

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

musketees." 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 the 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.

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"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.

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"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.

* * * * *

"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.

"Ooookay. 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." Ronny said dryly.

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

* * * * *

After a long moment of listening to the unfamiliar style of music, Ronny 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?" Ronny 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." Ronny 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 Marc 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 vill 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 vill 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 vill 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 would 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 vill 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.

"Zhis is not going to be easy." Kurt said frankly.

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

"Zhere is quite a crowd of people assembled, and zhere 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 zhink zhat you vill 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.

"Zhen 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 meerkat 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. Durnal? 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. Durnal 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 Krocket.// 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.

* * * * *

"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 Meer kats 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 sacs 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 sacs 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 sacs, 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 accidentally 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 Krocket 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 Slash 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 you 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.

[Chapter 20: Maverick]

"Are you ready for us to come in yet?" Seth asked as he appeared in their midst.

"Actually, it'd probably be better if we came out. There's not a whole lot of room in here." Beau said honestly.

"Are you guys done?" Seth asked curiously as he looked around, trying to assess the moods of those present.

"What'dya say, Mad? Are we good?" Slash asked hopefully.

Ms. Mordigan seemed to be about to answer, then instead, looked at Steve inquisitively.

"What?" Steve asked with a suddenly panicked look in his eyes.

"Before things get too crazy, I just wanted to be sure that you weren't feeling railroaded into anything. It's okay if you need to take a step back or put things on hold until you've had a chance to process." Ms. Mordigan said frankly.

"Thanks for thinking of that, but after all this time dreaming of 'what could have been' I'm finally reaching the big time, my chance is finally here. *This* is my shot." Steve said passionately.

Ms. Mordigan looked at Steve a moment longer, then turned to Beau and said, "I have a feeling that everything is exactly as it needs to be. If you need my promise not to share your secrets, you have it. If you're seeking my commitment to your team, you have that too. Just let me know what else you need from me."

"I don't think any of us would ask more from you than that. In a world that hates us, we don't just need someone like Matt to help us learn our abilities. We also need someone who knows how the world works to help us navigate our way past the people who obviously hate us AND the people who will pretend to be our friends so that they can use us. It looks to me like you could be that person." Beau said confidently.

"I'll do my best not to disappoint you." Ms. Mordigan said sincerely.

"Seth, will you ask them to unlock the door? I think we'd all like to celebrate with snacks." Lisa asked hopefully.

Rather than answer verbally, Seth disappeared in a brief flash of anti-light.

* * * * *

"Seth says that there's not enough room for all of us in there." John said to the group as they emerged from the quaint little cottage.

"I think we could all fit just fine. I'm just not sure we'd be able to accomplish much in the way of cleaning with everyone in the way." Beau said frankly.

"Jesus. Are you and Louie close to being back at the gingerbread house?" Slash asked into the air.

After a moment, Professor Xavier said into all their minds, //It appears that Jesus' telepathy shuts down when he assumes his fighting form.//

"Is Vile Cricket okay? Should we go back and get them?" Ronny asked with concern.

//They should be fine. They appear to have been a bit too ambitious in their choices. Therefore, carrying the

assortment of supplies is slowing them down.//

Professor Xavier explained.

"What about Lee and Quaid? Do you have any idea when they'll be back?" Slash asked anxiously.

//It appears that Lee and Quaid have discovered the joys of travelling at a high rate of speed within a psionic cube through the bowels of hell. I expect that they will return to you shortly, although it is yet to be determined if they will remember to gather any cleaning supplies.// Professor Xavier responded with fond amusement under his words.

"Maybe we could get a couple tables out of the cottage to use for the food while we're waiting for them to get back." Lisa quietly suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea!" Seth said cheerfully.

"The tables are really old and look like they're super heavy." Beau cautioned.

"Heavy's no problem for me, but it'd be nice if someone would take the other end to help me get it through the door." Lisa said frankly.

"Yeah. I'll help you." Clark said automatically as he stepped toward the cabin.

"Actually, I can make the tables light enough to float. If someone will just guide them through the doorway; that's the part that might slow me down a little."

Ronny said honestly.

"Yeah. I'll help you with that." Slash easily volunteered.

"I guess we'll be over here keeping the food cold." Bobby said with Robert at his side.

"At least there's *something* you can do to help." John said sourly.

"There's a pot-bellied stove in the cabin. I didn't see a woodpile or anything, but it's cool enough out here that if you got the fire going, I'm pretty sure that everyone would really appreciate it." Slash said frankly.

After a moment to consider, John finally looked to his side and asked, "Trey, do you want to help me gather wood?"

"Is that some type of thinly veiled invitation to engage in a sexual act?" Trey asked uncertainly.

Ms. Mordigan's eyes went wide in surprise at the suggestion.

"Yes. Yes it is." John said firmly, then broke into a smile as he took gentle hold of Trey's arm and whispered, "Come on."

"I feel like I should be helping." Steve said apprehensively.

It took a moment for Ms. Mordigan to realize to what Steve was referring.

"From what Beauregard was saying, they might end up taking all the furnishings out as part of the cleaning process. You could probably join in and be a part of that if you like." Ms. Mordigan cautiously suggested.

"Should I ask Beau about it?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"I suppose that if you ask Beauregard, he can either tell you himself or direct you to whomever is in charge. It seems to change from minute to minute." Ms. Mordigan finished with a smile.

"Do you think I'll ever be in charge?" Steve asked cautiously.

"I guess that depends on whether or not you can *take* charge. If you're not sure if you're up to it, this might be an ideal opportunity to dip a toe in and find out."

Ms. Mordigan said honestly, then glanced at Steve's tail before quietly adding, "...metaphorically speaking."

Steve looked at her uncertainly for a moment, then slithered toward the cottage where Beau, Lisa, Clark, Slash, and Ronny were already making their way inside.

* * * * *

"Since we've got everyone here, what would you think about taking some of the other furniture out too?"

Steve asked cautiously as he followed the group into the Gingerbread House.

"Yeah. That might be a good idea." Beau said decisively.

"It's something we can do until the cleaning supplies get here." Slash supportively added.

Before anyone could react, Beau suddenly said, "Everyone, hold on. I think we're doing this the hard way."

"What do you want for us to do?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"If we get everyone with a levitating ability or super strength together in here, we can get Seth to make the wall disappear so that we can carry everything out without anyone having to try and fit things through the doorway." Beau said seriously.

"That'll probably be a lot faster and easier." Lisa confirmed.

"Sounds good! I'll go get him!" Steve said enthusiastically, then slithered out the door before anyone could suggest otherwise.

* * * * *

"Seth? Would you mind making the front wall disappear so that we can carry the furniture out?" Steve asked hopefully.

Seth looked at the front of the building for a moment, then silently moved around to the side.

"If you don't want to do it, we can just carry the furniture out through the door like we were planning to." Steve quickly explained.

"No. It's not that. I'm just thinking that this isn't the same as making a door go noodley. I'm worried that making the whole front wall disappear might weaken

the building enough to cause the roof to cave in. I think it'll be a lot better if I go through this side wall. The beam across the top looks like it will hold everything in place, even if the wall below it suddenly goes squishy." Seth explained.

"I guess it's good that you're the one with this ability, because I never would have thought of that." Steve said honestly.

"Don't give me too much credit. From what I can tell, we're all just making it up as we go along. I'm sure that there are lots of things that I'm going to miss. You just caught me on a good day." Seth said with a grin.

Steve watched as Seth stepped forward and placed his hands flat against the wall. While the light of his horns started to glow, the wall began to become less and less *real*.

* * * * *

"Seth thought it would be better for us to go out through the side wall. He says it'll be less likely to cause damage to the building." Steve rushed to say as he slithered into the cottage through the front door.

"I guess he'd probably know best." Beau said simply, then watched as the side wall seemed to become semi-transparent and somewhat gelatinous in appearance.

"Looks like he's almost ready. Lifters and floaters, let's grab it and go!" Lisa said with an uncharacteristic enthusiastic attitude.

"Ronny, let me help with the table so you can concentrate on doing your floaty thing." Steve hurried to say as he moved to the other end of the table.

"Um, yeah. Thanks... um, Steve, was it?" Ronny asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. And you're Bobby's brother, aren't you?" Steve asked curiously.

"Right. Do you have super strength?" Ronny asked as he moved to allow Steve to take the end of the table.

"I wouldn't say 'super', but I'm decently strong, maybe a little above average. I can definitely lift a table if I need to." Steve said, as he suited actions to words.

Steve turned himself so that he could see where he was going, then took a firm grip to begin carrying the table.

"Wait! Wait! Hold up! I almost stepped on your tail." Slash said suddenly.

"Oh. Yeah. Maybe it'd be better if you were in front. I can't always keep track of where my tail is when I'm moving." Steve said anxiously.

"Yeah. Just stay there and I'll swing around." Slash said as he began to arch around Steve.

"How's the weight? Do you need for it to be lighter?" Ronny asked cautiously.

"Actually, no. It's not bad. I think we've got this." Slash assured him.

"I can help too." Beau cautiously offered, obviously braced for their refusal.

"Great! That corner's up for grabs." Steve said as he glanced at the corner of the end of the table that he was carrying.

As Clark and Lisa carried a table past them, Beau stepped up and took hold of the corner, making sure to take on at least *some* of the weight.

"Good. It looks like you guys have got this. If you'll get the tables set up where you want them, you can be

getting the snacks ready while I get the rest of this stuff emptied out."

"Will you need for us to come back and help you with that?" Steve asked with concern.

"The only reason I thought that I'd need help before was because of the door. As long as Seth keeps the wall open for me, I think I can handle the rest." Ronny said confidently.

"Let's move this over by Bobby." Slash quietly suggested.

"Yell if you need us." Steve called as he glanced to see that Beau was ready.

* * * * *

"That's impressive." Lisa said cautiously as she watched the shelving, boxes, and drums from inside the cottage floating through the transparent wall.

"The kid has some power." Matt acknowledged.

"The power itself is impressive enough, but it's his level of control that truly astounds me." Ms. Mordigan said quietly.

"That, right there, is what we're here for. The kid has what it takes to help a lot of people who need it, but at the same time, he could really let loose and cause some damage if he wanted to. It's our job to show him that fighting for what's right is worth it and that easy answers and pretty promises aren't always what they look like on the surface." Matt said sagely.

"It sounds like you're speaking from personal experience." Ms. Mordigan said with a look askance at him.

"I seen some things." Matt said simply as he kept his focus on the teenagers working together to achieve a goal.

Ms. Mordigan slowly nodded, as much in sympathy as agreement.

* * * * *

As Bobby, Robert, Steve, and Slash were working to arrange the prepared foods into something of a buffet line on the tables, the rest of the group began to cross the open ground to inspect the shelves and crates that Ronny had moved from the building.

Unexpectedly, a black blur wearing a shredded blue/black cape raced through their midst and came to rest at the side of the cottage. Within a matter of seconds, the blackness fell away and the cape dissolved to reveal Louie and Jesus, laying side by side. They were surrounded by various cleaning supplies as they both breathed heavily.

"Are you guys alright?" Lisa asked with concern as she hurried to them.

"They look like they need a drink. Did you guys bring any water with the snacks?" Beau called out as he knelt beside Louie.

"Yeah. We brought some canteens. Give me a second." Bobby said quickly as he rummaged through the backpacks.

//We'll be okay. We just need to catch our breath.//
Jesus assured them.

"You didn't need to push yourselves so hard." Lisa said gently.

//Things are a little different when we're combined. We don't get the same feedback to know how much effort something is taking. Time seems to move differently,

too... although I can't tell if it feels like it's moving faster or slower.// Jesus quietly explained.

"Are you sure that you're both going to be alright?" Lisa asked quietly.

//Yes. We just need a few minutes for our bodies to react and normalize. We're just like anyone else after a challenging run.// Jesus said seriously.

"Louie, here. Have some water." Beau said gently as he encouraged Louie to sit up.

"I brought a paper plate. I hope that'll work for you." Slash said gently as he placed the paper plate on the ground beside Jesus, then began to pour cool water from a canteen.

//That's perfect. Thank you.// Jesus said appreciatively.

Due to the uneven ground, Slash decided to stay and hold the plate in place as Jesus slaked his thirst.

After enjoying a long sip of water, Louie quietly said, "Next time we go for supplies, remind us to take a bag or a box or something. Carrying all that junk is what messed us up the most."

//We couldn't build up any momentum because things kept shifting and slipping.// Jesus further explained.

"If there's a next time, we'll be sure to remind you." Ms. Mordigan said warmly with a slight grin.

"Where's Quaid?" Louie asked with concern as he looked around the gathering.

"He left with Lee just after you did to get more cleaning supplies. We're expecting them back any minute." Beau said seriously.

"We didn't see them while we were out there." Louie said as he looked back toward the mansion.

"They're not anyplace that you could have seen them." Matt said simply.

Louie, filled with concern, looked to Matt for a further explanation... and possibly some reassurance.

"It's sort of like what you and Jesus do, combining your abilities. Lee and Quaid put their abilities together and found a way to make them do... something. We'll have to wait for them to come back before we'll know just how that worked out." Matt explained.

* * * * *

"Is that everything?" Seth asked as he looked around the empty single room, devoid of all but the pot-bellied stove..

"Unless you want to take the cobwebs down and clean them before putting them back up." Ronny said as he looked into the rafters.

"Don't say that around Beau or he might take you up on it." Seth joked.

"I don't think you'll have to worry about that. Now that the heavy lifting is done, they're probably going to set us off to the side so that they can focus on the *important work*." Ronny said bitterly.

"How do you mean?" Seth asked curiously.

"It's the whole thing about everyone being part of the team and making sure that everyone gets to make a contribution and participate and blah, blah, blah..." Ronny trailed off wearily.

"What's wrong with that?" Seth asked curiously.

"It ends up making things harder than they need to be. It makes them take longer and sometimes it even makes them more dangerous. Anything hard, dirty, or just plain miserable is given to us because we have

what it takes to muscle through it. Anything where you have to be smart, whether it's book smart or socially smart is something that they *definitely* have to take charge of... you know, for the good of the team."

Ronny said frankly.

"I don't get what you're saying." Seth said slowly, sensing the seriousness of what Ronny was telling him, despite the somewhat joking tone that he was using.

"You and me, we've got some mega-powers. I don't know if we qualify as 'alpha' or 'omega' level, but we've still got enough power to do some big important things. Basically, they call on us when they need a hammer. They call on the others when they need a tweezer." Ronny said firmly.

Seth nodded that he was following along so far.

"That's all well and good when they're actually the best people for the job. But when the team decides to let someone less powerful do something just so that they'll feel like they're part of things, they not only make everything harder and slower than it needs to be, but they sometimes even put us in danger because they don't have the best person doing the job." Ronny said frankly.

"When we got here, to the cottage, everyone was trying to come up with different ways to get us past the locked door. Louie said that the reason they weren't going to automatically use my ability was in case I was on a different team or knocked out or dead or something. Even though I didn't really want to hear that, I understood that he was right. When we've got the chance, it's important for all the members of the team to know how to deal with things on their own. But at the same time, you're right too, it's also important to know which of us can handle it best and see that they get enough practice so that they can know how to use their powers when they need to." Seth said thoughtfully, more of a way of reasoning it out rather than explaining his understanding.

"Yeah. I can see the point of that. It sounds like you guys are on the right track. I was just worried that you might be handicapping your team by limiting yourselves to the capabilities of your least talented teammate." Ronny said seriously.

"Our team has mutants, a regular human, a witch, a ghost, and even a fallen god. Our power levels are kind of all over the place." Seth finished with a weary chuckle.

"A ghost?" Ronny cautiously asked.

"Oops. Forget I said that. A few things still have to get worked out before I'm allowed to talk about it."

"Yeah. I can understand that, but are you saying that you're going to have an *actual* ghost as part of your team?" Ronny asked in fascination.

"Yeah. At least that's the plan. We're going to have to wait and see how it ends up turning out." Seth said frankly.

"Once it's all worked out, I'd like to talk to your ghost, if I can. I went through some stuff a while back that got me to thinking and... I just have a few questions."

"If it's questions about how death works, Beau might be a better person to talk to about it. He does death magic so he probably knows things about it that not everyone does, maybe not even the ghosts themselves." Seth said thoughtfully.

"My questions aren't as much about how it works as they are about how it feels. I'd like to know how close what I went through was to what it actually feels like to be dead." Ronny said with a note of anxiety.

"I can't say for sure how long it's going to take, but I'll be sure to ask him if I get the chance." Seth promised.

"I don't know if you know this, but I'm new here too." Ronny said more quietly.

"No. I didn't know that." Seth admitted, then added, "I wouldn't have guessed. You seem to fit right in with everyone else, like you've been with them all along."

"I just wanted you to know that in case you need something and don't have someone to ask who'll understand." Ronny said seriously.

"Because we're both high power?" Seth asked to confirm.

"That and because we're both new. I get the feeling that people who've been around for a while don't remember what it's like to not already know how things work and who can be trusted and things like that." Ronny said gravely.

"Yeah. It's hard to know who you can trust." Seth quietly admitted.

"I know. The only thing I can tell you is to try and find someone... one person, who's got your back. Once you've got that, the rest of it kind of falls into place."

Ronny said confidently, obviously secure in the advice he was giving.

"That sounds easy, but a lot of things that sound that way usually aren't." Seth said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Pretty much." Ronny easily conceded, then thought to add, "I've gone for years without a single person in my life who I could trust even a little bit. Then, like a switch was flipped, all of a sudden I've got more people than I can count who I'd trust with my life."

"If that's the case, then maybe it wasn't something they did. Maybe it was you." Seth cautiously suggested.

"Yeah. There's no big mystery of what changed. I just started 'choosing' to be around people who would treat me like I'm worth a damn. Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, I've got people lined up around the block to trust me and depend on me and make me feel like I'm a really valuable part of their team." Ronny said frankly

"I'm pretty sure that I'm already around people like that." Seth said uncertainly.

"Well, good. That's the first step. The next one should probably be picking someone who you'd want to be like. If you can find someone who's already got what you're looking for, it can kind of give you a roadmap of how to get to where you want to be."

"They could probably warn you about things to watch out for, too." Seth said with a slow nod.

"That is, if they like you. Remember that there are some people who think it's best to learn by doing or to learn from your mistakes. They won't warn you about what's up ahead because they think it's for your own good." Ronny finished with a roll of his eyes.

"As bad as that is, I think it's still better than someone who clears the path for you and doesn't let you face *anything* on your own." Seth said frankly, then added more quietly, "But it's probably better to have someone that's more in the middle."

Ronny nodded and seemed to be about to say something when he noticed that the floor seemed to be trembling beneath their feet.

"Do you feel that?" Seth asked uncertainly.

"Yeah." Ronny hesitantly answered.

"What's causing that? It feels like back home, when the washing machine would go unbalanced in the spin cycle." Seth said as he looked around for the source of the deep low rumbling.

"I think it's coming from outside." Ronny said and was out the door before he had completely finished the sentence.

Seth followed immediately behind.

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Seth asked as he looked around for the source of the rumbling.

Before anyone could answer, the ground in their midst seemed to simultaneously cave in and erupt.

In a burst of flame and smoke, a cloudy blue cube suddenly rose from within the earth with Quaid and Lee standing inside.

For a brief moment, flaming debris seemed to be raining down upon them, then within a heartbeat, the ground was solid beneath their feet, and the air was fresh and clear of flames and sulfur.

//And I thought we knew how to make an entrance.//
Jesus chuckled wearily at the spectacle of it.

"Sorry! We didn't mean to do that! This thing doesn't have any brakes!" Quaid said loudly, then stood panting heavily for a long moment as the cube dissolved around them.

"Are you guys alright?" Lisa asked with concern.

"We're great! It's just going to take a minute before we're past the adrenaline rush." Lee said with giddy chuckles interlaced with his words.

"I see that you brought us some cleaning supplies. Thank you for that." Matt said uncertainly as he looked at the buckets filled with water and brushes surrounding Lee and Quaid's feet.

"We stopped at the boathouse. No one was there, but I don't think Dad or Father will mind that we took some of their cleaning stuff." Quaid explained.

"I already told you, I'm the grandfather. I can give permission too." Lee quietly assured him.

"I'm still not sure about how all that works. They don't have grandfathers where I'm from." Quaid said frankly,

then thought to add, "They usually don't have kids either. They just kind of... are."

"If everyone's here, the snacks are ready." Robert announced from the beautifully organized snack tables.

"Let's go ahead and enjoy our mid-morning snack, then we'll be in a better state to be working on cleaning and testing." Ms. Mordigan helpfully suggested.

"Aren't you worried that it might spoil our lunch?" Ronny asked curiously as everyone picked themselves up and began to migrate toward the snack tables.

"In my experience, people your age tend to have highly variable dietary needs. I've found that typically, as long as you're not forced to eat when you're not hungry or prevented from eating when you are, that things tend to work out the way that they're supposed to." Ms. Mordigan said pleasantly.

* * * * *

"How many of you are there here?" Brian asked Clark as they approached the snack tables from different directions.

"How do you mean?" Clark asked with confusion.

"You, Trey, Robert, Quaid, and now Ms. Mordigan... are there more aliens than humans on Earth right now?" Brian asked warily.

