Brian finished with a smile in response.

"C'mon Beau. Let's leave the trouble twins to sort this out." Lisa said with a grin before walking away, passing through the veil of darkness surrounding them.

Beau glanced at Brian and Seth then gave a slight shrug before following obediently.

* * * * *

As Beau stepped to Lisa's side, his boot scuffed just enough to cause Ms. Mordigan and Steve to turn suddenly.

"You scared me half to death! Where have you two been?" Steve asked as he looked around to verify that no one else had been able to sneak in undetected.

"We just needed to talk for a minute. Is Seth back yet?" Lisa asked

curiously.

As Steve was about to answer, a dark blur appeared just long enough to leave Seth standing in its wake.

"It appears that he is." Ms. Mordigan said uncertainly as she looked at Seth warily.

"What's going on?" Seth asked as he looked around, trying to gauge the strange mood of the people surrounding him.

"Lisa was just asking if you were back yet." Beau said frankly.

"I've been looking around for some of that cobwebby stuff because you were saying that you're going to need it." Seth said seriously.

"Let me guess, you couldn't bring it into this reality, could you?" Beau quietly asked.

"I didn't get that far." Seth said simply, then explained, "Before, that stuff was everywhere, draped over everything. Here, there's very little of it and what there is turns to dust before I can do much of anything with it."

"That might mean that the presence of people, living their lives, coming and going, could have something to do with the formation and continued existence of the strands." Beau said speculatively.

"If that's how it works, do you think it's going to hurt anything if we use some of the strands for your cloak thing?" Seth asked cautiously.

"What do you think, Mad? Would it cause a problem if Seth brought some webbing back from the nygo-husk and used it in this realm?" Beau asked seriously.

"I'm hardly an authority on the subject..." Ms. Mordigan trailed off, obviously reluctant to discuss it.

"You're as close as we've got. We're not going to hold you responsible or anything. We just need to know if you know of any reason that Seth shouldn't at least try to bring the nygo-husk

webbing here." Beau said frankly.

"There's no reason I can think of except to point out that the nygo-filaments evaporate when you touch them." Ms. Mordigan said simply.

"Seth may have a work-around for that. And if he can keep the webbing stable in this dimension, even if it's just for a few minutes, I should be able to cement its state of being. I bought everything that I'll need for that when I went shopping with Andrew." Beau said happily.

"You really love it when you get to do your magic, don't you?" Lisa asked with a tranquil smile.

"I have to be really careful all the time to keep people from noticing that I'm different from them. Because of that, I only use my magic when there's no other way to solve whatever the problem is." Beau quietly explained.

"So it's like a treat for you." Lisa summarized.

"It's like after being kept in a box day after day, week after week, finally being allowed to fly." Beau countered.

* * * * *

"Did they come back yet?" Brian asked as he and Slash approached the group by the door.

"Where did you come from? Is there another door over there?" Steve asked as he looked in the direction they had approached from.

"No. We were just kinda hiding in the shadows." Brian said playfully, then turned his attention to Ms. Mordigan and firmly asked, "Are you here because you want to be or because you have to be?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Ms. Mordigan asked in surprise.

"After looking into things, I'm just trying to figure out if having you with us would be a good or a bad thing. I don't want to play word

games or try to 'trick' you into revealing your true intentions. That's why I'm asking, here in front of everyone, if you're here of your own free will, or if you're somehow being compelled or manipulated into being a part of our team." Brian asked seriously.

"The main reason I'm here is because Julia and I are old friends. I'm an education expert, so when she committed to opening a school for mutants of all ages and grade levels it was only natural that she would ask for my help." Ms. Mordigan said frankly.

"That's true when you're our teacher or administrator, but what about your part in the Meerkats? How did you wedge your way into our group? Better yet, why did you wedge your way into our group?" Brian asked firmly.

"Do you want me to go? Is that what you're saying?" Ms. Mordigan asked defiantly.

"Even though I don't know everything that's going on, I think I know enough. The rest of it doesn't really matter to me, the only thing I do care about is your motivation. Why are you here?" Brian demanded.

A knock on the door preempted any answer.

"I'll keep them outside." Seth said before disappearing in darkness.

"Well?" Brian asked seriously.

"What is it that you were wanting to know?" Ms. Mordigan asked slowly.

"Why are you here, with us... with the Meerkats?" Brian asked in an unsteady tone.

"You won't like my answer."

"Try me." Brian said simply.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"There are plenty of witnesses that you told us so. Now, what's the

big secret?" Beau asked curiously.