"You can't really judge it by the people we have here. This isn't a representative sample." Clark assured him, then explained, "Just like with mutants, this is just a place where it's safe for us to live and learn without having to worry about being discovered or hunted. I promise you that out in the real world you'll find a lot more people who are human than aren't."

"Oh... Okay." Brian said slowly, then added, "I guess that I just didn't realize how many aliens we had running around here."

"We prefer to be called 'non-humans'." Clark carefully told him, then explained, "I mean, it doesn't really bother *me*, but I know that it *does* bother some other people, so I try not to use it out of respect for them."

"Oh, yeah. Okay. I didn't mean anything by it. It's just that after meeting everyone individually, I didn't really do the math before." Brian cautiously explained.

"I think it's pretty much like being a mutant. When you're here, it's like being in a protective bubble that not only keeps you safe, but also has its own climate

of beliefs and attitudes. When you step outside the bubble, you feel like you're not a part of things and worry about what will happen if people find out. Basically, it feels like everyone in the universe is against you." Clark said frankly.

"I guess it *is* like being a mutant." Brian said with astonishment.

"So, Ms. Mordigan is a non-human?" Clark asked curiously.

"Yeah. I thought that somehow you'd just know." Brian said honestly.

"I'm not sure, but I think that might be a really prejudiced thing to say... somehow. At least, I feel like I *should be* offended by it." Clark said uncertainly.

"Oh? Sorry. I didn't mean it that way." Brian said honestly.

"It's okay. I know you didn't. I just thought you should know that stuff like that is probably not alright to say to people. They might not care if you mean it or not, they might just react." Clark carefully explained.

"Yeah. Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Brian easily agreed.

"You haven't started eating yet, have you?" John asked as he and Trey emerged from a wooded area down the hill from the Gingerbread House, each carrying an armload of branches and sticks.

"Not yet, but one more minute and we might have." Clark called back in their direction with a smile that conveyed his love for them both.

"Is there anything else that we need to do before we start eating?" Ms. Mordigan asked as she looked around the gathering.

"Yeah. We can wait for Trey and John to get up here, then we can decide what we're going to be doing next so that we can go and get to it as soon as we're done." Beau suggested.

"Do *you* know what we'll be doing next?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"I figured that you would probably want to take the test takers back to the mansion for their next round of placement tests." Beau said frankly.

"Yes. I *had* intended to do that." Ms. Mordigan confirmed.

"I thought that since there's so many of us, that the rest of the Meerkats could hang around here for a little bit and get the Gingerbread House ready for use." Beau said seriously.

"What did you have planned for the junior X-Men?" Matt asked curiously.

"I didn't actually have anything planned. But it seems to me that y'all have your own lives and your own way of doing things. You probably don't need for me to be making plans for you." Beau said frankly.

"Yeah. Well I been thinking that, if Julia and Kurt would allow it, we might take a look around the Wagner campus and dorm rooms to see what we can find that those detectives might have missed." Matt said seriously.

"What are we going to be looking for?" Ronny asked curiously.

"Clues." Matt said simply, then explained, "I figure that between mutant abilities and futuristic technology, we might be able to uncover a few things that the investigators either don't have the budget to fully investigate or might not know to look for."

"So we won't have to go to class today?" Ronny asked cautiously to confirm.

"As long as we go into this taking it seriously, I think it could end up being a practical learning experience." Matt quietly explained.

"It *does* sound like it has that potential." Ms. Mordigan said supportively.

"Even though we went to a lot of trouble to bring all the furniture outside, it's too cold to be sitting on the grass and eating out here. If no one has a really big problem with it, I'm going to get my food and take it into the Gingerbread House." Lisa announced.

"That sounds like an *excellent* plan to me." Clark immediately agreed.

"It *does* feel like it's getting colder." Ms. Mordigan said in support of Lisa's idea.

"Maybe, if we ask really nicely, John and Trey will start the fire for us." Ronny said hopefully.

"We can do that. We've already got everything we'll need." John assured him with a smile.

Armed with a plan, everyone made their food selections and headed for the shelter of the Gingerbread House.

* * * * *

With all the furnishings removed, the open floor space of the little cabin was comfortable, verging on cozy.

"Maybe we should have asked Ronny to stay to help float the furniture back in." Lisa said as she and Steve carried a heavy wooden rack of shelving through the transparent side wall.

"I'd rather that they get started on their investigation." Slash said frankly.

"And now that Beau's told them about Loomis, they've got another advantage over the detectives." Lisa said as she put her end of the shelving down.

"It's better that they investigate. We've got this." Beau said as he slowly and carefully mopped an open section of the floor.

"Do you have any idea of what we're doing with the cannisters of... gunk?" Slash asked cautiously as he looked out the window.

"I don't know what that stuff is, but I'm pretty sure that it's the kind of thing that you can't just throw in the trash. It probably has to be disposed of properly." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Okay. How do you do that?" Slash asked curiously.

"Actually, I have no idea." Beau said honestly.

//Maybe we should ask the professor. He handles so many things, he probably already knows and might want to take care of it himself so that he can be sure that it's done right.// Jesus cautiously suggested.

"You know... this might be an ideal project for you to work on as a group." Ms. Mordigan slowly suggested.

Silence fell over those assembled until Lee finally quietly asked, "What do you mean 'project'?"

"Not only would it be good for you to know how to properly dispose of hazardous materials, but I believe that it would be a valuable learning experience for you, as a group, to discover how and where to find answers to this type of question for yourselves. Since the cleaning is nearly done, your group could come back to the mansion with us and work on that while

the rest of us resume the testing." Ms. Mordigan said frankly.

"You know, all of a sudden, test-taking doesn't sound so bad." Lisa said uneasily.

Beau looked at Ms. Mordigan with dawning realization for a brief moment, then slowly whispered, "You're evil."

[Chapter 21: Baronette]

"Once you've finished cleaning and putting everything away where you want it, you can return to the library and I'll do what I can to point you in the right direction to discover for yourselves how to responsibly dispose of hazardous waste." Ms. Mordigan said with a grin, obviously pleased with herself.

Despite how onerous the task seemed, none of the 'non-test takers' had the will to speak out against it.

"Hey guys! Looking good!" Andrew said as he suddenly appeared in their midst.

"Are you here to help us set up the workshop?" Beau asked hopefully.

"Yes. I wasn't looking forward to all the cleaning that needed to be done, but it looks like you've already taken care of most of that. It looks great!" Andrew said as he looked around.

"Yeah. Everything's been cleaned and we just have a few shelves left to bring back in. It should only take us a few minutes" Beau quickly explained.

"Don't worry. I've got it." Andrew said as he glanced out the window.

Without any fanfare, those few remaining pieces of furniture on the lawn simply vanished and reappeared inside the cottage, exactly where they would be needed.

"I guess we could have saved ourselves a lot of wasted effort if we just waited for you to get here." Lisa said in realization.

"Nah. I may be good at moving things around, but I don't have any ability that helps with the cleaning. What you did needed to be done, and thanks to you doing it, now we're ready to get this place set up." Andrew said enthusiastically.

"I was about to walk the test-takers back to the mansion for their next round of evaluations. Are you going to need us for anything before we go?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"The only person I'd like to have close at hand is Beau. But if you need him to go with you, I can do the bulk of this on my own and wait until he's free to do the detail work." Andrew said frankly.

"No. That won't be necessary. All of Beauregard's academic testing has been done. He's free to stay with

you for as long as you need him." Ms. Mordigan assured him.

"What about Seth?" Andrew asked curiously.

"He *does* have some testing to do." Ms. Mordigan said seriously.

"That's okay. If he didn't, it might be a good opportunity for me and him and Dad to spend some time working on our portals together. But we can do that some other time. There's no rush." Andrew said, more to Seth than to Ms. Mordigan.

"Dad?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"Andrew is my son." Lee said simply.

There was a long moment of silence as Ms. Mordigan looked back and forth between the two young men who looked like brothers before finally saying to Lee, "I guess I can see what you were talking about when you said that you're 'old for your age'."

"I thought that with the way Quaid was talking about his grandfather that you had already figured it out." Slash said seriously.

"It's been a long day. There's been quite a bit to take in." Ms. Mordigan said in her defense.

"What still needs to be done before we head back to do our testing?" Brian asked curiously, in an effort to keep them on task.

"Have we met? What was your name again?" Ms. Mordigan asked him curiously.

"My name is Brian." He said firmly, and all those watching could tell that he was putting forth some type of mental effort as he concentrated on Ms. Mordigan.

"Oh... of course. Prognostication and all that. It must have slipped my mind." Ms. Mordigan said in a slightly flustered state.

"It's okay. I get that a lot." Brian said with a smile and seemed to be relieved at her reaction.

"I suppose that if no one has anything else, we can head back to the mansion now." Ms. Mordigan said pleasantly.

"If you like, I can create a portal for you. It'll save you a few steps." Andrew quietly offered as a doorway leading into the library appeared right before them.

"That ability of yours seems to come in handy." Ms. Mordigan said, somewhat dubiously.

"It has its ups and downs." Andrew said with a smile as he gestured toward the portal, inviting them to go through.

"Why, thank you." Ms. Mordigan said in proper response to his courtesy.

//Hold on. If no one minds, I'd like to stay here.//
Jesus hurriedly announced.

"Yeah. I bet it's boring just hanging out with me while I'm taking tests." Louie said frankly.

//Actually, it hasn't been bad. It was very relaxing. But now there's work to be done and I'd like to be here to help out if I can.// Jesus said as he slipped out of Louie's backpack then fell in slow motion, down to the floor.

"We'll be glad to have your help." Beau assured him.

Once on the floor, Jesus moved to stand in line with his teammates, beside Slash's foot.

"We'll meet you back here when the testing is finished." Ms. Mordigan said to confirm.

"I won't be able to stay too long. I have classes..."

Andrew trailed off as he looked at his father apologetically.

"As far as I'm concerned, this is me doing my liaison job. Don't worry if you have to go, I'll keep an eye on things here." Lee assured him.

"Thanks, Dad." Andrew said with relief.

"I guess the sooner we start, the sooner we'll be back here to help you." Ms. Mordigan said before stepping through Andrew's portal, followed by Quaid, Louie, Seth, and Brian.

* * * * *

"What do you want to do first?" Beau asked cautiously as he looked around the cabin.

"As much as I'd *like* to unpack the things that we bought this morning, I think it would be better for us to get the basic supplies put into place first so that we can see how everything's going to lay out." Andrew suggested thoughtfully.

"Yeah. That sounds right." Beau said easily.

"Give me a second to see if the others are ready."

Andrew said as his eyes suddenly flared with golden light.

"And here I was, thinking that everyone would be afraid of me and hate me if they found out that I was different." Beau said slowly as he stared at the eerie sight.

"It's the normal looking ones you have to watch out for." Lisa said conspiratorially to no one in particular.

Steve nodded his agreement.

//Andrew, would you mind if I piggy-back on your vision for a minute? I'm interested to know what it is that you see when you do that.// Jesus asked hopefully.

"No problem, but you'd better hurry up and hop on! It's only going to take me a few seconds to find out what I need to know." Andrew said cheerfully.

//Yeah. Wow, that's...// Jesus began to say, then abruptly stopped.

No one spoke as they waited for Jesus to reveal what he was seeing.

//Okay. That's just insane. It's like your eyes are flying around, looking inside, outside, and right through the middle of things.// Jesus said in wonder.

"It's something like an itty-bitty portal, just for my eyes. It doesn't phase all the way in though. It's just enough so that I can get a peek through it." Andrew tried to explain.

//Still, that's way too much for me. It's even more of a sensory overload than being Vile Cricket.// Jesus said in an overwhelmed mind-voice.

"It takes some getting used to." Andrew easily admitted.

"Is there anything we can do right now to help?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"Hang on." Andrew said quickly, then vanished.

"I really feel like we should be doing something." Lisa said hesitantly.

//I think he's gathering the other people who are going to be using the workshop.// Jesus said frankly.

"Is that what he was looking at with his golden eyes thing." Slash asked curiously.

//Yes. As far as I could tell. Piggy backing his vision was like watching a video in extreme fast forward. I didn't have time to notice every single thing.// Jesus said with gentle amusement under his words.

"It sounds kind of like when Quaid and I were 'hell surfing'." Lee said frankly.

"What's that?" Beau asked curiously.

"Riding inside Quaid's cube through the hell dimension at the speed of thought. It's kind of like riding a roller coaster at top speed... without tracks... on fire." Lee fought to explain.

//Would you mind if I look for myself?// Jesus asked curiously.

"Sure. Go ahead." Lee easily agreed.

There was a long silent moment until Jesus finally said, //Andrew's vision seems to be more frenetic but Lee's 'hell surfing' seems more adventurous. I think that being Vile Cricket falls somewhere in between.//

"I don't know, but 'hell surfing' actually sounds like it might be kinda fun." Beau reluctantly admitted.

"I'm glad you think so, because as far as I know, we don't have a faster or more dependable mode of transportation available to us. If the team needs to go somewhere fast, that's probably how we're getting there." Lee said frankly.

"Couldn't we use Quaid's cube to do the same thing in this dimension?" Slash slowly asked.

"We could try, but it would probably be too dangerous. In the hell dimension, I can use my ability to phase us in and out a little or a lot so that we can fly at a high rate of speed without having to worry about hitting things. The physics of this world are a little different. Truthfully, I'd be afraid to even try." Lee tried to explain.

"So if you're not traveling with us, we're stuck?" Slash asked anxiously.

"I don't know. I guess you could still try. You'd probably just have to go slower." Lee said seriously.

"Seth might be able to do it." Beau interjected.

After a moment to consider, Lee quietly conceded, "He might."

"Change of plans." Andrew said as he suddenly appeared with a beautiful, long-haired girl standing timidly at his side.

"Which plans?" Beau asked with concern.

"Originally, I was planning to port the items that we'd be needing in here from three different locations, but Dawn pointed out... by the way, everyone, this is Dawn." Andrew babbled.

A few of the Meerkats said 'hi' or waved.

"Anyway, Dawn was saying that it might be better for me to open portals to all the rooms at once so that we can pick and choose what we want to move. That will give all of us an opportunity to make suggestions and discuss what we'd like to do with certain items so we'll all be on the same page with planning. Doing it this way, hopefully we'll be able to meet everyone's minimum requirements and it might keep us from having too many duplicates of items that we don't need that much of." Andrew explained.

"I have about twelve incense burners, just of my own." Dawn said frankly.

"I probably have about ten and I barely even practice anymore." Andrew responded.

"Were you going to bring Tara over?" Dawn asked hopefully.

"Yes. She's busy right now, giving Cynthia instructions before leaving her with Marc and Gar." Andrew explained.

After a look at the others to see if they had any idea of what Andrew was talking about, Lisa finally asked, "Cynthia?"

"Yeah. She's one of Hank's new medical assistants. He's been needing to hire someone for a while now. He's been working poor Tara half to death." Andrew explained.

"I'd be a lot more upset with him about that if Tara wasn't loving every minute of it." Dawn said honestly.

Andrew nodded, then glanced in the direction of the mansion as his eyes glowed for just an instant.

"Now that I know what that is, it's kinda creepy to see you doing it." Lisa said hesitantly.

"She's ready." Andrew announced without giving any indication that he heard what Lisa was saying.

Suddenly, three doors appeared on the side wall, all at the same time, each obviously leading to a completely different room.

The first of the three doorways revealed the stark lighting and brushed steel of the MedLab, complete with Tara looking back at them curiously.

"Not only does this allow Tara to join us, but I also thought that this way Lisa would be able to visit with Marc when she has a free minute." Andrew explained, not only to the group, but also to Tara herself.

"Marc was asleep the last time I checked in on him, but if you'll leave the portal open, Cynthia can let us know when he's awake." Tara said pleasantly as she walked through the doorway to join them.

"Thank you." Lisa said sincerely as she fought the urge to run past Tara and verify for herself how Marc was doing.

"If you guys wouldn't mind helping me, I've got quite a bit of stuff to go through." Dawn said as she gestured toward the second doorway.

The room Dawn indicated was dark, menacing, and jam-packed, floor to ceiling, mostly with books.

"Holy crap! You've got more of a library than the library!" Beau exclaimed as he stepped into the room and saw row after row of tightly packed shelving.

"*Unholy* crap, actually." Dawn quietly corrected as she followed him in.

"Don't worry about Dawn. She isn't really a witchcraft memorabilia hoarder. She's just been kind enough to keep the magic books and supplies that belonged to a former witch." Andrew helpfully explained from the doorway as Steve slithered past him to see what they were talking about.

"*Former* witch?" Beau asked dubiously.

"Yeah. She went back to being human, so Dawn took custody of her magic books and things to keep her from falling back into it." Andrew said seriously.

"I don't mean to tell you your business, but there's no such thing as turning back from being a witch, not even after death. It's a one-way transformation." Beau said with certainty as Lisa stepped to his side.

"Usually that's true. However, this time, there was a vengeance demon involved." Dawn regretfully added.

"Okay, yeah. I guess a vengeance demon *might* be able to do it. From what I've heard, their magic is on a whole different level. They play by their own set of rules." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Why don't you guys start hauling? Just about all this stuff that's been packed is going to the workshop... well, except for what's under the tarp. You'd better just leave that be." Dawn said seriously.

"Yeah. Count on it." Steve said with a wary glance at the dark misshapen mass, wrapped in heavy chains and emanating evil.

"Did you want the books kept in order?" Lee asked cautiously as he approached the first bookcase, which was built into the wall.

"For that bookcase, I'd like for you to keep the books from each shelf together, since they're more or less grouped by subject matter but you don't have to worry about it beyond that." Dawn answered.

"I think the thing under the tarp just moved." Slash said in a warning tone.

"Ignore it." Dawn said impatiently.

"Where do you want these boxes?" Lisa asked as she easily lifted a wooden crate.

"How about stacking them on the shelving over there at the back? All those boxes contain things that we only need once in a blue moon." Dawn said frankly.

As Lisa was about to start hauling, Dawn continued, "Since we just had a blue moon, we probably won't have to go digging in them for quite a while."

Lisa wasn't sure if Dawn were being playful or serious, so she quietly carried her box through the doorway, into the 'Gingerbread House'.

"Did you want the bottles and jars moved too?" Slash asked cautiously.

"Yes. The baker's rack shelves in the work area look like they'd be a perfect place to keep them, but before you start, you'll need to move the shelves. Make sure that wherever you position them, that they're not going to get hit with any direct sunlight. Some of those jars contain demon derived components that are extremely light sensitive." Dawn said frankly.

"Really? Have you ever *seen* a demon?" Steve asked in wonder.

Dawn laughed at the question as Tara demurely smiled.

"Dawn's seen things you probably can't imagine. Back where we're from, Dawn's older sister is called the queen slayer." Andrew explained.

"I've heard the legend of the slayer, but I don't know if that's anything like what you're talking about." Beau said cautiously.

"Actually, I'm sure it's *exactly* what I'm talking about. But for us, the legend ended up taking off in a whole different direction, next level stuff. Anyway, that's a really long story that we'll have to tell you some other time. For now we need to make good use of the opportunity that we've been given. Dawn, Tara, and I are going to have to get back to work as soon as we can. There are people depending on us." Andrew said seriously.

There was a rattle of bottles being knocked together, then Slash shakily said, "It moved again."

Dawn rolled her eyes, then muttered, "Sometimes I could just kick Willow for sticking me with her dirty work."

"Is there anything we can do?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"No. I've got this. Just give me a second." Dawn said wearily, then stood directly in front of the bound lump and pointed at it as she clearly enunciated, "*And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is **cast down**.*"

There was a muffled snort or growl as the mound quivered, causing the chains to rattle briefly, then it went silent.

"That should keep it quiet for a couple weeks. Just ignore it. We have more important things to do if you're serious about wanting to cast your spell today." Dawn said as she indicated an area of the room that looked to be halfway between a kitchenette and a science lab.

"Um, yeah." Beau said in a disturbed voice as he stared at the chained lump.

"Does everything go or are there things you want left here?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Leave that bottom row of books on the built-in bookcase. They're too dangerous to let them out of my possession. Besides that, I think the rest of the books can all go. Like I said before, you can take any of the boxes. If I realize that I need something that was brought over, I can always come back here and get it." Dawn said to the group in general, then focused on Andrew and continued, "Just leave the work area for me to take care of myself."

"Beau, there are the things we bought from Na'balim." Andrew said as he indicated the third doorway that had appeared.

After a glance in that direction, Beau looked back at Andrew inquiringly.

"As we get the work area set up, you can incorporate these things where you need them for your spell. Once you've seen everything together, you can let me know if we're missing anything." Andrew explained.

"That sounds good. If you don't need me doing anything else, I can start sorting it out now." Beau said hesitantly.

"Sure. While you're doing that, Tara, Dawn, and I can set up the work station. Everyone else can haul the books and general supplies out of Dawn's room." Andrew said decisively.

"Just don't get mad at us if we end up moving something that you didn't want us to. I don't know what a lot of these things are. I mean... what's this?" Slash asked as he picked up a coiled implement with a crank handle from a wooden peg.

"Some things, like those books, I need to keep with me so I can be sure that they aren't going to fall into the wrong hands. Other things, like that, for example, I'd rather not have in my room at all." Dawn said firmly.

"Put that down and wash your hands." Tara said with a queasy look at him.

"Wait. What? Why? What is it?" Slash asked as he hurriedly put the tool back on the peg.

"You insert it..." Dawn began to explain, but was interrupted.

"It doesn't matter. But you can wash up right through there." Andrew said as he indicated the MedLab portal, then quickly added, "Be sure to use lots of soap."

"Excuse me." Slash said in an aggravated tone as he hurried out of the portal from Dawn's room and into the portal to the MedLab.

//Where did you want that thing, anyway? I can move it without touching it.// Jesus asked seriously.

"How about hanging it off the end of that back shelf? You should be able to hook it up there and it'll be out of everyone's way." Andrew suggested.

//I'll take care of it.// Jesus assured him.

* * * * *

After returning to the workshop, Slash went to the task of moving the baker's racks so that they could be used to house the various bottles and jars from Dawn's room. As soon as Tara saw what he was doing, she automatically stepped up to help him and to guide him in organizing things in an intuitive manner.

Beau went into the room that housed his supplies and realized once he was inside, that it was a bedroom in the boathouse. Although he hadn't been in this particular room the night before, the view out the bedroom window was unmistakable.

Andrew watched to see that Beau wasn't going to need his help for anything before going back to work, getting the spellcasting workstation set up for their use.

After Jesus had telekinetically moved the offensive implement, as he said that he would, he decided to continue on with moving other oddly-sized and shaped things while the others focused on the boxes, books, and jars.

When Dawn saw the load that Jesus was levitating, she quietly said, "We hardly ever need that stuff. You can put it up on the top shelf, all the way to the back, if you like."

//Sounds good. But be sure to let me know if I'm putting something useful out of your reach.// Jesus responded.

Dawn nodded her agreement before turning her attention back to what she and Andrew were doing.

After a moment to look over the job before him, Steve cautiously asked, "Do you want for us to move the books off, then move the bookcases over, then put them back on?"

"No. Just focus on emptying the built-in bookcases and move those books over to the bookcases and shelves you just cleaned. Once everything else is settled into place, I can move the free-standing bookcases without disturbing the books." Andrew carefully explained.

"That makes sense. I'm on it." Steve assured him before lifting himself high on his tail to stand about seven feet tall. After gathering an armload of books, Steve lowered himself to find Lee looking at him strangely.

"What?" Steve asked self-consciously.

"I just never thought about you being able to make yourself taller like that. I bet that could come in handy." Lee said as he began gathering books from one of the lower shelves.

"Yeah. I guess so. But it's kind of a trade off. I don't need a step-stool to reach the top shelf, but if it were too much taller, I *would* have trouble since I have problems using a ladder." Steve said frankly.

//If you come across something that's too high for you to reach, just let me know. Between us, we'll get the job done.// Jesus assured him.

"Thanks. I'm kinda in the habit of being on my own. Do me a favor and let me know if you notice me doing things the hard way." Steve asked hopefully.

"Crap!" Slash said as he placed the bottles he had been carrying down on the countertop.

"Did you spill something on you?" Tara asked with concern as she rushed to his side.

"No. It's nothing like that. It's just that my power got away from me and I turned all the bottles black." Slash said as he backed away.

Tara picked up one of the bottles and looked at it carefully before saying, "I can still make out the writing on the label, so no harm done."

"Good. I'd hate it if I'd ruined some of your magic supplies." Slash said with relief.

"I'm just glad that you weren't carrying the books. That *might* have been a problem." Tara said frankly.

"I should have thought of that." Slash said regretfully, then quietly admitted, "Since I've been here with everyone I've felt so free, I haven't even thought about holding my ability back. I felt normal."

"I was there when Xander and Warren were talking about opening a school for mutants. I think what you're describing is an example of their combined dream being realized." Andrew said with a smile.

"I'm going to need to get back to class soon. I won't be able to stay until you're all done." Dawn said regretfully.

"As long as you're not worried about us having access to your room while you're gone, we don't have any problem finishing this ourselves." Lee said as he stopped at Andrew's side.

"I've been using the room that the professor assigned me for storage, kind of like an extra big walk-in closet. I've really been staying in Tara's room." Dawn said frankly.

"Well good. I was wondering how anyone could sleep in a room as creepy as that." Lee said seriously.

"I've stayed in worse." Dawn said honestly.

Andrew chuckled and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"Tara?" A lovely dark-skinned woman asked as she timidly entered through the MedLab doorway.

"Hi Cynthia. Is something wrong?" Tara asked with immediate concern.

"No... This door wasn't here before, was it?" Cynthia asked nervously as she looked around at the hustle and bustle of everyone working.

"No. It's a temporary thing. Did you need something?" Tara asked seriously, to keep Cynthia on task.

"What? Oh, yes. The older patient, Marc, he's awake. You asked that I notify you." Cynthia rushed to explain.

"Lisa? Are you at a good stopping point?" Tara asked more loudly, toward the second doorway.

"All I'm doing is carrying boxes. I can stop any time." Lisa said as she walked into the room carrying a large cardboard box.

"Cynthia just came to tell us that Marc is awake." Tara said with a gentle smile, obviously happy to be able to deliver welcome news.

"Let me put this away and I'll be ready to go." Lisa hurried to say.

//I've got it from here. You go on and see Marc. Tell him Louie and Jesus said 'hi'.// Jesus said as the box floated out of her hands.

"What? Oh, I will. Thank you, Jesus. I really appreciate it." Lisa said happily, then turned to Tara and asked, "Can we go now?"

Cynthia looked down at Jesus with nothing less than complete confusion.

"Yes. Andrew knows where to find us if he needs us for anything." Tara said with a gentle smile in Andrew's direction before walking away with Lisa.

It took Cynthia a moment to react, but she finally fell into line and followed them out of the room.

* * * * *

"How's it looking, Beau? Have you noticed anything missing that you're going to need?" Andrew asked curiously.

"I'm kind of used to having a sink where I work. I didn't notice any water anywhere around here." Beau said seriously as he looked around.

"I didn't even think of that. Of all the silly things to forget. How much do you think you'll need to do your spell?" Andrew asked curiously.

"I never thought about it. Two or three cups, I guess." Beau said uncertainly.

"I'll get you a gallon jug for now and later we can work on something a little more practical for the longer term." Andrew said seriously.

"I think I have everything else that I'm going to need here. I'm going to have some prep work to do, but the only thing I need that I don't have is some of the nygo-husk webbing." Beau said thoughtfully.

"I can access the in-between realm for you if you need to gather some." Andrew cautiously offered.

"I've got some things that I need to prepare before I can do that. Besides, I'm also going to need for Seth to stabilize it for me before I can cast my spell on it." Beau explained.

"What about... Peter? Have you kept him up-to-date on what you're doing?" Andrew asked anxiously.

"No. We discussed the possibility, but I haven't gotten back with him about it. I suppose that I should probably summon Emily and get her to bring Fallen here so that he can ask whatever questions he has and be completely sure that he wants to go through with it." Beau said seriously.

"Why would you summon this Emily person and not summon Peter?" Andrew asked curiously.

"I'm sure that you already know that the different magical disciplines each have their own set of restrictions. Something that's perfectly acceptable in Sorcery will completely spoil the spell in Wizardry." Beau carefully explained.

"I've never really thought of it in those terms, but I suppose that I knew that." Andrew said cautiously.

"Emily and I have a contract. I can call on her and ask her to help me and in exchange, using my necromancy, I can allow her to continue to exist in the world of the living, even though her time has technically passed." Beau said slowly.

"And you have no such contract with Peter." Andrew guessed.

"Right. And if I tried to summon him, it might... muddy the water, so to speak, potentially causing problems when I try to enact another spelling on him at a later time." Beau said seriously.

"So you're doing your best to have a clean slate to work with from the very beginning." Andrew said slowly, to verify his understanding.

"As much as possible, yes. The embodiment ritual is kind of tricky and it takes a lot of power." Beau said cautiously.

"How dangerous is it going to be?" Andrew slowly asked.

"Listen. I know the ritual and I'm well practiced. With everything we've got here, I don't think I could be any better prepared than I am right now. But even with all that, we're still talking about a dangerous level of magic. I *can't* promise that nothing will go wrong and no one will get hurt." Beau said frankly.

"I had intended for Dawn and Tara and I to be here to help you, but you know better than I do what risk is

involved, you'll have to make the decision." Andrew said slowly.

Beau looked around and noticed that Jesus, Slash, Steve, and Lee had all stopped working and were listening in on their conversation.

"If you or Dawn or Tara wants to be here, I have no problem with that. If you have some kind of defensive spells, they might end up being of use to you." Beau said seriously, then turned to his Meerkat teammates and continued, "But as much as I'd like to have you guys here to stand with me and support me..."

"We're going to be here." Slash said firmly.

//Save your breath. It's happening.// Jesus said simply.

"If you're worried that something might happen to us, we can watch from inside one of Quaid's cubes or Seth could be ready to do his phase out thing to us." Steve explained.

"I can phase you out too." Lee interjected.

"You can?" Steve asked with obvious interest.

"Yeah. Let me show you." Lee said as his eyes glowed red for an instant before he and Steve both vanished in sulfuric puffs of smoke.

"Do you think they should be allowed to stay and witness the ritual?" Beau asked Andrew cautiously.

"I guess it depends on whether them being here will be more of a help or a hindrance for you." Andrew said frankly.

"I don't know if I can really answer that. I mean, I'm worried about what might happen to them if they're allowed to be here." Beau said frankly, but continued more gently, "But they came up with some good, very workable ideas about how to protect themselves. Add to that, this is a really big thing we can do as a team to bring in our newest member. They'll be supporting him... and me... and each other, I suppose. Despite the danger, I can't see myself refusing."

[Chapter 22: Natty Voices]

"How are you doing, Steve?" Lee asked as they appeared in the middle of a desolate hellscape.

"Whoa! This is incredible!" Steve said in amazement as he quickly looked around trying to see everything at once.

"Yeah." Lee confirmed with a glance, then asked again, "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Why?" Steve asked as he focused his attention back on Lee.

"I just know what it's like to be new to the group and have questions and not know who to ask. I thought that I'd take a minute to pull you off to the side to make sure that you're okay with everything that's happening. I'd hate for you to feel like you've gotten yourself into something that you don't know how to get out of." Lee said frankly.

"I don't want to get out! This is what I've been dreaming of!" Steve passionately exclaimed, pleading with his eyes for Lee to understand.

"I didn't really think that you did." Lee quietly assured him, then explained, "But sometimes when people get

what they always wanted, they realize that they don't really want it after all. I just want to be sure that you know that I'm here for you if you suddenly find yourself in a place that you don't want to be."

"Did that happen to you?"

"I suppose it did, even though it didn't have anything to do with me being a mutant... in fact, at the time, I didn't even know what being a mutant was. My problems had more to do with drinking and drugs... and maybe some mental illness."

"Are you saying that I shouldn't blame all my problems on what I look like?" Steve asked cautiously.

"I can't say anything about your situation. I don't know what it's like to be you or how much of what you've gone through has to do with your appearance. All I'm trying to do is let you know that you're not alone in all of this. That's it." Lee said firmly as he looked Steve in the eyes.

"Okay. Yeah." Steve responded slowly, then added more confidently, "I got it."

"Good. Then let's get back to the group meeting. After all the talk, I want to see what kind of power Beau really has." Lee said with a smile.

"I have a funny feeling that his power is probably going to be a whole lot scarier than *literally* being in hell." Steve said frankly as he glanced upward at a flaming vortex swirling in the sky.

"Hell's not so bad." Lee said simply, then added with a grin, "It's a *dry* heat."

Steve laughed as the world seemed to turn to dust and dissolve all around them.

* * * * *

"What'd we miss?" Steve asked as he looked around.

"Beau just agreed to let the Meerkats stay and witness the ritual." Andrew said simply.

"Just let me know if we're going to have to wait a really long time because I *really* need to visit with Doctor McCoy for a few minutes." Steve said anxiously.

"I'm going to summon Emily right now, then I'll have to wait on Fallen to arrive so that we can confirm that he wants to go through with this. That should give you

plenty of time if you want to go and take care of that now." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Actually, my sacs can wait. Summoning ghosts and talking to them sounds awesome! I don't want to miss a minute of it." Steve said frankly.

"Oh? Alright. If no one has anything else that they need to do, I could do the summoning right now." Beau said cautiously.

"Even though I've got a class to get to, I'm really interested to see your summoning ritual." Andrew said honestly.

"Okay. It's a simple one. This'll just take me a minute." Beau promised, then began to gather items from around the work station that they had just assembled.

"I'll go ahead and get you the water before I forget about it." Andrew said as his eyes briefly flared golden.

"I won't need it for this, but I *will* need it later." Beau said absently as he placed items on the floor, just inside the front door.

A moment later, a gallon jug of water appeared on the countertop on one of the baker's racks.

"I just need to be sure, you haven't magically or by way of your mutant ability altered this door in any way, have you?" Beau asked as he indicated the front door of the 'Gingerbread House'.

"No. I haven't done anything at all to it." Andrew assured him.

"But Seth did." Slash hurried to remind him.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Thanks for reminding me." Beau said gratefully.

After a moment to consider, Beau slowly continued, "Seth's ability is a known quantity. I understand enough of how it works to know that it won't impact what I'm doing with the spell. I just had to be sure that Andrew hadn't done something that I didn't know about so I wouldn't accidentally hit some hidden enchantment or locking spell when I invoke the summoning."

As the others watched, Beau began to very precisely pour salt onto the floor in a semi-circle in front of the door, creating an intricate design with it.

"Are you going to need me to close the portals?"

Andrew asked quietly, not wanting to take a chance of breaking Beau's concentration.

"It won't make a difference for what I'm doing. In fact, most of this is just precaution. The salt boundary keeps anything *other* than what I've summoned from coming through the door." Beau carefully explained.

"So you cast the summons on the doorway, then limit what can respond to it?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Yeah. I mean, I *could* craft the spell to seek out and notify only Emily of my summons, but it would take a lot of extra time, effort, and supplies and probably wouldn't be as effective as a general summons carried on the ethereal wind." Beau said frankly as he completed his salt diagram.

"I've used salt barriers before, but I've never tailored one to a specific task like that. It's really ingenious." Andrew said with a smile.

"I wish I could take credit for it, but Mrs. Durnal taught me this. Her magic was of the common folk. It's usually not much to look at, but it gets the job done." Beau said as he placed a blank piece of parchment in an open area of the salt diagram.

"I think all of us can respect that. While there's a time and a place for showmanship, I'm all for functionality." Andrew said seriously.

"Glad to hear it." Beau said as he opened a jar of ink, then unceremoniously dipped in a brush.

"I can't even guess what you're..." Andrew began to say, but fell silent as he watched Beau draw a complex symbol on the parchment in long precise strokes.

"Is that Japanese?" Andrew asked uncertainly.

"It's a little older than that, but in essence, yes. This symbol says what I need to say clearly and directly without having to muck around with spoken language." Beau said as he added three simple marks on the right side of the larger symbol.

"If you say so..." Andrew said slowly.

"Remember, we're going for functionality." Beau cautioned.

"Oh, I know. I just... I don't see how this is going to work." Andrew said honestly.

"Hand me those candles and I'll show you." Beau said as he motioned toward the main table of their work area.

"The white ones?" Andrew asked to be sure.

"Yeah." Beau confirmed as he set the ink and brush out of his way.

Beau took the candles from Andrew and placed them around his salt diagram.

Those watching were surprised to notice that the placement of the candles had obviously been accounted for when the diagram was drawn, although it didn't appear that anything was missing before the candles had been added.

"Before you start, do we need to be prepared to run for cover or anything like that?" Lee asked cautiously.

"No. This is just a simple summoning. If all goes well, a ghost will appear. And most likely, I'll be the only one who'll be able to see her." Beau said honestly.

"If all *doesn't* go well, Dad and I can port everyone out." Andrew added confidently.

Lee made a point of making eye contact with Steve and giving him a slight nod of assurance to let him know that he was covered.

"Okay Beau, we're ready when you are." Andrew said seriously.

The candles simultaneously burst into flame without any obvious encouragement from Beau.

"You don't need to do the words or gestures to access your fire spells?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"No. Along with being a necromancer, I'm also a fire mage." Beau quietly admitted.

"So am I, but I still have to use gestures and spoken words to access my fire. There's no way someone as young as you could have advanced to that level, not even if you worked at it every day of your life."

Andrew said suspiciously.

"I'm a born witch. Things are a little different for me." Beau quietly explained.

"You mentioned that before. Although I've heard of a 'born witch', I'm not sure that I've ever met one before. How *exactly* does that happen? Are your parents both witches?" Andrew asked curiously.

"That's something we don't talk about." Beau timidly answered.

//Beau, tell him. He can handle it.// Jesus interrupted.

"I would rather you didn't look in my mind without my permission." Beau said in a warning tone.

//You know how it is when you hear a noise and you automatically turn to look at it? That happens with telepathy, too. I wasn't snooping, but sometimes things will catch my attention and I'll *glance* to see what they are.// Jesus explained.

"I'd still prefer it if you would try not to look." Beau said simply.

//I won't snoop on purpose and I won't tell anyone what I accidentally saw, but from what little I *did* see of it, this looks like something that needs to be carefully navigated so that we can come through it with all the members of our team intact.// Jesus said seriously.

"If it's something really personal, I don't need to know. I just want to be aware of as much as I can in advance so that I won't be as likely to be blindsided by it later." Andrew said quietly.

"It's probably not that big a deal to anyone but me. I've just been afraid that if anyone found out that they'd decide that I'm too dangerous to be allowed to... just to be allowed." Beau finished quietly.

"Does it have something to do with you being a 'born witch'?" Andrew guessed.

"Not exactly. You see, the thing is, I actually have to work to suppress my fire; it's always on." Beau said frankly.

"I've never heard of a witch with an 'always on' ability." Andrew said cautiously.

"Well, now you have." Beau said uncomfortably.

"What about your other magic? Is it just your fire or do you have other abilities that you have to fight to suppress?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Actually, that's the main reason that I practice necromancy. I have to. Otherwise I might accidentally resurrect an entire graveyard just by walking past it or dinner as it's being prepared. As it is, I can see and talk to spirits all the time. I don't need to use a spell to 'reveal' the spiritual plane to my eyes. It's always there, even when I don't want it to be." Beau said

frankly, then disjointedly added, "I'm going to start now."

Andrew nodded and watched with interest as Beau used a piece of chalk to draw a series of symbols within the semi-circle of the salt diagram on the concrete floor at the foot of the door.

"Is there some reason that I couldn't do what he's doing?" Steve asked curiously as he watched Beau's ministrations with interest.

"Beau has access to magic. You don't. So, if you did exactly the same thing that he's doing, most likely nothing would happen. But, except for the pointlessness of it, there's no reason that you couldn't try." Andrew said seriously.

//I can see what he's doing, but I can't sense his ability like I would a mutant ability. It's like there's a void that I can't see into.// Jesus said frankly.

"That's probably a good thing." Lee said honestly.

Abruptly Beau began to speak in a clear poetic cadence, "*Displaced spirit, lingering essence, Emily Evans, by the terms of the pact we share, I summon you. Find your way to me, by whatever means. The*

one who anchors you to this world requires your presence. Come forth."

After staggering back a step, Andrew said in amazement "This isn't right. Your power level is *insane!*"

"I don't know if it's his magic or not, but I can sure feel *something*." Lee said in a slightly quaking voice.

"Yeah, my hair is standing on end." Slash said anxiously.

//Think of how it is for me. It feels like I'm becoming a porcupine.// Jesus added apprehensively.

Before anyone could respond to that, there was a faint tapping on the heavy wooden door.

"She couldn't answer the summons that fast, could she?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"It takes as long as it takes. Spiritual energies aren't necessarily constrained to three dimensions, although most of them don't know that." Beau said as he stood forward and put his hand on the doorknob.

"If that's true, I have a funny feeling that you're not going to need me to take you to the Mizrith Magic

Shop next time." Andrew said slowly, watching carefully for Beau's reaction.

"I don't have any spells that I could use to travel like that incarnate. But, to be honest, I've never really looked for one, either. I can't think of any reason that I couldn't do it. All it would take is a little research." Beau said honestly, then pulled the door open.

"If research is what you're needing, I think I know where you can find some books that might help." Steve said as he made a show of looking through the portal into Dawn's room at the immense magic library.

Everyone watched with anticipation and were equally disappointed when the open doorway didn't reveal anything but the beautiful view outside the front door.

"Only she summoned may enter. All others return to cowering in your dark places. You are not welcome here. You are NOT granted entry. Be gone." Beau said firmly.

"Did she come?" Andrew asked curiously.

//My telepathy is telling me that nothing's happening, but the chill running up my spine is telling me

something else.// Jesus slowly injected into the conversation.

"Yeah. I can feel it." Andrew said simply.

"Me too." Lee confirmed.

"The creeps. That's what we're feeling, isn't it?" Steve asked to confirm.

"Yeah. I have *total* goosebumps." Slash said in a slightly shaky voice.

"That's not all." Lee said as he pointed to the shelf that Slash was leaning against.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to do that." Slash said as he quickly lifted his hand.

"Don't worry about it. I think it looks better that way." Andrew said easily.

"Step forward, Emily. I have a task for you." Beau said firmly.

Everyone felt their goosebumps and chills ramp up to the next level as Beau watched something that only he could see walk through the doorway to join them.

* * * * *

As Beau closed the door, Jesus cautiously said, //Even though I can sort of *feel* that something's here, I can't see it, either with my eyes or with my telepathy.//

"Slash, would you mind helping me out with something?" Beau hesitantly asked.