"I'm drawn to pivotal events."

"What does that even mean?" Brian asked slowly.

"We, my people, I mean, we tend to show up in places where noteworthy things happen. We usually don't participate, we simply document, record or sometimes just stand back and observe some of the most significant events in the history of the universe." Ms. Mordigan said with a sad, distant smile.

"What's so wrong with that?" Lisa asked curiously.

After a moment, Brian speculatively asked, "Not all of those events are good things, are they?"

"No. Many times not." Ms. Mordigan easily agreed.

"So, if someone were to notice your presence at several of these 'pivotal events', they might assume that you were somehow the cause of them." Brian continued.

"Yes. That has been suggested."

"Where her kind goes, trouble follows." Lisa said quietly.

"Where did you hear that?" Ms. Mordigan asked anxiously.

"It's something that Brian picked up when he was trying to figure out if you were a threat to us or not." Lisa said honestly.

"From what I was able to pick up, it seems that your people have something of a reputation." Brian added.

"Just because we were present doesn't mean that we caused anything to happen." Ms. Mordigan said defensively.

"That doesn't sound so bad." Slash said uncertainly.

"You didn't cause anything, but you didn't try to stop anything either, did you?" Brian cautiously asked.

"It's not in our nature to intervene." Ms. Mordigan patiently explained.

"I'm guessing that when others noticed that your people happened to be present when something catastrophic happened, they jumped to the conclusion that you were the cause of it." Brian said carefully.

"Some primitives believed so, yes. Later I was relegated to the status of 'harbinger'." Ms. Mordigan added as confirmation of his assertion.

"Harbinger?" Beau slowly asked, then suddenly said, "If I'm remembering correctly, The Morrigan is the celtic goddess known for being the harbinger of war and death. That's not just a coincidence, is it?"

"Those were different times and the dynamics of that culture were a bit more... fluid than I am accustomed to." Ms. Mordigan said cautiously.

"You were The Morrigan? I mean, you personally?" Beau asked dubiously.

"Just a piece of advice, Beauregard. If you ever find yourself trying to hide out in a primitive culture, remember that even the most seemingly innocuous technology can appear to be magical."

"The guys are waiting outside." Lisa quietly reminded those present.

"Mad? Why are you here?" Brian asked quietly.

"I suppose that, not unlike a moth drawn to a flame, I'm here because I have to be."

"Does your being here mean that we're going to do something important?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Not necessarily. I could have been drawn here by any number of things that have little or nothing to do with your team."

"Who are you really?" Brian demanded to know.

"We have many names. Quaid's people tend to refer to me and mine as imps and tricksters, although we're no such thing." Ms. Mordigan said wearily.

"What do you know about Quaid's people?" Slash asked curiously.

"We've had dealings with the Q throughout the millennia, although I've never met Quaid or Matt's doppelganger before, they appear to be more reasonable than most of the Q that I've heard about." Ms. Mordigan admitted.

"So, if you're not an imp, what are you?" Brian asked firmly, dragging them back to the point.

"Your friends Trey and Robert could probably tell you quite a bit more about my people than I ever could. I'm sure they have access to the digital remains of my culture. The Borg encountered us a relatively long time ago. Many of my people were assimilated. Those few of us able to escape the Borg onslaught were scattered to the solar winds and were mostly lost to each other. Eventually, we settled on various worlds, far and wide, and blended in as much as we could." Ms. Mordigan said distantly.

"Should we go and ask Trey and Robert about you?" Beau slowly asked, carefully watching for her reaction.

"I don't see that it matters. But you might consider that anyone who'd care about my people would probably be more interested in theirs. They're Wysanti and Norcadian, unless I'm mistaken. Beyond that, I wouldn't be surprised to find that their Borg implants and nano-tech would be of great interest to a fair many people." Ms. Mordigan said with a fairly convincing facade of unconcern.

"So keeping your secrets helps us to keep ours?" Slash cautiously asked.

"If you like." Ms. Mordigan said easily, then continued more seriously, "As you've deduced, I have my own motivations, none of which involve causing you harm or exposing your secrets. If you feel that you can do me the courtesy of extending the same

discretion to me, we might be able to enjoy a mutually productive working arrangement going forward." Ms. Mordigan said seriously.

"Guys. She hasn't really told us anything." Brian cautioned his comrades.

"Despite having witnessed numerous pivotal moments in your world's history, I don't really have a lot of stories to tell. I'm more of a listener." Ms. Mordigan finished with a serene smile.

To Be Continued...