"Sure." Slash immediately agreed, even though he couldn't imagine what help he could be.

"Can you do like you did in the corner and encase us in darkness? We need to be able to see each other, but not the light from outside." Beau asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I think so. At least, I can try." Slash said as he began making dramatic gestures with his hands and arms.

//Does that flapping around do something or is it all just theatrics?// Jesus asked curiously.

"If I act out the pushing and pulling, my dark cloud seems to go along with it... mostly... when it wants to." Slash fought to explain, then thought to add, "Maybe later, after I've had a lot more practice with it, I'll be able to make it work without having to 'whip it up' like this."

//I wasn't complaining about it, I was just trying to understand how your ability works.// Jesus explained, then thought to add, //The way you described it makes sense to me.//

As the darkness engulfed the group, the candles at their feet became their only source of light. Once everyone had adjusted to that, they were surprised to see a vaguely humanoid form standing in their midst.

"Everyone, this is Emily. She's my spirit helper." Beau said calmly.

"You're a ghost?" Steve asked with surprise.

Even though Emily appeared to speak, no one but Beau could hear what she was saying.

"It takes quite a bit of spiritual energy for Emily to manifest even this much. It's very difficult for her to make her voice heard on the material plane, sometimes it's actually impossible." Beau carefully explained.

Emily turned and said something to Beau, then patiently waited.

After a moment to consider, Beau finally responded, "We've gathered the necessary items to help your new friend, Piotr. I called you here to ask you to go and

find him and invite him to join us, here in this cabin. I would like to ask him for his final decision, if he wants to go through with the embodiment ritual or not."

Emily said something quickly in response, then waited for Beau's nod of agreement before fading from sight.

"This might take a few minutes. She doesn't know exactly where he is right now. She's going to check his bedroom first." Beau said thoughtfully.

"I didn't know Peter that well, but he was always nice to me. I mean, we didn't hang out or anything, but at least he acted like I existed." Steve said quietly.

"It would probably be best if we got into the habit of calling him by his team name, at least until everyone who knew him before has had a chance to deal with the changes in his... situation." Beau finished with a slight cringe at his inadequate choice of words.

"Do you want for me to keep the dark cloud up?" Slash asked cautiously.

"It'd be nice to have it for when 'Fallen' gets here, it *could* make it possible for you to see him. But if it's

easier for you, you can take it down, then put it back up later, when we need it again." Beau said simply.

"No. It doesn't take anything to keep it going. I just wanted to make sure that you still needed it." Slash quickly responded.

"I'm going to stay long enough to welcome Peter back, but then I'm going to have to get to my class. I'm already late." Andrew informed the group.

"Once she finds him, it shouldn't take long." Beau said honestly.

"I can leave the MedLab portal open when I go, if you think you'll be needing it." Andrew quietly offered.

"It'd be great if you could. That way Lisa can visit with Marc when she wants, Steve can get his venom sacs drained and Tara can come and go whenever she needs to." Beau said seriously.

"Consider it done." Andrew said simply.

"Should one of us go and get Lisa? I wouldn't want for her to feel left out." Slash asked uncertainly.

"There's not really much for her to see at this stage of things. All that I'm expecting to happen is a little question and answer session." Beau said frankly.

"Be sure to get her before you do the embodiment ritual. I think that's the part that she would regret missing." Andrew said seriously.

"It's going to take time for me to get everything ready." Beau reminded them.

"Are you still going to be able to do it today?" Andrew asked with concern.

"Yes. I should be able to, some of the preparation takes time. Have you ever made a homunculus?" Beau asked, not daring to hope.

"I've looked at the spell a few times, but that's leaps and bounds beyond anything that I've ever done magically." Andrew said frankly, then cautiously asked, "You're not going to have to create a homunculus as part of the preparation, are you?"

"No. But the embodiment that I'm planning to do will follow the same basic steps." Beau explained.

"If it's anything like the spell that I saw, then you're going to need a full coven of witches working with

you to call up and keep the forces balanced long enough to stabilize the final invocation." Andrew said thoughtfully.

"Past a certain point, raw power can be used to create its own balance. With the firm application of unrelenting force, just about anything will eventually yield." Beau said seriously.

"But spirits can be impossibly fragile. How likely is it that your 'unrelenting force' will damage Peter?"

"I'll use the force to 'prepare' his vessel. I promise, when I'm dealing with Fallen directly, I'll be as gentle as possible." Beau said confidently.

"I believe you, but how likely are your gentle intentions to translate into gentle results?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Did you have another option that you were considering? Because as far as I can tell, this is it. We embody Fallen into an object or he fades to nothing and is lost forever. If you have any other ideas, this is probably your last chance to tell me about them." Beau said firmly.

"No. I just wanted to be sure that we were taking every precaution for Peter's safety." Andrew hurried to explain.

"Listen, the truth is, when it comes to witchcraft, I can really do only two things, fire and necromancy. I have to struggle to do even the most basic spell outside those specialties. In fact, by most people's standards, I'm barely a witch at all."

Andrew slowly nodded that he understood.

"But within those specialties I have phenomenal power and exceptional natural ability." Beau said seriously, then turned at a movement that only he could see.

* * * * *

A collective chill fell over the group as the faint blur that they had come to know as Emily appeared within their shroud of darkness.

"I'm glad you could make it Piotr. Did Emily explain why I asked you to come here?" Beau asked curiously.

The others searched by the light of the candles of the spell diagram but none of them could detect even a glimmer of Peter.

"Of course. It's really simple. I'll install your essence into a cloak that Lisa can wear to gain access to your fighting skills and motor control. While she's wearing it, the two of you will function as a combined being." Beau carefully explained.

Slash, Steve, Andrew, and Lee shared a look which confirmed that none of them could see anything other than Emily.

"Outside of battle, you'll exist in a form where you'll be able to participate with the team as much or as little as you choose. If you like, you can act like an object, to be used by Lisa to empower her in battle or, if you'd rather, you can choose to act as an independent participating member of the team." Beau assured him.

There was a pause, then Beau responded more quietly, "What you do about your former life is up to you. If you want to hide who you were, that's your business. If you want to reconnect with your old friends, no one is going to try and stop you."

//Please don't be mad at me, but at the risk of revealing the secret of the emperor's new clothes, I thought I should mention that I can't hear Fallen's

thoughts or psychically feel his presence. I just wanted to be sure you knew that before we got too deeply into this and start doing things that can't be undone.// Jesus cautioned.

"As soon as his spiritual essence is bound to something physical everything else should resolve itself... I can't tell you exactly how it will manifest in telepathic terms, but something that physically exists in the material world and is imbued with spiritual energy should be detectable to a telepath." Beau said thoughtfully.

"From my experience back home, I've learned that things like this can end up going a lot of different ways. It's usually best to go into something like this ready to adapt to the way things turn out instead of trying to force them to go *exactly* the way that you want them to." Andrew said seriously.

"That may be true when you're holding a cup full of magic and deciding what's the most efficient way to use it, but when you're channeling an ocean of it, you have to focus on *exactly* what you want and accept nothing else. Even the slightest variation can lead to a catastrophic miscast." Beau said frankly.

"Can't you hold it back and only use a cupful if you want to?" Andrew asked with concern.

"I lit the candles just now instead of blowing the gingerbread house off the face of the earth, so yes, I can. But even when I only express a cupful of magic, the vast ocean is still there, pressing in on me, wanting nothing more than to burst forth into the world in a spectacle of glory." Beau said seriously, then turned his attention away from Andrew and quietly said, "Sorry Peter. I got distracted. If you've decided what you'd like to do, tell me and I'll do my best to make it happen."

The anticipation hung heavily in the air as everyone watched and waited, trying to get some sense of what Peter's answer was going to be.

Emily seemed to be nervously waiting as well, although her image was so vague that those present might well be assigning their own emotional reactions to her.

"Yes, of course. In fact, I think that's an excellent idea. Hold on while I take care of that." Beau said seriously, apparently responding to Peter.

Everyone looked on and waited curiously for Beau to explain.

"Could someone go and get Lisa? Peter would like to talk to her before he commits to doing anything." Beau said frankly.

"She's in the MedLab, right?" Steve asked curiously.

"Yes. She'll be in the recovery room with Marc." Andrew confirmed.

"I'll go get her." Steve volunteered, then passed through the shroud of darkness covering them.

"Hang on, I'll go with you." Lee said as he followed.

* * * * *

"Is there a way that you can make it so that Fallen can be seen and heard? I mean, so that Lisa can look him in the eyes and *know* that she's talking to a real person?" Slash asked urgently.

"That's kind of a tall order. Pretty much anything that I could do now to Fallen to make him more visible in our world would interfere with the embodiment spell that I'm going to be performing later." Beau reluctantly responded.

"If Lisa has to make her decisions based only on faith, then so be it. Peter's too important to us to take a chance with his safety." Andrew said firmly.

Beau glanced away for a moment, then back to Andrew and said, "Fallen wants for me to tell you that you're a precious friend to him, too... And that he's sorry that he left you the way he did."

"Don't worry about how you left. Right now, just try to focus on coming back. That's what we're all here to do. That's today's mission." Andrew said firmly and clearly.

//Excuse me, but even if there's not a practical way for you to make Fallen more visible to us, would it be possible to do something to Lisa so that she might be able to see him better?// Jesus asked curiously.

"I hadn't thought of doing it that way. That actually *might* work." Beau said thoughtfully, then explained, "There is a spell, it's kind of high-level, but it's based in fire and necromancy. It *could* be used for something like this."

"Fire and Necromancy? It sounds like something that's right up your alley." Andrew said frankly.

"Yes. That's why I studied it. Normally you'd have to convene an entire coven to perform a spell like this." Beau said seriously.

"How dangerous is it?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"Not at all. But it's really complicated and I've never actually tried it before so I'm not sure how it's going to turn out." Beau said anxiously.

"But it's not going to hurt us?" Andrew asked to be sure.

"No. There's no physical component to the spell so there's no danger in that regard." Beau assured him, then explained, "It's possible that there may be some minor side-effects, but I just don't have any way of knowing about that."

"It's your call. Do what you believe is right and we'll support you." Andrew said seriously.

"The 'Divine Torch' doesn't take that much in the way of supplies, it just needs a butt-load of power to fuel it. Fortunately, I've got that covered. I think we should have everything else that we're going to need." Beau said as he looked around.

"How long is it going to take?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"I'll basically be using my fire to penetrate the divine layer of the realm of the dead to let the light shine through into this world. From what I've heard, piercing worldwalls can take some concentrated effort. I really can't predict how long that will take." Beau said seriously.

"You're going to pierce heaven?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"Not really, I mean... yeah, but just enough to let a sliver of divine light shine into this world. In that light, spiritual beings appear to have substance." Beau quietly explained.

"But the divine light won't do anything to Peter to change him?" Andrew asked to be sure.

"No. The change will be to our perception of him. In a way, it's like the light from our world won't reflect off a spiritual being. The light of heaven will. When the heavenly light shines on him, we'll see him, but it won't change him in the process."

//So there's no chance of sunburn?// Jesus asked, only half-jokingly.

"Not that I know of. But to be honest, I haven't read any accounts of this being done, so I'm not entirely sure of what to expect." Beau reluctantly admitted.

"Will you only be able to do this for Lisa or will it be for all of us?" Slash asked curiously.

"All those present when the light shines on Fallen... and Emily, for that matter, should be able to see them clearly, as though they were corporeal physical beings." Beau said professionally.

"Will we be able to hear them too?" Slash hesitantly asked.

"Logically, I'd say no. There's no reason to believe that shining a light on someone would make you able to hear them better." Beau said frankly.

"Except that we're talking about magic." Andrew quietly added.

Beau nodded, then explained, "That's right. Because of that, we'll just have to wait and see what happens."

[Chapter 23: The Autocorrect Adventures: Peas of Mind]

"As much as I want to wait around for Peter's final answer, it looks like this could take some time and I'm really late for class. I'll check in with you later to see how you're doing and if you need anything." Andrew said quickly.

"Before you go, could you move the bookcases?" Slash hesitantly asked.

"Oh, yeah." Andrew said easily, then stepped out of the cloud of darkness enough so that he could see everything at once.

As the others also filed out, the full bookcases from Dawn's room disappeared, one by one, then reappeared in the open floor space of the 'Gingerbread House'.

There was no doubt that the bookcases were closer together than they had been in Dawn's room, being barely far enough apart for a person to walk between them.

"I didn't realize that they'd take up this much room." Andrew said hesitantly as he looked over his handiwork.

"Or block the light from the windows." Slash quietly added as he looked upward at each of the shelves nearly touching the ceiling.

//All of a sudden it feels a little too close for comfort in here. I think I may need to go outside for a little bit.// Jesus said honestly.

"It's really not that bad. Maybe we'll get used to it." Beau said uncertainly.

"You made the rat claustrophobic. Just take a minute to think about that." Slash said with a teasing smirk.

Beau fought down a smile as he rolled his eyes in response.

"Let me know when you need the cloud again. I don't think we need it with the bookcases in here." Slash said as he waved an arm to dispel the cloud.

"Yeah. Thanks." Beau said fondly.

"Does anyone need anything else from me before I go?" Andrew quickly asked.

"You're going to be back later, for the embodiment spell, aren't you?" Beau asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I wouldn't miss it." Andrew said with a smile, then with a glance at the side wall, two of the three portals closed, leaving only the MedLab portal still in existence.

Between one moment and the next, Andrew was gone.

* * * * *

"Oh, wow. It looks a lot different with the bookcases in here." Steve said quietly as he slithered through the portal with Lisa at his side.

"It looks like if it wasn't for Beau's candles, we'd barely be able to see anything." Lee said frankly as he followed them into the room.

"We may have to look into setting up a separate library. I feel like these things are going to cave in on us any second." Slash said anxiously.

"I doubt that we'll be visiting here much after today. I think it'll be fine." Beau said seriously, then continued, "If you'd like, we can do the next spell outside."

//Oh God, yes.// Jesus said with relief.

"Count me in." Slash immediately added.

"I get it. You don't like the tight space." Beau said wearily.

"We're packed in here like sardines and there's not enough air for all of us to breathe at the same time." Lee said frankly.

"You're exaggerating that a little bit." Beau said with a reluctant smile.

"Not that much." Lee said frankly.

"Come on. If everyone will go outside, I can do my divine torch spell and then Lisa and Fallen can have their talk." Beau said firmly.

"Are you going to need the dark cloud for anything?" Slash asked curiously.

"I don't know yet. I *think* it will work just fine in direct sunlight, but if I'm wrong, I may need your cloud to make it possible for everyone to see each other." Beau said thoughtfully as he gathered a few seemingly random items into his arms.

"I'll be standing by." Slash said seriously.

"Steve, would you grab that brazier for me?" Beau asked as he gestured toward the workbench.

"What's that? You mean this hibachi?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"A brazier is a special tray used to hold hot coals." Beau carefully explained.

"So's a hibachi." Steve said as he picked up the piece of equipment.

//He's got you there.// Jesus said, apparently in much better spirits since he knew that they were going outside.

"Peter and Emily, please follow me. We're going outside, so stay close. It will be easy for you to get lost out there." Beau said as he opened the door.

* * * * *

//Seriously, we need to find someplace else for those books. I'm already dreading having to go back in there.// Jesus said sincerely.

"It's not like it's our clubhouse or anything. After today, you'll probably never have a reason to go back in there again." Beau said frankly as he walked into the wide-open area directly in front of the cabin.

//Good.// Jesus said simply, conveying his honest thoughts on recent developments.

"Is there anything you need for us to do?" Lisa asked uncertainly.

"If you'll just stand right there for a minute, I'll start my spellcasting." Beau said simply.

"You're going to cast a spell on me?" Lisa slowly asked, clearly conveying her displeasure with the idea.

"No. I thought Lee and Steve would have told you. I'm going to cast a spell to make it easier for you to see Fallen. He wants to be sure that the two of you both want this before I do anything more." Beau said honestly.

"So, what are you going to do?" Lisa asked cautiously.

"I'm just going to create a magical torch that illuminates spiritual entities." Beau said simply.

"Oh. I guess that's okay." Lisa said uncertainly, then cautiously asked, "What did you want me to do?"

"Just stand there for a few minutes. I'll do the rest." Beau assured her as he positioned the brazier very precisely.

"Okay." Lisa reluctantly agreed, then watched carefully to try and get some sense of what Beau was doing.

After making sure that everything was to his liking, Beau looked around to see where everyone was standing before looking back to the brazier.

With just a glance from him, the charcoal within the brazier burst into flame.

"I'll have to remember not to piss you off." Steve said as he stared at the subtle show of power.

"Vermillion." Beau said as he opened a pouch, then threw a pinch of red powder into the fire.

Nothing seemed to happen, although everyone present was braced for whatever was to come.

"Ochre." Beau stated firmly as he repeated the same steps, this time throwing dark yellow powder.

//Do you have to name each thing as you put it in, or are you doing that for us?// Jesus asked curiously.

"I'm kind of in the habit of doing it aloud so that Mrs. Durnal could keep track of what I was doing." Beau said seriously.

//Just so you know, we don't have a clue about any of this. We'll be just as impressed whether you tell us what you're throwing on the hibachi or not.// Jesus said frankly.

"Yeah. It'll probably be faster if I skip the ingredient list and just do the spell." Beau said as he seemed to pick up the pace of what he was doing, adding pinches and dabs of things to the growing flames.

//I really wasn't complaining. I just don't have a lot of patience for pointless things.// Jesus explained.

"Sorting out what's pointless and what isn't in all of this might be a pretty big job." Beau said honestly.

//Maybe. But it might be worth it, too. I'm actually interested to know which things are requirements and which ones are fluff. It's fun to speculate about why things are the way that they ended up.// Jesus said frankly.

"Excuse me." Beau said to Jesus, then took a long slender stick out of his back pocket and made a complicated gesture with it.

"No way! Seriously? You've really got a wand?" Steve asked happily.

"Yeah. I need it for certain spells." Beau said shyly.

"That is so cool! I thought all that stuff was made up. I didn't think you'd really have one." Steve said delightedly.

"We can talk more about it later. I need to do this now." Beau said urgently.

"Oh, yeah. Go ahead." Steve said happily.

Beau used the wand to make complicated gestures in the air around him.

While nothing 'supernatural' seemed to be happening, no one could deny the skill that Beau was demonstrating with his precise movements.

"I can feel the magic building." Lisa said quietly.

//I don't know what I'm feeling, but whatever it is, it sure is ramping up.// Jesus announced.

"Jesus, why don't you come up here with me? If we need to bug out suddenly, I don't want to have to guess at where you are." Lee cautiously asked.

//I'll get on your shoulder, if that's okay. I don't like being cradled like a baby.// Jesus asked hopefully.

"Yeah. That's fine. Do you need some help up?" Lee asked, but before the words were fully out of his mouth, Jesus gracefully leapt Lee's full height and gently came to rest on Lee's shoulder.

"Guess not." Lee quietly muttered.

"Flame permeates all. I call upon the mystic forces to pierce the unseen veil and grant us a glimpse of what lies beyond." Beau said as he raised his arms in a grand gesture.

"I see something." Slash said as he pointed at a flickering pinpoint of light suspended in the air above the brazier.

"Is that what you were trying to do?" Lee asked cautiously as he fought to focus in on the floating speck.

"Actually, yes. It's perfect. I thought it would take a lot longer." Beau said with satisfaction.

"I'm guessing that there's more to it than what I'm seeing." Lee said frankly.

"No. That's it. That is exactly what I was trying to do." Beau said happily.

"*That's* the Divine Torch?" Steve asked dubiously.

"Yes... I mean, no. Not all of it. But it's the part that I was most worried about. The rest of this may take some time, but it's all stuff that I know that I can do. If you'll hang on, I'll have this all up and running before you know it." Beau said excitedly with a touch of his Texas twang, then without waiting for a response, went back to the gestures and muttered words of his spellcasting.

"What's going to happen after you're done with all this magic stuff? Are all of you going back to the Wagner school?" Steve quietly asked.

"That's kind of up in the air right now. We're waiting for the 'all clear' from the task force before we decide what we're going to do next." Lee said frankly.

"If you're worried about us leaving you alone here, Quaid and Lee live at the boathouse and I'll be staying there on the weekends." Slash said seriously.

"I was just wondering because Mung's my roommate and if I'm moving to another team, that could make things... weird." Steve said uncomfortably.

"I can see how that could get awkward." Lisa said with concern as she kept the majority of her attention on what Beau was doing.

"Before I go jumping to a lot of conclusions, would you *like* to move?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Yeah, I think so." Steve said carefully, then thought to add, "Our team never really came together like yours has. We're just a bunch of isolated people, each dealing with things in their own way."

"Have you ever *tried* helping each other?" Lisa asked with concern.

"We just don't have those types of connections." Steve said simply.

"Even though I haven't gone through it myself, I know that there are 'team building' exercises that are supposed to help with things like that." Lee said thoughtfully.

"The professor has done all kinds of things to try and bring us together. We did okay with them and learned the lessons that we were supposed to and all of that. But when the exercises were all over with, we each went back to our own corners and went back to being

alone. Whatever we felt toward each other during the exercises ended when they did."

"Guys, something's probably about to happen." Beau said in a warning tone.

//Can you be a little more specific about that?// Jesus asked from Slash's shoulder.

"Sorry Li'l Buddy, I'm breaching a new barrier. I don't know what that's going to look like or feel like." Beau said frankly.

//So, is this the divine light you were talking about?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"No. Not yet. That comes later. This is more... the realm of the dead." Beau hesitantly explained.

"Like the afterlife?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

"Not exactly... I mean, yes... but no. It's more like the anteroom to the afterlife."

"Like purgatory?" Steve suggested.

"Not really. This is something else entirely." Beau said reluctantly.

//Limbo?// Jesus ventured.

"I guess that's closer. This isn't a place to stay, but one that leads to several different planes."

"Oh? It's an airport?" Slash asked suddenly.

"Ya know what, sure. Except that when you go to your departure gate, you don't get on a mechanical plane with wings, but instead, you enter a spiritual plane of existence."

"Okay. I got that. Go ahead." Slash said seriously.

"You did?" Beau asked with surprise, then after a moment to regroup, he said, "Well then, here it goes."

* * * * *

After all the build up, the actual breaching of the spiritual plane was something of a let-down. Basically, their surroundings appeared to become a little bit bluer and dimmer. Otherwise, everything looked exactly the same.

"Is that it?" Lisa asked uncertainly.

"Look beside you." Beau said as he pointed.

Lisa turned and jumped slightly when she saw a bluish-white wisp hanging in the air.

"Is that Peter?" Lisa asked cautiously as she stared.

"No. That's Emily." Beau said simply.

"Why can we see Emily, but not Peter?" Lisa asked curiously.

"We should really get used to calling him Fallen." Beau gently corrected, then continued, "Emily and I have made frequent contact, so she's more attuned to the material plane than most spiritual entities."

"So what is it that we're seeing here, then?" Lee asked uncertainly.

"First of all, what we're seeing isn't really here. We're not in 'Limbo', if that's what we're calling it. The light of the torch is showing us what exists there. Since that plane is more spiritually attuned than ours, we can see Emily better in that light." Beau said as he placed his pouches on the ground.

"So it's not like when I take us to hell? I mean, what we're seeing isn't really there... or what?" Lee asked uncertainly.

"It exists on its own plane, but we can't make physical contact with it. We can just see it in the light from the divine torch." Beau said as succinctly as he was able.

While everyone did their best to comprehend that, Beau gathered a few more things and started adding them to his fire.

//I'm just curious. From the way I understand Seth's ability, wouldn't it be possible for him to use the light of his horns to do the same thing that you're doing with that bar-b-que pit?// Jesus slowly asked.

"Technically, yes. Practically, no." Beau said carefully.

//Okay. How does that work?// Jesus asked curiously.

"From what I've seen of it, if Seth were to try to duplicate the light of the divine torch, he would *probably* end up taking us, physically, into limbo or possibly even a heavenly realm." Beau said as he continued to work.

//From the way you say that, I'm assuming that means that it would be a *bad* thing.// Jesus said uncertainly.

"When you're in a realm like Limbo, it's easy to get lost. It's easy to forget. If you don't pass through it and get to your destination very quickly, you risk being trapped on that plane forever. You'll forget who you are, why you're there, even your own name. You'll just

wander unknowingly without a destination." Beau said distantly as he continued to work.

"You'll just wander around until you starve to death?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"In a non-corporeal dimension like limbo your body typically doesn't need food or water. It doesn't age or need sleep. The way you are when you go in is the way you'll be for as long as you're there... maybe forever." Beau said seriously.

"But you won't remember who you are or why you're there?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"That's right." Beau confirmed, then added, "Most beings, when they enter that place, are drawn to go directly to their preferred plane of existence. They arrive without incident and probably don't even remember passing through."

"What's that?" Steve asked suddenly as he pointed.

Beau looked for a moment, then slowly said, "I think it's a pferox."

"What's a pferox?" Steve asked nervously.

"It's a being native to a few of the spiritual dimensions. Some people call them demons, although I don't think that's technically correct. I see the pferox as being more like animals; creatures of utilitarian purpose without intelligent thought, without consciousness. "

Beau said consideringly.

"Can it hurt me?" Steve asked as he kept his gaze fastened on the creature who was staring back at him.

"No. He's on a different plane. He can't touch you."

Beau assured him.

"Good. Because he looks dangerous." Steve said frankly.

"He's probably about as dangerous as any other wild animal. Come to think of it, since they're native to the realm, they *might* actually have a life cycle." Beau said speculatively.

"Which means?" Steve asked cautiously.

"It's possible that the pferox might need to eat." Beau said simply as he started performing a series of complicated gestures with his wand.

"Eat... us?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"Eat whatever becomes lost and disoriented within its realm." Beau explained, then quickly added, "I'm just guessing based on how things usually seem to work in situations like this. I don't actually *know* anything about the pferox except their name."

"So it *can't* hurt us?" Steve asked to be sure.

"No. Not unless you have the ability to shift dimensions." Beau assured him.

"Hey! Wait. I have the ability to shift dimensions... should I be worried?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"I can't be sure if the pferox can shift dimensions on its own. You might want to be sure to look before you leap when you know that there are pferox around." Beau cautiously suggested.

"So it can shift itself to the hell dimension?" Lee asked with surprise.

"I really don't know. It's possible. That's all I'm saying." Beau said simply.

"What about the 'sideways'? Could the pferox shift itself there?" Lee asked anxiously.

"Not that I'm aware of. But while it's possible that it could, it's also possible that it has no reason to go there. So if you're thinking about going to the sideways dimension trying to escape the pherox, it *is* possible that it might be able to follow you there." Beau said thoughtfully.

"What about *this* dimension?" Steve asked cautiously.

"No. They can't shift here. They aren't capable of it." Beau said with certainty.

//But could *you* bring one here if you wanted to?//
Jesus tentatively asked.

"No. I don't think so. Even if I could find a way to transport the creature, it would probably disintegrate within minutes of arriving." Beau said frankly, then added, "But according to my limited understanding of how Seth's ability works, I'd have to guess that, if he wanted to and really tried, that he *might* be capable of reorienting a creature from another dimensional plane to this one."

//That doesn't apply just to pferox, does it?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"No. I don't think so." Beau said frankly.

//We're going to need to keep a close eye on that.//

Jesus said more quietly.

"I think we're ready to try this. Everyone hold still until you get used to the divine torch." Beau warned.

"Is this going to do anything to the pferox?" Steve rushed to ask.

"It will look completely real to us, but it still won't exist on this plane so it still won't be able to do anything to hurt us." Beau assured him.

"Okay. I'm ready then." Steve said reasonably confidently.

"Then goes the feeling,

then goes the flow,

then goes the magic,

then goes the fire!

By the power of my will, let the assault on high places be enjoined, let the walls of this world be further breached!" Beau called out in an escalating voice as he raised his open palm toward the speck of light floating high above the brazier..

"Holy fuck!" Slash gasped as he fell to his knees.

"I think my heart stopped." Lisa said between heaving breaths as she clutched her chest.

//Is anyone else blind, or is it just me?// Jesus asked in a clearly frightened mind/voice.

"I've got you Jesus. Stay right there. Does anyone need to get out of here? Just let me know and I'll open a door for us." Lee asked as he fought to remain standing.

"Just give it a second and your vision will return. The torch worked just the way it was supposed to." Beau hurried to explain.

"I'm glad I didn't empty my venom sacs yet, because it's beginning to look like I may need them." Steve said as he struggled to coil himself to return to an upright position.

"Um, Beau? Can you see yourself?" Lee asked cautiously.

"I know. I was afraid this might happen. I know how it looks, but this isn't something to worry about. The mythical beast is part of me. It's only visible under spiritual light." Beau explained.

"Lee, you have red eyes." Lisa hesitantly warned him.

"Beau's practically being devoured by a giant bird and *that's* what you're focusing on?" Lee asked incredulously, then turned to the tall young man beside Beau and cautiously asked, "Is that really you, Peter?"

"Hang on. Before we get started, let me try something." Beau hurried to say.

"If you make us blind again, I *will* bite you." Steve said firmly, then added for emphasis, "Believe it."

"I'm not going to do anything to your sight this time. Now I'm going to work on your ears." Beau said before doing a complicated gesture while saying a few incomprehensible words.

"*By divine light let their words be heard.*" Beau said as he added a few more items to his brazier.

As one might expect, the added items smoked a little before burning up entirely, but they appeared to do little else.

"Give it a second to take hold. If it doesn't work, I can still translate for you, like we were planning before." Beau announced.

"Are you Peter?" Slash asked to confirm.

"Da, I mean, Yes. Piotr Rasputin, at your service." The tall young man said in a firm clear voice with a pronounced Russian accent.

"Whoa. Okay. That worked a little better than I expected." Lee said with astonishment.

//I guess I can't see the same thing that you can. I can't see who you're talking to.// Jesus said frankly.

"Try seeing through my eyes. Maybe that'll work." Lee suggested.

//It's kind of disorienting for me. I'll need to stay still while I do it. Is that okay?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"As long as you don't dig your nails in, you're fine." Lee assured him.

"Lisa. Emily told me that you would like to use my training and skill so that you can serve your team as I did mine. Is that correct?" Peter asked carefully as he indicated the impossibly pale, younger girl at his side.

"I came here, to New York, for a chance to do something with my life, something better than living in my mom's basement." Lisa said quietly.

Peter and Emily both nodded to encourage her to continue.

"When I got here, Doctor Hoffman made sure that I knew that I needed to look toward the future and dream of something more than just existing. I needed to find a way to make a contribution." Lisa said with a gentle smile, then looked Peter in the eyes as she continued, "If you'll agree to share your skill with me, I can do more than exist. I can *help*."

Peter slowly nodded, then looked to Beau and said, "This is what I needed to know. I would not wish to give of myself to someone with wrong intentions."

"I can understand that." Beau said with a gentle smile.

"Hang on, Beau. Before we call everything settled and done, just what the hell are you?" Lee asked frankly.

Slash looked at Lee with surprise at the bold question, but then turned his inquisitive gaze toward Beau to wait for a satisfactory answer.

"Would you believe that this is my spirit animal?" Beau asked hopefully.

"Nice try." Lee said simply.

"This creature which inhabits you, it is the Phoenix, is it not?" Peter asked carefully.

"Yeah. Most people don't recognize it by sight. How did you know that?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I have seen one once before. That one inhabited a dear friend of mine which eventually forced her to have to leave us." Peter said seriously.

"Did you do something to make Miss Grey have to leave?" Steve asked in a pained voice.

"No. I don't know anything about that. But it may explain what I've been sensing since I've been here. I didn't know that I had landed in someone else's nest. No wonder all the power structures around here have already been rooted out." Beau finished thoughtfully.

"So this isn't the same phoenix that took Miss Grey from us?" Peter cautiously asked.

"No. That much I can tell you for certain. This phoenix has been in the Murdock and Collins families for centuries. The phoenix you encountered had to have been from an entirely different lineage." Beau said seriously.

//Fire and death... it all makes sense now.// Jesus said consideringly.

"Yeah. If I hadn't been possessed by the phoenix I probably wouldn't have been a witch at all. But my only choices were to become a suitable vessel or to endure as best I could until a better vessel presented itself." Beau quietly explained.

"You're not a vessel, you're a person." Lee stated cautiously.

"I'm both." Beau corrected.

"And you're okay with that?" Lisa asked uncertainly.

"I wouldn't be me without the phoenix. When I was born, she was reborn within me. She and I are one fused being."

"Did your parents do this to you?" Steve asked darkly.

"No. Some of my family were involved, but not my parents. They fought to give me as normal a life as possible to ground me in the real world." Beau finished contentedly.

"So does that mean that you can never get rid of the phoenix?" Lisa asked with concern.

"Not exactly. One day I'll turn to ash and she will be reborn in another vessel. But at least I'll know that a part of me will live on. In a sense, part of me is eternal. How can I be mad about that?" Beau finished with a smile.

"Religion gives me a headache." Slash said sourly.

//It gives me gas.// Jesus countered.

"Ooookay. So what do we need to do now so we can keep this thing moving?" Lee asked hesitantly.

"Peter, do you have anything that you'd like to say or any questions that you'd like to ask before the breach seals itself?" Beau asked seriously.

"I'm a simple person, not well versed in the abilities of the phoenix or in witchly matters. Could you explain to me what you're intending to do?" Peter asked carefully.

"Yes. It will be good for me to restate it in front of both of you so that you're both aware of what you will be agreeing to." Beau said with a smile, then continued, "To put it simply, I plan to take what's here in front of me, all that remains of who and what you were, and transfer it into an object that Lisa will be

able to don when she needs to have access to your skill and complex motor control."

"And what will I do when you do not have need of my *gifts*?" Peter asked cautiously.

"That will be up to you to decide. You can choose to retreat into the sark and become an inanimate object if you like. But if I'm able to get the nygo husk webbing to work the way I want it to, then you'll have a skin, of sorts, that you'll be able to use to interact with your teammates, independently from Lisa." Beau carefully explained.

"Where will I live?" Peter slowly asked.

"You won't. You're dead." Beau said honestly.

"I think he wants to know where he'll be staying when he's not doing team business." Slash hesitantly suggested.

"Oh... I don't know. That's really not my department." Beau said honestly.

"I think it might be mine." Lee said hesitantly.

"You are Andrew's father, yes?" Peter asked uncertainly.

"That's right, I'm Lee. I'm also the liaison between Xavier's and the Wagner Institute, so it's my job to make sure that people who have interests in both places get the best possible outcome." Lee said carefully.

"What would you suggest in Fallen's case?" Beau asked curiously.

"Since all the Wagner students have been displaced due to the shooting, I think that we can keep Fallen with his new teammates for now. That should give me time to investigate the possibilities so that I can give you some choices to consider." Lee said seriously.

"Many thanks to you Lee. I'm sorry that I didn't get to know you before. You are very kind." Peter said regretfully.

"I was dealing with a lot, all at once, back there. Now is better." Lee finished with a disarming smile.

After a moment to consider, Peter quietly said, "Perhaps it is."

"Listen, the breach is about to close so this may be your last chance to talk to each other until after the

embodiment ritual. Go ahead and tell Fallen what you need to say." Beau said firmly.

"Fallen, I'm new to this team, but I used to be part of another one. So if you decide to go through with it, you won't be the only one. If you want to talk about that stuff I'll know how it is and I'll help you if I can." Steve hurried to assure him.

"Even though I don't know what kind of abilities you're going to have when this is all over, that's one of the crazy things about this team. We're all over the place with abilities and stuff. No matter where you fall on the spectrum, there will be a place for you." Slash assured him.

"I don't know if anyone has mentioned it to you, but Wagner's is just starting out. The new people need someone who can not only show them the way, but also warn them about consequences. It's a unique opportunity to help in a different way than you're probably used to." Lee said frankly.

//I don't know if you can see and hear me. I can't see or hear you except through Lee's eyes and ears, but either way, my partner is Louie just the same way that your partner will be Lisa. If you're worried about that

part of things, I'll be right here to help you.// Jesus sent very carefully and deliberately.

After a moment, Lee cautiously asked, "Did you hear what Jesus was saying?"

"No. Who is that?" Peter asked cautiously.

"This rat on my shoulder. He's telepathic, but for some reason he can't see or hear you. It seems that you can't hear him either. He wants you to know that he and his partner on the team combine something like what you and Lisa are planning on doing. He offered to help you if you find out later that you have a problem that comes from being a combined being." Lee carefully explained.

"I do not understand. You have a *rat* on your team who is telepathic?" Peter asked slowly.

"Yes. That's right." Lee confirmed.

"Although he prefers to be called an emotional support companion." Slash added with a smile.

"I wish to understand, is this a person whose mutation made him appear to be a rat?" Peter asked slowly.

"No. He's a rat who achieved sentience by way of a mutant ability being used on him. His partner, Louie, is the one who woke him up and made him a person." Lee carefully explained.

//Very nicely explained. Thank you.// Jesus said appreciatively.

"The torch is almost out. Is there anything else you need to know before you lose the chance to ask directly?" Beau asked urgently.

"Lisa, if I understand correctly, you wish to gain access to my skills so that you can use your gift of strength to help others who aren't as strong and lack such gifts of their own. Is that correct?" Peter carefully asked.

"Yes. That's right. But that isn't all. Since I first heard about the Wagner school, my motive for being here has changed a couple times. Helping the weak sounds like a good enough reason to fight for now, but something else may come up later that gives me another reason." Lisa slowly explained.

"So, at some point we may disagree regarding what is right and wrong."

"I suppose that every partnership is going to have to face that at some point." Lisa said speculatively.

"I would not wish to mislead you. While I am earnest in my desire to work with you and help you on your quest to be strong for the weak, I cannot promise to abide by your every decision. Some certain things are important to me and I will fight to defend them. If you cannot accept me having my own free will, this would be the best time to bring it forward." Peter said carefully.

"You'd better hurry up and answer. He's fading fast." Slash cautioned.

"Take the time you need to make the right decision." Beau countered, then reminded them, "I will still be able to hear Fallen even after you aren't able to."

"Right." Slash acknowledged.

"I don't think it's going to be a problem anyway. Friends fight. Friends disagree. Sometimes they let the other have their way just because they *are* friends. You can't command me and I can't command you. That's how it should be. We'll work together because that's the best thing we can do for ourselves, for each other and for the team. Right?" Lisa finished confidently.

"Lisa. I will be honored to stand beside you in your quest." Peter said reverently, then added in a fading voice, "In the fullness of time, we may continue on to other adventures... we may not. Regardless, I will vow to fight at your side until such a time as we decide to move on to separate challenges."

Everyone was silent as the light of the 'torch' faded to nothing.

Beau waited a moment for any response. When none was forthcoming, he finally said, "I guess that means that it's time to prepare for the embodiment ritual."

[Chapter 24: Grow Fonder]

"Are you guys ready for some visitors?" Cynthia asked from the doorway of the recovery room.

"Yeah! I never even thought it was really possible to be bored to death but here we are. This place could do it." Gar said dramatically.

Cynthia smiled at the response, then looked behind her into the hallway and said, "I get the feeling that they might welcome some company. Just be sure not to get them too worked up. Doctor McCoy says that they both need their rest."

"We'll keep it quiet." Lisa promised.

As Gar and Marc watched, Lisa, Steve, and Lee entered the room.

"Steve, I'm glad you came back! Come over here!" Gar called excitedly.

"Calm down or they won't let us visit you." Lisa cautioned the boy.

"Okay. But I want Steve to come over here so I can try something." Gar said urgently.

Steve slithered to Gar's bedside and cautiously asked, "What did you want to try?"

"After you came and got Lisa I started to wonder if I could use my ability to make me be like you." Gar said frankly.

"Why would you want to do that?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"To look cool, for one thing." Gar said seriously, then quickly added, "Besides I think that there's times when it would be good to be able to slither instead of walk."

"Yeah? Like when?" Steve asked slowly.

"Like maybe when you need to go under something really low, I bet you can probably crawl faster than just about anyone." Gar said earnestly.

After a moment to consider, Steve hesitantly said, "I guess that's true."

"He's also really good at climbing and reaching things down off the top shelf." Lee contributed to their conversation.

"Okay. Hang on. I'm going to try it." Gar said quickly, then before anyone could react, he began to shrink down as his facial features began to smooth out.

"Be careful, Gar. If you get stuck, I don't know if anyone will be able to help you." Marc warned.

A movement at the foot of the bed drew everyone's attention as a green snake tail emerged from under the sheet.

As they looked back to the other end of the bed, they found a large snake looking back at them. While the intelligent look in his eyes betrayed his consciousness, his features were nothing less than fully those of a boa constrictor.

"I'm guessing that that's not what you were trying to do." Lee said speculatively.

"Even if it's not, he should still be able to do what he wanted to do, like the crawling and stuff." Steve said cautiously.

As he spoke, Gar began to change again, this time returning to his humanoid form.

"I really need to find a way to make it so that my clothes change with me. Every time I change my body

I have to go back and put my clothes back on." Gar said aggravatedly as he fought to quickly dress himself under the sheet.

While Gar was busy dressing, Marc quietly said, "I'm surprised to see you again so soon. Not that I'm complaining, I just didn't expect you."

"If there were anything for us to do to help Beau we'd still be at the gingerbread house doing it, but Beau has to do most of it himself. Slash and Jesus stayed behind to help him with the rest." Lisa explained.

"It sounds like it's going to be a really big deal. I'm sorry that I'm going to miss it." Marc said regretfully.

"Maybe you don't have to." Lee said slowly, then explained, "I don't know of any reason that Andrew can't make a portal so that you can witness whatever happens. He already said that he would be there so all we'll have to do is ask."

"That sounds so great! This feels like something that we should all be doing together as a team." Lisa said happily.

"Yeah. I think so too." Marc said contemplatively.

"If I'm there when it happens, does that mean that I'll be on your team too?" Gar asked cautiously.

"Do you want to be?" Lee asked curiously.

"From the way Doctor McCoy's been talking, he expects me to be on his team someday. He keeps saying that I have such a high level ability that I'm going to have to train a lot, but he seems really sure that even though I'm a kid, I'm probably going to be one of the stronger members of his team." Gar said seriously.

"Well, if that's how it is, how about we count you the same as we're counting Clark, John, and Bobby? You can be a friend of the team, someone that we can go to and ask for help when we need it. Maybe sometime we can help your team or you can help ours." Lee cautiously suggested.

"Yeah. Me being like Clark... that sounds good to me." Gar finished with a contented smile.

"But before we do anything else, right now I think Steve needs to visit with Doctor McCoy for a few minutes." Lee said in a leading tone.

"Yeah. I guess so." Steve reluctantly admitted, then glanced at Gar as he said, "Too bad 'Snake Junior' can't go with me. It'd be good to have his company."

"He needs his bedrest, but I'd be willing to go with you, if you wouldn't mind." Lee tentatively offered.

"I don't know, I mean, it's kind of a personal thing, but at the same time, it sucks having to do it alone..."

"Then it's settled. Let's go." Lee said decisively.

That seemed to be all the encouragement that Steve needed. After one last look back, Steve followed Lee out of the room.

* * * * *

"Doctor McCoy? Do you have a few minutes to help Steve?" Lee asked from the doorway of Dr. McCoy's office.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I had intended to summon him in case he forgot that he was due." Dr. McCoy said as he looked up from his computer.

"No chance of that. My sacs are pulled tight." Steve said anxiously.

"Not to worry. We'll have your situation resolved shortly." Dr. McCoy said before picking up the phone and hitting one button.

Lee and Steve silently watched and waited to be told what to do next.

"Bobbo? Would you go to treatment room two and wait for me? There's a procedure that I'd like for you to observe." Hank asked hopefully.

After a moment to listen to the response, Hank hung up the phone, then looked to Lee and Steve before asking, "That's alright, isn't it?"

"What's alright?" Steve asked cautiously.

"I'm going to have my medical assistant sit in and observe so that in future, it's less likely that you will have to wait for me to be available." Dr. McCoy patiently explained.

"If it comes down to it, I can do it myself. You just won't end up getting my poison." Steve said simply.

"Your venom is incredibly useful. If circumstances conspire to prevent collection, then of course I want you to do what makes you most comfortable. But if at

all possible, I would rather harvest as much as we can." Dr. McCoy said professionally.

Steve slowly nodded his acknowledgement.

"So, is it alright if Bobbo sits in?" Dr. McCoy asked to be sure.

"Yeah. That sounds like the smart way of doing it." Steve reluctantly admitted.

"Come along then." Dr. McCoy said as he led the way out of his office.

* * * * *

As Lee and Steve entered the treatment room, they were surprised to see a tall beefy man wearing a labcoat. His physique was that of a linebacker and he seemed to be completely out of place in a professional medical setting.

"He looks like you did before." Steve said before he could think about propriety.

"What was that?" Lee asked curiously.

"Steve remembers how I looked before my mutation progressed to its current level." Dr. McCoy said simply.

"Is that why you hired me? Because I remind you of how you used to be?" Bobbo asked Dr. McCoy curiously.

"Not as such. Although I do recall what it was like for me starting out. People would take one look at me and believe that I was a mindless oaf based only on their first impressions. Even after receiving my first doctorate some continued to treat me as though I were a stupid beer guzzling jock." Hank said distantly as he relived the profound sense of unfairness underlying that time of his life.

"So you wanted to give another muscle bound $\frac{1}{2}$ jock a chance?" Bobbo asked curiously.

"I let it be known that I had a need for medical assistants. You and Cynthia expressed interest in filling those vacancies. I didn't choose you, either of you, over more qualified candidates due to your physical attributes. I simply chose the people who I thought would do a capable job and fit in reasonably well with the culture at the mansion. Perhaps I thought you might be relatable to me, but I can't say for sure if that had any influence on my decision." Dr. McCoy finished introspectively.

"But if other people see you and think that you're not smart because you're big, then they probably passed you over for scrawny smart people which made it so that you were available when Doctor McCoy needed someone." Steve cautiously reasoned.

"Exactly my point." Dr. McCoy said with a smile of approval of Steve's assessment, then continued, "Steven is here to have his venom sacs drained. I would like for you to witness the procedure so that if I should be otherwise occupied, he could come to you for relief."

Bobbo looked at Steve uncertainly, but didn't appear to object.

"The collection beakers are kept in this cabinet. Be sure to observe full sterilization protocols, since the harvested venom will be used to create antivenom as well as a number of other medicinal serums." Dr. McCoy explained as he quickly passed his hands under an intense blue light.

"I can release the venom on my own, but then Doctor McCoy couldn't use it. It gets mixed with my spit and stuff." Steve helpfully added.

"Yes. But we'll do our best not to let that happen. With a minimal effort on our part we can provide a

benefit to a great many people." Dr. McCoy confirmed, then held out a covered beaker to Steve as he said, "In the interest of getting an uncontaminated sample, we massage Steve's venom sacs so that they will slowly release. During that time, Steve will be consciously resisting the release so as to keep the flow steady."

"That's why if you talk to me I won't be able to answer or even nod, I have to keep concentrating while I'm holding still and keeping the jar steady, all at the same time." Steve seriously explained.

"Fangs out." Dr. McCoy prompted as he moved to allow Bobbo an unobstructed view of what he was doing.

After a slightly nervous look around, Steve opened his mouth wide which turned out to be a little wider than would be possible for a normal person.

A set of dangerous looking fangs lowered down, as though they were on hinges and had been tucked against his gumline.

Bobbo automatically took a step back at the sight.

"You'll need to stand closer so that you can see." Dr. McCoy instructed seriously.

With his mouth still held open, Steve glanced to his side and made eye contact with Lee.

Although Steve didn't alter his expression to indicate what he wanted, Lee nonetheless stepped forward and took gentle hold of the boy's free hand.

Steve responded by squeezing the hand firmly

"I didn't expect them to be quite that big." Bobbo admitted as he moved a bit closer so that he could see what Dr. McCoy was doing.

"We've found it best if Steve holds the collection beaker, so if he needs to move, he can keep the positioning of the beaker constant." Dr. McCoy said instructively.

Bobbo nodded that he had heard.

"Now, if you were to feel Steve's neck, just below the jawline, you would feel two hard nodules. I'm not going to have you do it now because Steve is highly sensitive at this stage of things. Once we've been able to express a portion of his venom, you can have a turn at helping him so that you'll be familiar with the positioning." Dr. McCoy said as he began to gently probe Steve's neck.

"Is there some way you could do this so that Steve wouldn't have to be in such a vulnerable position?" Lee quietly asked.

"None that I can think of. I recognize the amount of trust that Steven is demonstrating by allowing me to do this. I do my best to never give him cause to regret his decision to allow me to collect his venom." Dr. McCoy said reverently.

Steve winced slightly and Lee automatically squeezed his hand to remind him that he wasn't facing the uncomfortable experience all alone.

"Sometimes when you're massaging the venom sacs Steve will have an occasional twinge of pain. There's no avoiding it. Just do your best to be gentle and persevere. Stopping and drawing the process out helps no one." Dr. McCoy said seriously.

"What effect does the venom have in its raw form?" Bobbo asked curiously.

"A small amount of Steven's venom injected or applied topically causes paralysis on a level commensurate with the amount introduced. A larger concentrated deposit additionally has a necrotizing effect, essentially causing flesh to rot." Dr. McCoy said clinically.

"Nasty." Bobbo muttered as he watched Dr. McCoy's movements very carefully.

"How much do you usually collect in one sitting?" Lee asked as he looked at the collection beaker to gauge how much had already been collected.

"It varies. Since we've let it go so long, this time, I would expect thirty to fifty milliliters."

"What's that in cups?" Lee hesitantly asked.

"It's not." Dr. McCoy said with a slight smile at the question, then explained, "If we were to convert that to a measure that's more familiar to you, I'd guess that we're going to collect between two and three tablespoons."

"It doesn't sound like that much, but I guess when you're squirting it out of your teeth, it probably feels like it's a whole lot more." Lee said thoughtfully.

"I would suppose so." Dr. McCoy said as he continued to gently massage Steve's neck.

Lee watched the collection jar carefully and saw a mostly clear, slightly milky, liquid starting to pool in the bottom.

"I think that we've lowered the pressure enough so that we may proceed. Steve, I'm going to move aside and allow Bobbo to massage your venom sacs for a moment. Please try to remain relaxed." Dr. McCoy slowly explained.

Lee kept firm hold of Steve's hand as Dr. McCoy shifted aside and allowed his equally large assistant to take his place.

"Right here." Dr. McCoy indicated, then quickly added, "Be gentle."

"I can be gentle. Don't worry." Bobbo quietly assured him as he placed his hands where Dr. McCoy had shown him.

"Proceed slowly. There's no rush." Dr. McCoy said soothingly.

"Who knows, if I get to do this often, maybe I could use the time to tell Steve about some of my adventures back in college. It might end up being fun." Bobbo said warmly as he very gently duplicated Dr. McCoy's movements.

"I'm afraid that we need for Steve to be awake during this procedure so that he can maintain concentration." Dr. McCoy said in a believable serious voice.

"Hey! I have good stories!" Bobbo insisted, but it was obvious that he was playing along with the joke.

Lee and Dr. McCoy's matching incredulous stares were all the response that was needed.

* * * * *

"How's it going in here?" Steve asked quietly, noticing that Gar appeared to be asleep.

"We were just talking with Cynthia. Gar pooped out about five minutes ago." Lisa easily explained, then thought to ask, "How did everything go with you?"

"Wonderful. After having that pressure relieved, I feel like I could use a good nap." Steve said frankly.

"You know what they say, 'The more the merrier'." Marc said with a smile as he lifted the edge of his sheet in invitation.

"Tempting, but no. I think I'd rather be awake so that I can enjoy this feeling." Steve said with an air of tranquility surrounding him.

After a long silent moment, Cynthia finally said, "Lisa was just telling us what you're going to be doing later. It sounds really spooky."

"I don't know if we're supposed to be telling everyone about that." Lee said frankly as he looked at Lisa uncertainly.

"If Cynthia's going to be working in MedLab, she's probably going to see a thousand more interesting things than a ghost transplant." Lisa said frankly.

"Ghost transplant?" Steve asked with a chuckle.

"Yeah, well, that's what I'm calling it. I mean, it's not hurting anyone, so why not make it sound like the harmless thing that it is? We're going to take Fallen, who's a spirit that's floating loose, and contain him in something so that he won't dissolve and completely disappear. We're doing a good thing, so why act like it's something dark and menacing?" Lisa asked reasonably.

"It sounds to me like you've found your own unique way of preserving the essence of a lost friend. While most people are satisfied to do that with mementos and photo albums... It sounds like a healthy and

beautiful way for your group to find closure." Cynthia said speculatively.

Lee and Steve gave Lisa matching curious looks at Cynthia's strange interpretation of events.

"Yeah. And if this doesn't work, we can still put up a plaque or something." Steve cautiously ventured, watching carefully for Cynthia's reaction.

"Exactly." Cynthia said happily.

"Any idea of when the rest of the team will be out of their testing?" Marc asked curiously.

"Nobody said anything about it, but I think they'll probably be taking a break for lunch pretty soon. It's about that time." Lisa said speculatively.

"Already? I totally lost track. That snack at the gingerbread house really threw me off." Lee said honestly.

"Me too. As nice as it was, I doubt that I'll feel like eating much at lunch." Lisa agreed.

"Just don't make the mistake of not eating because, if you do, you'll be starving before dinner." Lee warned.

"My head knows that, but my stomach may need some convincing." Lisa said unenthusiastically.

"Marc, are you feeling alright? You look tired." Cynthia asked with concern.

"I don't want to miss a minute of visiting with you guys, but yeah, I am starting to wear down." Marc quietly admitted.

"Let's go up and see if the test-takers are about ready to take a break." Lee quietly suggested.

"Before we do that, maybe we should check in with Beau and the guys to see if they'll be able to go to lunch with us. If they're doing something where they can't, then we could take some food back to them." Steve cautiously suggested.

"Yeah. That sounds like an even better idea." Lee agreed.

"Marc, we're going to leave now. Get lots of rest and we'll be back to visit again later." Lisa said before leaning in to give him a gentle kiss.

When the kiss finished, Marc looked at her lovingly for a moment before finally responding, "That sounds good to me. Enjoy your lunch."

The group left quietly as Marc rested back and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

"How are things going here?" Lee asked as the group passed through the portal into the gingerbread house.

"I seen a lotta weird shit in my life, but this... let's just say you don't ever have to worry about me ever becoming a witch." Slash said unsteadily.

"Nobody asked you to." Beau said as he slowly stirred a bowl that he was holding close to his chest.

"Where's Jesus?" Lisa asked curiously.

"Outside. He said to call to him mentally if we need him for anything." Beau said seriously.

"So he really was becoming claustrophobic?" Lee asked with concern.

"Maybe a little, but I think it's more likely that he just needed to go behind a tree for a minute." Slash said seriously.

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that. I guess a regular toilet probably wouldn't work too well for him." Lee said thoughtfully.

//I can use a toilet just fine, but going behind a tree is much easier for me.// Jesus said into all their minds.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be talking about you behind your back." Lee said with concern.

//You weren't.// Jesus said simply, then thought to ask, //Beau? Is it okay if I open the door?//

"Let me get it for you. I don't want to disturb the diagram in case I need to do another summoning." Beau said as he set the bowl that he had been stirring aside and carefully walked to the door.

"We just came by to see if you guys want to go to take a lunch break with us or if you'd like for us to bring something back for you." Steve said as he absently reached to one side to take a book at random off the nearest shelf.

"As much as I'd like to stay and keep working on this, the truth is, there's not much more I can do without Seth's help." Beau said regretfully as he held the door open long enough for Jesus to enter. As soon as Jesus was inside, Beau closed it, particularly careful not to disturb any part of the diagram on the floor.

"Well, Ms. Mordigan seems to be on board with what we're doing, so I'm sure that if we tell her that we need Seth for a few minutes that she won't have a problem with it." Lisa said confidently.

"Besides that, we're planning on stopping by the library and getting the others before we go to lunch anyway." Lee said seriously.

"Do you know if you have any snake spells?" Steve asked absently as he casually leafed through the book that he had picked up.

"These aren't my books. I'm not sure what Dawn has." Beau responded disjointedly at the non sequitur, then continued more steadily, "As far as going to the library, that sounds like a good idea. I could use a few minutes away from this before I have to dive into the hardcore spellcasting."

"I thought with you being all superpowered that it was going to be like a walk in the park for you." Lee said curiously.

"I don't have to worry about stirring up the forces to power the spell, but the other edge of that sword is that I have to be exact in my spelling or all the magic

that I command will flow to the wrong place and do the wrong thing." Beau said frankly.

"Are you sure it won't hurt for me to read this stuff?" Steve asked as he looked up from the book that he had chosen.

"You can scream at the moon all night long and it will never hear you. Speaking the words without any source of mystic power to drive them won't cause anything to happen. To become a witch requires the transformative power, a spell of intent and most of all, your free will for it to be so. Lacking any of those, the spells in those books will only ever be just words to you." Beau carefully explained.

"So he wouldn't have to sell his soul to the devil to gain the power?" Lee asked curiously.

"Only metaphorically... well, I suppose that there are some demonic entities who can make a contract with you, but no one does it that way anymore." Beau finished with a grin at the absurdity of the idea.

"So it won't hurt anything if I read this?" Steve asked to be sure.

"If you were to lose it or damage it, Dawn might cause something unfortunate to happen, but I don't think there's anything to worry about besides that." Beau said honestly.

"How long will it be before you're ready to go?" Lee asked curiously.

"Oh, I'm just about ready. Hold on." Beau said as he took the gallon jug of water and poured some of it into the bowl that he had been stirring.

"Would you like to come up here and ride with me?" Lee asked down to Jesus at their feet.

//Sure. If you wouldn't mind.// Jesus responded with surprise at the kind offer.

"It's kind of nice having you up here. I can see why Louie enjoys it." Lee said with a smile.

Jesus jumped from a standstill and gently landed on Lee's left shoulder.

"Peter, I'm going to need for you to stay here with Emily while I get the supplies that we'll need for your embodiment. If you start having problems or need me for any reason, Emily can come and get me. I won't mind." Beau carefully instructed.

After apparently receiving a favorable response, Beau looked to Lee and said, "I'm ready."

"Do you need to lock the door?" Lisa cautiously asked.

"I don't know who ended up with the key, but it doesn't matter. I can make it work." Beau said as he slowly looked around the room.

There was a long moment of silence during which all those present collectively felt a chill of foreboding wash over them.

"Let's go." Beau said casually, breaking them out of the breathless moment of fear inspired paralysis.

"What the hell did you just do?" Lisa shakily asked in a whisper.

"I just put a little protection spell on the gingerbread house. Don't worry, as long as no one tries to break in, nothing will happen." Beau assured the group as he led the way through the open portal.

After a moment of walking down the brushed metal hallway, Steve asked what they all were wondering, "What happens if someone does try to break in?"

"The phoenix protects her nest. I basically took a minute to establish where it is." Beau said frankly.

"Um... I don't really know anything at all about the phoenix, but from what little I've picked up since I've been around you, it sounds like you just connected the detonator to the powder keg." Lee said anxiously.

"Basically, yeah." Beau said simply.

"And you're okay with that?" Lisa asked as she glanced in the direction of the MedLab.

"Nothing will happen to an innocent or a person with noble intent. If someone breaks in and tries to cause harm, they will be prevented." Beau carefully explained.

"Permanently." Lee quietly added.

"As long as no one tries to break in, there's no problem." Beau countered.

//Please don't take this the wrong way, but you're really scary.// Jesus said warily.

"Yeah. I know. That's one of the reasons that I was trying to leave the magic stuff behind in Texas." Beau said honestly.

"You were trying to give it up?" Lisa asked curiously.

"Not entirely. I'm a witch. It's part of my life and always will be." Beau said frankly, then explained, "I wasn't trying to quit. I was just trying to move it to the back burner and make something else the main focus in my life."

//Maybe we could help you with that.// Jesus cautiously suggested.

"Actually, that's the part that I hadn't planned on. It never occurred to me that I'd be anything but alone in all of this." Beau said honestly.

"I may not have been part of your team for long, but I've been around for a while." Steve said honestly, then continued, "Most of us arrive here alone. Only a few of the lucky ones find a place to fit in. To me it looks like you're really lucky."

* * * * *

"Can we come in?" Lisa asked from the library doorway.

"Yes. Please do." Ms. Mordigan said happily, then quickly added, "I need to finish going over Quaid's latest test, but then I'll be right with you."

"We just stopped by to ask if you were going to take a lunch break soon." Lisa hurried to ask before Ms. Mordigan could become engaged with evaluating the test.

"Yes. Seth and Brian are nearly finished and I can look over their tests when we get back." Ms. Mordigan said as she picked up a stack of papers and started reading them.

"How was it? Did you have fun?" Louie asked as he welcomed Jesus onto his shoulder.

//Let's just say that now I have an idea of how the sausage is made.// Jesus said cautiously.

"What?" Louie asked in bewilderment.

//Never mind. It doesn't matter.// Jesus said fondly to his companion.

"Mine's done." Seth said as he stood from his table and carried his papers to Ms. Mordigan.

"Perfect timing." Ms. Mordigan said as she accepted the papers from him.

As Seth was returning to his desk, Beau stopped him by asking, "When we're done eating, I was wondering

if you could take us to the nygo-husk to gather some webbing? "

"I can do it now if you want. I think Chesser still needs a few minutes to finish up." Seth said honestly.

"Well, we can't collect it now, because I'm going to need for you to stabilize it until I can cast a spell on it. But if you wanted, we could go for a few minutes now and scout around for a piece of webbing big enough to use for a shroud for Fallen. The husk by the gingerbread house doesn't have a usable amount." Beau said seriously.

"Is that okay, Mad? Can you spare us for a few minutes?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yes. That should be fine." Ms. Mordigan answered with a smile.

"Hang on." Lee said quickly to Seth, then turned and asked, "Quaid, do you want to go along?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why?" Quaid asked cautiously.

"I just thought of a way that we might be able to help. If you'll come with us, we can find out if I'm right." Lee quietly explained.

"I love to help." Quaid said with a grand smile.

"Anyone else?" Seth asked as he looked around.

"I'm good." Lisa assured him.

"Maybe next time." Steve said as he looked up from his book.

//Yell if you need anything from us. I'll be listening for you.// Jesus said seriously.

"Is there going to be anything I can do to help you?" Slash asked cautiously.

Lee shrugged, then looked to Beau and Seth inquisitively.

"Not that I know of. But this should only take a few minutes. You can come along if you want to." Beau offered sincerely.

"Yeah. I've been in on everything so far. I'd like to see it through." Slash agreed.

After a look around, Beau enthusiastically said, "Fantastic. Let's get going."

[Chapter 25: Slice of Life]

"Hey! You're getting better at that." Beau said as he noticed that they had smoothly and effortlessly transitioned from standing in the library to the nygo-husk equivalent. The effect was something like a light dimming, except that instead of ending up in darkness, they ended up in a blue-grey abstraction of their own reality.

"I guess I'm getting used to how hard I have to push to make things happen." Seth explained.

"Before we get too much into this, let me tell you what I was thinking." Lee hurried to say.

"What was that?" Beau asked curiously.

"I thought that if you were able to find your piece of nygo-husk and Seth was able to stabilize it for you, then Quaid and I could 'hell surf' you back to the gingerbread house so that you could do your hocus-pocus thing on it." Lee explained earnestly.

"I had assumed that we would need Andrew to make a portal for us to be able to make this work. But I think it will be better for us to do for ourselves as much as we can." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Is there going to be anything that I can do while you're doing all that?" Slash asked cautiously.

"I can think of two things, right off the top of my head. First, you can be the one to physically hold the nygo-husk while the rest of us are doing the things that we need to do to it." Beau said seriously.

When Beau didn't automatically continue, Slash prompted him by saying, "Second?"

"I was just thinking that it would look a lot cooler if Fallen's nygo-husk shroud was black." Beau finished with a smile.

"That *would* be cool, wouldn't it?" Slash said with an emerging grin.

"What about this, over here?" Lee asked as he pointed.

When Seth saw what he was referring to, he took a few steps and adjusted the light emanating from his horns to provide the best possible view for everyone.

"It looks like a nice continuous sheet of webbing." Lee said consideringly, then thought to ask, "Is it big enough?"

"Maybe. But now that I see it, I just don't know how we'll get to the top of it or how we'll cut it down." Beau said slowly as he strained to see the top of the sheet of webbing.

"How about with Steve's help and some scissors?" Quaid cautiously suggested.

"I guess if you want to do it the simple way... we can try." Beau reluctantly admitted.

"Seth, be ready to bring me back in." Lee said before disappearing with a slight ::bamf:: and a sulfuric puff of smoke.

"That's new." Seth said uncertainly.

"I think he's refining his technique, just like you are." Beau said frankly.

"Do you think scissors will work on it?" Slash asked Beau cautiously.

"I think that's going to depend on Seth." Beau answered honestly, then explained, "If he can find the perfect balance of durability for the nygo-husk so that it can be cut but won't dissolve, then we should be able to collect what we need."

//Steve and Lee are ready to be brought in.// Jesus projected into all their minds.

"Got it. Thanks." Seth said as a flash of golden light suddenly erupted, followed by a pulse of blue/white light from his horns.

When the flash faded, Lee and Steve were standing in their midst.

"Lee said that there might be something that I can do to help." Steve said uncertainly.

"Yes. If you could reach the top of that sheet of webbing while Seth stabilizes it, we were hoping that you'd be able to cut it down for us." Beau said seriously.

Lee held up a pair of scissors, then offered them to Steve.

After looking up at the webbing for a moment, Steve slowly said, "I don't know if I'll be able to reach all the way to the top of it."

"I can make a cube for you to stand on if you want." Quaid quickly offered.

"That's right. I didn't think of that." Lee said with surprise.

"Seth, do you think you can alter the webbing so that we can cut it without it dissolving?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I haven't really tried anything that exact. It'd probably be best if I could try it on some other webbing before I mess up the big one that's the right size." Seth said seriously.

"Excellent plan." Beau said with a decisive nod.

"Steve, bring the scissors over here and let's try some things." Seth said as he started walking to another part of the cavernous space.

"How long do you think this is going to take? The others are waiting on us." Lee reminded his companions.

"It shouldn't take too long. Either it'll work or it won't." Seth said frankly, then added, "If I can't make it work, then we can go have lunch while I think about other things to try." Seth said confidently.

"Sounds good." Lee said as he watched with interest.

Seth focused his attention on the webbing as he slightly altered the light of his horns.

"Here. Try it now." He finally said as he held perfectly still.

Steve waited a moment to see if Seth were going to do anything else before cautiously moving in with the scissors.

After a tentative 'snip' that appeared to have the desired effect, Steve looked around to see what the others wanted him to do next.

"That seems to have worked. Why don't you try cutting it into a shape?" Beau asked cautiously.

"You mean, like a heart?" Steve asked uncertainly

"It doesn't matter. I just need to know if you can cut the webbing to hold a precise shape or if it will fray or unravel at the edge." Beau explained.

"Let's find out." Steve said as he carefully snipped and cut the ethereal fabric.

"It seems to be good so far." Slash said tentatively.

"Yes." Beau agreed, then asked, "Seth, do you think that you can do the same thing with the big sheet?"

"It feels like when my light hits the webbing that it kind of 'bakes' it, by that I mean it's like after you've taken something out of the oven, when it cools down, it's changed. It doesn't go back to being raw." Seth struggled to explain.

"I don't know enough about the sideways dimension to know if that's how it works or not." Beau said slowly.

"Does it matter? It worked, right?" Lee asked quickly.

"What I'm saying is, if I'm right, I'm going to need a few minutes to 'bake' the whole thing. But once I'm done with that, I won't need to keep my light on it the whole time until Beau makes it permanent." Seth said slowly.

"Are we sure that it won't dissolve when it comes to our world?" Steve asked cautiously as he looked at the webbing heart that he had cut out.

"One way to find out." Seth said as he faced Steve and his horns pulsed with dark blue light.

"Don't be mean to Steve." Quaid warned.

"I'm not. I'm just not going to treat him like 'company'. This is my way of showing him that he's 'family'. I'm treating him just like I'd treat my brother, Junior."

Seth said frankly as his horns erupted a lighter shade of blue light.

"Just because my fangs have been drained doesn't mean that I don't have any poison left." Steve said with a glare at Seth.

"How's your heart?" Seth asked, pointing to the delicate fabric in Steve's hands.

Steve paused for a moment, then held the heart-shaped piece of fabric up for all to see.

"I'd call that a successful test." Lee said frankly.

"Yeah. Then I guess I'm ready to bake us some webbing. Do we need to do anything else first?" Seth asked as he looked around.

"Go ahead. Let us know when you're ready for us to start cutting." Beau said decisively.

"Quaid. Could you make me a cube to stand on. I think this would be easier if I were a little higher up." Seth asked hopefully.

"Yeah. How's this?" Quaid asked as a three-foot-tall smokey-blue cube appeared.

"Can you make it taller?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But I can't fly you up there. Get on top and I'll grow it for you." Quaid replied.

Seth easily hopped on top of the cube and it almost immediately began to grow.

"You'll have to tell me when it's big enough." Quaid said simply.

"Stop it there. It looks to me like I'm right in the middle. I should be able to reach the whole thing, top to bottom, from here."

"Steve, is that too high for you?" Lee asked with concern.

"Quaid, can you move the cube a little closer in if I need you to?" Steve asked cautiously.

"Sure. I can make my cube do anything I want." Quaid said proudly.

"Here it goes." Seth announced, then the light of his horns changed and the glow of them was focused on the sheet of webbing before him.

"Jesus, how are things going out there?" Lee asked into the air.

//Chesser just finished his test booklet. Mad said that she can wait to evaluate it after the test-takers have had their break.// Jesus carefully explained.

"Tell her to go on to lunch and we'll catch up to you guys in a few minutes." Lee said decisively.

There was a long pause, then Jesus responded, //She says that the team needs to be together right now. I agree with her.//

"Seth? Can you bring them in?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Busy baking. Give me a second." Seth said slowly as he fought to maintain his concentration.

//There's no rush. I'll get everyone over to one side so that we won't phase in on top of you guys.// Jesus said seriously.

"That sounds like a good idea." Lee said appreciatively.

There was a long silent moment as everyone waited for Seth to complete his 'baking'.

"Before I go any further, I just want to confirm, what shape do you want this thing?" Seth asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Beau quietly said, "I was naturally thinking of a square, but now that you ask, it

seems to stand to reason that it should be a circle, so it will drape evenly."

"The way I've been 'baking' it is mostly a circle pattern. That's just the way my light could hit it best. Look it over while I bring the others in." Seth said as he looked over his handiwork.

"It all looks the same to me. Is there a way to tell what's 'baked' and what isn't?" Lee asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah. Here." Seth said as golden light flashed for an instant, leaving the 'baked' portion slightly luminescing.

"You're really getting better at that." Slash said in an impressed voice.

"When I do new things, I try to remember what each thing does." Seth said as he turned around on top of the cube, then released two bursts of light in rapid succession, which resulted in the crew from the library appearing in the nygo-husk quasi-dimension.

"It looks kinda like a starburst pattern." Steve said slowly as he moved closer to the webbing.

"I think that's from the natural formation of the weave. All I did was a circle." Seth said as he turned back around.

"Is that going to glow like that when you put your friend into it?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. Seth was just showing us what part of the webbing that he's already changed so we can decide what still needs to be done." Beau explained.

"How tall is Peter?" Lisa asked as she stepped closer to the sheet of webbing.

"He isn't. Fallen is a spirit. No height, no width, no breadth, no mass." Beau said seriously.

Lisa rolled her eyes, then slowly asked, "How tall *was* he?"

There was a long silent moment, until Steve finally said, "Really big, like 6'6" or 6'8", I think."

"If we made it that big, it might drag the ground when Lisa puts it on." Beau cautioned.

"Then I'll tuck it in." Lisa responded, then explained, "This is basically going to be his new 'body'. I want to do everything I can to make it as comfortable as

possible for him. It *should* be the size that he's used to."

"What do you say, Seth? Can you make it about a foot longer, all the way around?" Lee asked hopefully.

"Yeah. No problem, as long as Quaid can boost me up a little when I get to the top." Seth said frankly.

"I can do that. Steve, why don't we go ahead and get up on the cube so you can jump into action as soon as Seth's done?"

"Sure. Sounds good to me." Steve easily agreed.

"Going down. First floor, jewelry and perfumes. Watch your step." Quaid called out as his cube began to shrink.

"I think it's strange that you're making elevator jokes when you're someone from outer space. I'm not quite sure what's wrong with that, but it seems like something is." Brian said honestly.

"Yeah. Well, I got my dad's sense of humor... I mean, literally. I've got his entire collection of stale cringey dad jokes. There's nothing I can do about it but apologize in advance." Quaid said as he and Steve moved to stand beside Seth.

"At least you've got something from him, even if it *is* kinda crappy." Steve said honestly.

"Of all the things I could have gotten, it's not the worst." Quaid tentatively agreed.

"Does that mean that you got a crappy dad too?" Seth asked Steve as the cube started growing.

"Nope. I guess when I slithered out of the womb it probably wasn't looked upon as a joyous occasion. At least they let me live. I bet *that* wasn't an easy decision. But anyway, I grew up in a third rate orphanage, you know, where the unadoptable losers end up." Steve said as he fought to keep the despair out of his voice.

"Then how did you end up here?" Lee asked curiously, hoping to move the conversation in a slightly more cheerful direction.

"When Professor Xavier was notified about another mutant kid at the orphanage, he saw me and asked if I could be sent to his school, too. I think that since no one was paying for me, the orphanage was just as happy to have me off their books. I went with him and I've been here ever since." Steve said frankly.

"So, in a way, the professor rescued you?" Ms. Mordigan asked with concern.

"Yeah. Even though I know that he's helped a lot of kids... you know, that's what he does... I still feel something for him that I can't quite put into words. I want to prove to him that what he did was right. I want to be the person he imagined that I *could* be when he first saw me." Steve said introspectively.

"It looks to me like you're well on your way." Ms. Mordigan said with obvious admiration.

"Lift it up, just a foot or so." Seth said as he moved to one side of the cube.

Rather than grow, the cube began to levitate off the ground.

"Is that going to be stable enough?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Sure. I can make my cube have its own gravity, if I want to. If Seth wasn't busy right now, I could turn us upside down and we wouldn't even feel a jiggle." Quaid happily proclaimed.

"I can see that being very handy." Ms. Mordigan said honestly.

"It has been so far." Lee said with a proud smile at his newest grandson.

After a long silent moment, Seth quietly said, "A little higher."

"Up we go." Quaid said happily as his cube once again lifted.

"When they're done, are we going back to the gingerbread house?" Lisa asked curiously.

"Yes. I have everything that I'll need already prepared, so it shouldn't take *too* long to cast the spell on the nygo-husk webbing." Beau cautiously explained.

"It doesn't look like there's anything that we can do to help you here. If Seth can let us out, we can walk through the portal that Andrew left open for us and meet you there." Lisa said seriously.

"Seth looks like he's busy right now. But I can make a portal for you." Lee happily offered.

"Oh. Okay. Thanks." Lisa said with surprise at the offer.

With little more than a glance, Lee caused a doorway to open into radiant heat and hellfire. A moment later,

a doorway opened within that doorway to reveal the calm and quiet of the library.

"We'll meet you guys there." Lisa hurried to say before stepping through the open portal.

"It shouldn't take us long." Beau called after her.

Brian, Ms. Mordigan, and Louie, with Jesus on his shoulder, followed along.

* * * * *

"You know, from the outside this looks a lot more impressive than it is." Steve said frankly.

"What's that?" Lee asked curiously.

"Being the ones actually *doing* things. From the outside it looks all... glorious or something. It's like you're doing a big thing because no one else can, which makes you all kinds of important and special and stuff." Steve said thoughtfully.

"Nope. Something needs done, so we do it. That's all there is to it." Lee said slowly, then explained, "And if *that* doesn't work, then we do something else and we keep trying things until something finally works. If we're doing anything special at all, it's that we're

actually trying to make a change rather than assuming that 'someone' will fix it for us."

"Yeah. That's it. From the outside, it looks like you're so confident and powerful and... you don't have any doubt in your abilities. But inside, we're just doing a job, aren't we?" Steve asked uncertainly.

"Pretty much. Yeah." Lee confirmed.

"Maybe that's why your old team never took off. If they stood back and watched instead of stepping up and *doing* things, then they'd never discover what it's like to change things for themselves." Beau said speculatively.

"I always thought that the professor didn't think that we were good enough to give us anything important to do, but he didn't have anything to do with it. *We* thought that we weren't good enough. That's what held us back." Steve said with astonishment at the simplicity of it.

"Are you going to tell them?" Quaid asked curiously.

"I don't think it would do any good if I did. If they don't take the first step, nothing will change." Steve said thoughtfully.

//Which is *exactly* why I haven't told them.// Professor Xavier said into all their minds.

"Isn't there some way that you can make them understand?" Steve asked into the air.

//I have done so in the past, much to my regret. People who can't take that first step on their own aren't sufficiently prepared for the next one. A fighter who fights, a leader who leads or any of the others who seek to enact change for the good of all are more valuable than a collective of mindless automatons who will fight and die on command. Without will, they're fodder, they have no real value in the true struggle.// Professor Xavier said solemnly.

"So Steve has passed some sort of a test?" Lee asked cautiously.

//He took a step. With any luck you, as a group, will take even more.// Professor Xavier said seriously.

"Steve, I'm done here if you want to jump in." Seth cautiously interjected.

"Quaid, can you move us a little closer?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Sure thing. Just let me know when you need me to lower it." Quaid said as the cube slowly drifted closer to the webbing.

"Seth, can you flash it again so I can see what's baked and what's not?" Steve asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Sure." Seth said as he emitted a quick pulse of light.

"Do you need for me to do anything?" Slash asked as he looked up at what they were doing.

"Yeah. Could you come around to the front of the cube and be ready to catch the webbing as I cut it down? I can't be sure if when I start cutting if it's going to start tearing and fall all at once." Steve said seriously.

"Yeah." Slash said quickly, then moved into position and asked, "How's this?"

"Perfect." Steve said as he stretched himself to his full extension to reach the top-most portion of webbing that had been 'baked'.

"Do you need me to raise the cube up at all?" Quaid cautiously asked.

"No. Just hold it here for a minute. I've got this."

Steve said carefully as he pinched the webbing and made his first tentative ::snip::.

"Does it feel solid enough? Do you think it will hold together?" Seth asked with concern.

"Yeah. I wouldn't make a trampoline out of it, but it doesn't feel like it's about to shred or anything." Steve said as he carefully cut the webbing, paying particular attention to making a smooth arching cut at the exact edge of where Seth had 'baked' it.

"That's looking good. Just let us know if there's anything we can do to help." Beau said as he carefully watched Steve's every move.

"You might want to come around and help Slash. I think it's going to be like trying to fold a sheet. It'll probably be a whole lot easier with two of you." Steve said honestly.

"Yeah. I hadn't thought of that. Good idea." Beau said as he moved to stand opposite Slash.

"Do you want to take the webbing through Andrew's portal or do you want to 'hell surf' there?" Lee asked seriously.

"Honestly? I'm *really* looking forward to the 'hell surfing'. It sounds incredible." Beau said with an emerging smile.

"Then that's what we'll do." Lee confirmed with satisfaction.

* * * * *

"Seth? Have you got it?" Steve asked as he tried to look past the multiple folds of webbing below him.

"Yeah. It didn't look like it was this much when it was hanging up there." Slash said honestly.

"It's not too heavy for you, is it?" Steve asked cautiously.

"No. It's not heavy at all, it's just really poofy." Slash confirmed.

"How close are you to being done?" Beau asked as he worked to help Slash gather the cut down webbing.

"Give me a second to finish trimming this bottom edge. I've almost got it." Steve said intently.

"Then we should get ready to go. Everyone is waiting on us." Beau said decisively.

"Do you want for me to change the color of this now or later?" Slash asked as he continued to try and gather the large sheet of webbing into a pile.

"Now would probably be best. There's no telling what effect my spell will have, it might prevent you from making changes to the webbing afterward." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Okay. If you'll hand it all to me, I'll go ahead and change it now." Slash said seriously.

It took a moment, but Beau was finally able to transfer the awkward bundle entirely into Slash's arms.

"Here it goes." Slash said as he focused his primary mutant ability on the mass of webbing.

As everyone watched, the off-white bundle began to darken, starting at his hands and draining all traces of color from the insubstantial fabric.

"I think that's got it." Slash said in concentration.

"Yeah. Looks good. Is everyone ready to go hell surfing?" Lee asked happily.

"Sure. Just tell us what we need to do." Seth said with a smile at the prospect of what they were about to do.

"Just get together so I can make a cube around us, then leave the rest to me and Grandpa Lee." Quaid said enthusiastically.

"Do you need any help, Slash?" Beau carefully asked.

"No. I've got it." Slash assured him.

* * * * *

"You guys will need to remember that nothing can happen to you while you're inside Quaid's cube. If it gets too scary, just close your eyes and it will be like standing still inside an empty room. There's no inertia or centrifugal force inside the cube. It has its own gravity." Lee carefully explained.

"We'll be fine. The others are waiting. Let's just do it." Beau urged.

"Quaid?" Lee prompted.

"Big cube!" Quaid said as he spread his arms expressively.

"Nicely done." Lee said warmly to his grandson as he looked around to verify that the newly formed cube contained their entire group. Once he was sure that

everyone was ready, he said in a grand voice,
"Welcome to hell."

A doorway suddenly opened right in front of the cube, just large enough for it to fit through.

Quaid caused the cube to slightly levitate, then moved it forward through the opening. As they left the nygo-husk dimension, the doorway smoothly closed behind them.

The searing heat of the expansive desert before them appeared to be hotter by virtue of the burning sky.

"That way." Lee told Quaid quietly as he pointed.

"I love to fly." Quaid said ebulliently, then suiting actions to words, launched the cube forward at high speed in the direction that Lee had indicated.

"Bear left, just a little." Lee said as his red-glowing eyes stared into the distance.

Slash let out a gasp, which might have contained a little bit of a scream, although none present could do other than sympathize with what he was feeling.

"Over there. Slow it down. Bring us in for a landing." Lee said in concentration.

Although Slash hadn't been able to keep his eyes open, the rest witnessed what Lee had told them about the cube having its own self-contained environment. The cube abruptly slowed, swiveled, and tilted in the direction that Lee had indicated, even though the group didn't *feel* the slightest sensation of tipping or deceleration.

"Over that way, about ten feet, then put 'er down." Lee said as he pointed.

Quaid expertly followed his directions and brought the cube to rest on an open patch of sand.

"And here we are." Lee said with accomplishment as he made a lowering motion with both hands. His movement coincided with the world of fire and heat being washed away by the quaint scenery outside the gingerbread house.

"Wow. You need to sell tickets for that ride. You'd make a fortune." Seth said with a smile that he couldn't contain.

"Slash, bring the webbing, we need to stabilize it as quickly as we can." Beau said seriously.

"What? Oh, yeah." Slash said disjointedly as he fought to contain any evidence of the adrenaline rush he was experiencing.

* * * * *

Beau carefully opened the door, then said to those following him, "Watch your step as you go in. Don't mess up the spell diagram."

"If you don't want it messed up, why did you put it right inside the door?" Slash asked as he carefully stepped over the diagram with the bundle of webbing in his arms.

"Because I need to use the door itself as a component part of the spell." Beau answered simply.

//If you want to fit anyone else in here, you're going to have to hang them from the rafters.// Jesus said with a note of anxiety under his words, supporting earlier claims of his claustrophobia.

"It looks like you were able to get the webbing down without a problem." Lisa observed.

"Yeah. Seth and Steve did a great job." Beau agreed.

"It wasn't just us. We all worked on it." Seth let it be known.

"Are you going to have enough room to work in here? Some of us can leave if you need us to." Ms. Mordigan offered with concern.

"It's fine." Beau assured her.

"Where do you want this?" Slash asked as he indicated the bundle in his arms.

"Just stand over here by me. I have everything prepared, so this won't take long." Beau said as he indicated a spot beside the work table.

Slash had to squeeze past Lisa and walk sideways around Quaid, but was finally able to settle into place.

"Emily, before we start, I need for you to take Fallen back to the mansion and stay with him there. What I'm about to do will be dangerous for both of you. Later on, when we're ready to do the embodiment ceremony, I will summon you and I want for you to bring Fallen back here with you." Beau said seriously, then thought to add, "You can go through the open portal over there if you like, it should be faster for you."

The others watched silently as Beau followed the pair's progress through the doorway with his eyes.

"If it's going to be dangerous for *them* what are the chances that it's going to be dangerous for *us*?" Slash asked cautiously.

"I don't think there's any danger at all for you. The only one I might worry about is Jesus. Since he's unique in my experience, I don't have any way of estimating how firmly his soul is rooted to his physical body." Beau said thoughtfully.

//Should I leave?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Sorry bout that li'l buddy. But I think it might be for the best. I'm afraid that if things start to go wrong, I might not be able to stop in time to protect you." Beau quietly explained.

//You'll call me back for the embodiment?// Jesus asked to be sure.

"Absolutely. It's going to be a team thing. There's no way we'd do it without you." Beau promised.

//Well, I'd go and wait with Fallen and Emily except that since I can't see, hear, or even telepathically sense

them, it probably wouldn't be a very fun time for any of us.// Jesus said honestly.

"Actually, since I've had my sacs drained, I've been feeling like I need to get out and blow off some steam. If you want to tag along with me, we can go back to the mansion and I can show you my room and show you around the place until they're ready for us to come back." Steve said seriously, then thought to ask, "You can hear them when they call you, can't you?"

//Possibly. But I will definitely be able to hear it if either Louie or Quaid call to me. Of course, if you can't reach me directly, any of you can contact the professor and he can relay the message.// Jesus said frankly.

"Steve, can you get through the door without messing up the diagram?" Beau asked cautiously.

"I got in, didn't I?" Steve said simply.

"Yeah, I guess so. To tell you the truth, I didn't notice how you did that." Beau reluctantly admitted.

"C'mon Jesus. If you want to go with me, hop on." Steve said as he reached over the spell diagram to open the door.

//Is on your shoulder okay?// Jesus asked to be sure.

"Actually, it might be better for you to get into the hood of my hoodie and hold on around my neck. I plan on being low to the ground so I can get up the best possible speed." Steve suggested.

//This sounds like it might be as much fun as hell surfing.// Jesus said frankly.

"Probably not, but you might still enjoy it." Steve chuckled as Jesus followed his suggestion and climbed onto his back.

As soon as he could tell that his passenger was settled into place, he carefully arched his body as he passed through the door so he wouldn't disrupt the delicate diagram.

Once he was fully outside, he turned and pulled the door closed behind him.

* * * * *

"Seth, can you cast a light to show us the sideways without actually taking us there?" Beau asked hopefully.

"I think I can. I don't think I've tried to do that yet."
Seth said as his horns began to glow.

After a few stops and starts, Seth finally settled on a blueish-green light that revealed faint cobwebs all around them, looking something like a night vision camera image.

"That's perfect. Can you hold it like that for a little bit?" Beau asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I could do this all day." Seth said honestly.

"Slash, I'm about to cast a preliminary spell on the webbing. If it works the way it's supposed to, the texture will significantly change. It might get slippery or reduce its size. Just do your best to keep hold of it." Beau carefully warned.

"What happens if I drop it? Do we have to go back and start over?" Slash asked anxiously.

"No. Nothing like that. All we'll do is dust it off and keep going. I just wanted to warn you so it wouldn't catch you by surprise." Beau said frankly.

"Oh, okay. Thanks." Slash stammered.

Beau glanced at the spell diagram by the door and all the candles surrounding it immediately lit themselves. Next, he glanced toward his work area and the candles positioned there likewise burst into flame.

There was a long silent moment when everyone present felt chills, gooseflesh, and an increasing sense of dread.

"One of these times your magic is going to give me a heart attack. My heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest right now." Lisa said breathily.

Before Beau could respond, Lee said, "If that happens, we've got a necromancer right here to help you... at least, I *think* he'd try to help you."

Beau flashed him an exasperated look before dipping the tips of his fingers of his right hand into a bowl, then flicking the moisture from them onto the pile of webbing.

"This closed, I now open,

this foreign, I now make native,

this complete, I now make hollow,

this void, I now make ravenous,

this empty, I now give voice,

*this cursed vessel, this void of despair, this spiritual trap,
I now empower.*

*May all Gods have mercy on one who succumbs to this
temptuous snare...*

...for I have none." Beau finished in a whisper as the power to fuel the spell flowed out of him like a flood.

"Holy Fuck!" Slash gasped as he fell to his knees, somehow able to keep hold of the bundle of webbing.

"That's it... I'm done with magic... I can't do this..." Lisa panted as she backed up against the nearest wall and clutched her chest and fought to catch her breath.

Beau glanced to his side in time to see both Lee and Seth's eyes roll back as they crumpled to the floor.

Before he could say or do anything to help, Ms. Mordigan and Brian knelt down to do what they could to provide comfort and aid for the unconscious members of the team.

Louie was openly crying as Quaid pulled him close to comfort him.

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU JUST DO!?" Andrew bellowed as he appeared in their midst.

[Chapter 26: Revelations and Resurrections]

"Maybe I should have broken that down into steps."

Beau said reluctantly.

"Ya think?!" Andrew asked disbelievingly as he looked around and evaluated the situation.

It was obvious that Andrew was fighting to process his emotions as his gaze stopped on his unconscious father.

At Andrew's anguished expression, Ms. Mordigan quietly told him, "I think they'll be alright."

"I was just trying to get the nygo-husk shroud ready for the embodiment ritual. I didn't think it would hurt anything to do it all in one go." Beau fought to explain.

"You tried to do too much too fast. I get that, okay? But what you just did impacted people all over the mansion. Regardless of your intentions, I'm afraid that we can't take the chance of you overestimating your ability and control again." Andrew said shortly.

"You can't stop me now! All that's left is to install Fallen into the shroud." Beau urged Andrew to understand.

Andrew held up a hand and carefully said, "We can go ahead and finish what you've started. All of us want for you to do whatever you can to help Peter. But after that, we're going to have to severely limit your use of magic."

Louie looked up from the safety of Quaid's arms and called into the air, "Jesus! Are you and Steve okay?"

//I don't know yet. Steve had to stop and needs to recover a little bit more before he can decide if he wants to go to the mansion or go back to the gingerbread house.// Jesus answered with concern.

"When he's ready, tell him to bring you back here. I'm pretty sure that what just happened was the dangerous thing that Beau was worried about you being here for." Louie said seriously.

//It may take us a few minutes. It hit him kinda hard.// Jesus said anxiously.

"If he doesn't feel up to it, just let us know and me and Grandpa Lee will go and get you." Quaid said decisively.

//Give him some time to recover and I'll let you know what he wants to do. Right now he just needs to collect himself.// Jesus said seriously.

"Okay. Just call us as soon as you've decided." Quaid said firmly.

//Will do.// Jesus quietly responded.

* * * * *

When it was apparent that Louie and Quaid's conversations had ended, Andrew fixed his gaze on Beau and continued, "I'm going to call everyone in so that we can get your spell done right away. We need to get this over with and behind us before anyone can mobilize a movement to forbid the use of magic entirely."

"Do you really think they'd do that?" Beau asked anxiously.

"We're not all that far from Salem." Andrew said frankly, then added more gently, "I think that getting this over with as quickly as possible is probably the best thing for all involved."

"Andrew, can you do your portal thing so that Marc and Gar can see Fallen's embodiment?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"This isn't an induction to the team ceremony. While I can see the necessity of it, we need to get it over with and protect the people at the mansion from Beau's insane eruptions of magic." Andrew said seriously.

"Andy." Lee said from his place on the floor, with his head cradled in Mad's lap.

Andrew looked down at the sound and his panic melted away, overridden by concern for his father.

"Beau's just trying to help. Don't stand against him. Work with him. Guide him. Help him to understand. He's an important member of our team and you'll be helping no one by trying to make him afraid of his gift." Lee asked his son hopefully.

"There's no way we can continue forward never knowing if half the people at the mansion are about to be slapped down by yet another torrent of gale-force magic." Andrew said imploringly.

"You remember when I told you that I didn't have any magic supplies at all with me? This is why. I'm not

planning on using magic all day, every day. I was confronted with a problem and I had a solution. Once it's done, I'm not planning to use magic again for a while. I got into college at the age of sixteen by doing things the mundane way. I can restrain it." Beau explained seriously.

"It sounds to me like you guys are on the same page. If you'll just go ahead and get it done, you've both agreed that Beau isn't going to make magic his full-time job." Lisa said reasonably.

"I'll use it when it's the right tool to get the job done." Beau said simply.

"Just be careful to only use as much magic as the situation calls for." Andrew cautioned.

"Try to fill a glass with water from a firehose. I'll do my best to hold it back, but sometimes it gets away from me a little." Beau said seriously.

"Is that what happened today?" Andrew asked curiously.

"Yes. Like I said when you got here, I should have broken it down into steps. If I had done it in four or five smaller spells, it probably wouldn't have had the

same... impact. Of course, it would have also taken four or five times as long to get the same job done." Beau said honestly, then quietly admitted, "Sometimes it's hard to find the balance."

"Okay. Let's just get this done, then we can worry about what comes next." Andrew said simply.

"If you're ready to do it, I can summon Emily and Fallen right now, so that they can be on their way." Beau said professionally.

"Sounds good. While you're doing that, I'll get Dawn and Tara." Andrew said, matching Beau's tone and pace.

"Jesus, are you and Steve going to need a ride back?" Louie called into the air.

//No. Steve is feeling better. We'll be on our way in just a minute.// Jesus responded.

"Beau's about to do his spell on the door, so make sure you don't open it until he tells you to." Quaid said quickly.

//We need to get him a door of his own so that he can use it just for his spells.// Jesus said frankly, then

added, //We're leaving now. Expect us in a few minutes.//

With some help from Ms. Mordigan and Brian, Lee and Seth were both working to get back onto their feet.

Andrew was looking into the distance with glowing gold eyes.

Louie and Quaid were still holding each other, although now they seemed to be mostly content.

"Is there anything the rest of us can do to help?" Slash asked as he looked around uncertainly.

"Yes. You can go outside." Beau said simply.

"Just me, or all of us?" Slash asked cautiously.

"I've done what I need to do in here. I need to gather a few things, but the embodiment ceremony is going to take place outside." Beau said seriously.

"Coming through. Make a path." Lisa said determinedly as she squeezed past people to get to the door.

"I'm right behind you." Seth called out as he followed in her wake.

"Beau, don't do anything destructive or insane for a minute, would you? I'll be right back." Andrew said, then was gone before Beau could say anything in his defense.

"Would you like for someone to hang back here with you?" Slash asked as the others filed out of the room, all of them careful not to disturb the diagram in front of the door.

"The brazier's already outside. I should be able to carry the rest on my own." Beau said as he looked through the bottles, searching for a particular one.

"That's not what I'm asking. Andrew came down on you pretty hard. I just wondered if you'd like some company right now or if you'd rather be alone for a minute." Slash said honestly.

"It's okay. I'm not some delicate little flower who can't handle some criticism. I screwed up. It'll blow over." Beau said as he gathered several bottles into a woven basket.

"I just wanted to be sure that you knew that just because you goofed a little, we're not mad at you or anything." Slash said seriously.

"I think Lisa might be a little miffed." Beau said honestly.

"I think if you'll just make a point of not doing things to make her heart want to explode, she'll probably get over it. She strikes me as the reasonable type." Slash said frankly.

Before Beau could respond, Dawn appeared right beside them.

"With a magic blast like that, you would've been right at home in Sunnydale." Dawn chuckled.

Beau looked at her with confusion, not understanding the reference.

"Give me that. You're doing an embodiment, right? I'll start the setup." Dawn said as she took the basket from in front of him.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks." Beau said uncertainly.

"When we've got more time, I'll tell you some stories about magic spells that went wrong a whole lot worse than yours." Dawn said cheerfully before slipping out the front door, nimbly avoiding the summoning diagram.

After a long silent moment, Beau passed his hand over the candles of the diagram, causing them to light, then quietly said, "Emily, the one who anchors you to this world summons you. Come with all due haste."

"Is that everything you need?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"If you want to grab that sack of bone dust, I might need it for the meta-diagram." Beau said as he pointed.

"This pillow looking thing." Beau asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. But hold on a second. I don't want to use the door until Emily gets here." Beau said seriously as he gathered a few pinches and dabs of things together in a pouch.

"When's your birthday?" Slash asked curiously.

"Later this month, December 28th. Why?" Beau hesitantly asked in response to the odd question.

"Just don't be surprised if you receive a strangely 'door shaped' present from the team." Slash said with a smile.

Beau turned toward the door, then stepped forward and opened it before saying, "Emily, if you and Fallen

will follow us out, we will be doing the embodiment ritual in just a few minutes."

Slash couldn't see or hear any indication that Emily, or anyone else, was present.

Even so, as Beau walked through the door with a big poofy bundle of nygo-husk webbing in his hands, Slash gathered up the bag of bone dust and followed.

* * * * *

As Slash walked out to the open area in front of the cabin, he noticed that Andrew and Tara were already present.

"Andrew, can you please make a portal so that Marc can be a part of this? It's really important for him to be here with us." Lisa said imploringly.

Slash could tell that it meant a lot to Lisa that Marc feel included in the landmark moment as part of the team.

"Hey Beau." Slash said quietly before he could really think his idea through.

"Yeah?" Beau responded absently, paying most of his attention to Andrew, waiting for his answer.

Before Slash could respond, Andrew carefully told Lisa, "Remind me when Beau's ready to cast his spell and we'll decide then if it's safe for Marc to attend or not."

Just then, Steve slithered into the clearing with Jesus riding on his back.

"How are you guys? Are you alright?" Louie asked with concern.

"Yeah. Whatever that was rang my bell for a second, but I came back just fine." Steve said confidently.

Beau was lost in thought for a moment, then glanced at Slash and distractedly asked, "What was it you were needing? "

"Is there a way that you can make the embodiment ceremony have to include Marc?" Slash asked hopefully.

"How do you mean?" Beau asked curiously.

"From what I've seen of your magic, it looks like it's you describing what you want to happen when you let your magic loose." Slash said thoughtfully.

"Basically, yeah." Beau cautiously agreed.

"So, what if, maybe you could make it so you, like, define the team as part of your spell, so that when you do Fallen's part, you define Fallen as being what you want him to be instead of what he is." Slash said carefully.

After a long moment of consideration, Beau quietly muttered, "The rat, the rabbit, the snake..."

"What about them?" Slash asked hopefully.

"The Chinese zodiac, it's an incredibly powerful magical paradigm. If we can assign everyone their own astrological sign, then Fallen's assignment could be the last. The moderating force of all the other astrological signs should provide the glue to hold Fallen fast in place in his new shroud." Beau said excitedly, then added, "It could work."

"What sign should I be?" Slash asked curiously.

"Let me think... the chicken?" Beau said uncertainly.

"Seriously?" Slash said flatly.

"Beau. We've got the spell components laid out for you. Do you need to do any diagramming for this?" Dawn asked pleasantly.

"Yes. A Chinese zodiac with twelve houses." Beau said seriously.

"Twelve? What are you going to do with twelve houses in an embodiment?" Dawn asked curiously as Andrew turned to listen with interest.

"Install each member of the team into their house so that it can give structure to our overall dynamic." Beau said reasonably.

"No wonder your eyes are brown." Slash quietly muttered at Beau's side.

"Yeah. Twelve houses. I think we can do that. You'll have to tell us who's who and what's what." Dawn said thoughtfully.

"I think Steve, Lisa, and Jesus are probably obvious. I was just telling Slash that he might be well-represented by the Rooster..." Beau was saying until he was interrupted.

"Nope. Not the chicken." Slash said firmly.

"Tell me about the other placements then we'll see about what's left." Dawn said with a grin at Slash.

Beau noticed that everyone else had gathered around and were listening curiously.

"Well, I thought that Brian might be well-suited to the sign of the dreamer, the monkey... you know, because of his premonitions." Beau hurried to explain.

"Makes sense." Andrew cautiously agreed.

"For Louie I thought that the sign of the loyal partner, the boar." Beau said carefully.

"He is that." Quaid happily agreed.

//For sure.// Jesus added.

"What am I?" Seth asked excitedly.

"The goat." Beau said simply.

"Why the goat?" Seth asked with anticipation.

"Because of your horns." Beau said honestly.

Seth looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then slowly said, "That's it? Everyone else got theirs picked for who they are. And you picked mine because of what I am?"

//Not everyone.// Jesus said frankly.

"Yeah. Think of it as being automatically picked instead of having to try out." Steve said honestly.

"Welcome to the club." Lisa added with a smile.

Beau looked Seth in the eyes and said, "The goat is intelligent, dependable and usually calm. Not always, but when it counts. You make good decisions."

"Yeah, okay." Seth reluctantly accepted.

"Who's left?" Slash asked uncertainly.

"Lee." Beau answered, then looked him in the eyes and asked, "How would you feel about the sign of the dog?"

"I'm not one of your classmates. Are you sure you want me on your team?" Lee cautiously asked.

"Absolutely. You're Quaid's counterpart." Beau said simply.

"Besides that, you've lived out in the world and seen the ugly side. We need someone with his eyes already opened." Slash added seriously.

"C'mon Grandpa. Without both of us the team can't go hell surfing." Quaid said urgently.

"Okay. I guess I can't argue with that." Lee said warmly.

"What's mine?" Quaid asked Beau hopefully.

"The tiger." Beau said with a smile, already knowing that Quaid would love it.

"Awesome!" Quaid crowed.

"And since Lee is your partner, it makes a cat and dog, yin and yang relationship, which also serves the zodiac perfectly."

"What about Marc?" Lisa quietly asked.

"I actually thought about his before anyone else. When Marc was given the team name 'Archer', I automatically thought 'Sagittarius'." Beau explained.

"Okay." Lisa said slowly, not seeing the connection.

"Horses are energetic, outgoing, warm-hearted and intelligent. They keep the people around them happy with their humor and their wit. Does that sound like anyone you know?" Beau said frankly.

"Yeah. That's him." Lisa said with a gentle smile at the thought of her boyfriend.

"What's left to choose from?" Slash asked firmly.

"The rooster and the ox. I thought that with Fallen being six and a half feet tall, that he'd probably be more ox-like." Beau said frankly.

"What's yours?" Slash asked slowly.

"The dragon." Beau reluctantly admitted.

"Just how does that work?" Slash demanded to know.

"Hold on." Dawn told Beau, then turned to the group and continued, "Who here do you think is independent, capable, warm-hearted, quick minded and has great self-respect?"

After a long moment of looking around to see if anyone else was going to answer, Lisa finally said, "Both of them."

"Right!" Dawn triumphantly agreed, then continued by asking, "Which one of these guys do you think might have a natural gift for working with or exorcising spirits?"

"I'm guessing that you mean Beau?" Lisa said hesitantly, half sure that it was a trick question.

"Right. That's one of the attributes of the rooster."

Dawn said seriously.

"I just thought it made sense for Beau to be the chicken because it's a bird... and so's the phoenix."

Slash said frankly.

"Actually, that's a really good argument. I guess that I let my own preferences cloud my judgement. When we do the ritual, I'll be in the house of the rooster and Slash will be in the house of the dragon." Beau graciously allowed.

"If that's all settled, let's do some diagramming." Dawn said firmly, then pointed to Andrew and said, "Rat, ox, and tiger."

Andrew nodded and went to work.

"Tara, would you do the rabbit, dragon and snake?"

Dawn asked with a tender smile.

A timid nod was Tara's response before she hurried off to work.

"I'll get the horse, ram and monkey. Which leaves Beau to set up the rooster, dog, and boar." Dawn said decisively.

"Is there anything the rest of us can do?" Lisa asked hesitantly.

"Just be ready to go to your house when it's ready. Once everyone has taken their place, Beau can bring it all home." Dawn said confidently.

"Good call on buying the bone dust. We should have just enough." Andrew said as he took a cup of bone dust from the sack.

"Andrew, remember that we're going to need Marc in his house when we perform the ceremony." Dawn called as she drew her diagram.

"Beau, do you think my portal will interact with your spell?" Andrew asked as he, too, was diagramming.

"No. Your portals don't interact at all. It shouldn't be a problem." Beau said with certainty.

"Jesus. If you'll come over here and stand in this circle, that's all you should have to do for a while." Andrew said as he moved to start on the next diagram.

//I'm just curious, are you casting this spell on us or on Fallen?// Jesus asked slowly.

"As I understand it, Beau's going to be defining Fallen's new state by his relationship to the team. Likening it to the Chinese zodiac gives it an established framework to solidify and stabilize the embodiment. It's really kind of ingenious." Andrew finished with a smile.

//You just tap danced right around that one, didn't you? Beau? Are you casting the spell on Fallen or on the whole team?// Jesus asked more insistently.

"Mostly on Fallen. The way it works is, I'm going to be magically stating what you already are, so that will carry over to establish what we expect Fallen to be. The stability of the other eleven houses will promote stability in the twelfth house." Beau said instructively as he worked.

//Got it. Thank you, Beau.// Jesus said sincerely.

"Lisa. I've got yours ready. Slash, I'm almost done with this one." Tara said with her typical half-concealed smile.

"Andrew, whatever you're going to do about Marc, it's time to do it." Dawn said as she indicated the freshly completed diagram.

"Right. Give me a second. I'll be right back." Andrew said before vanishing.

"Is it alright that I'm here, since I'm not participating in this?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"The team will be a thing all its own. We might not be able to see everything clearly from inside of it. We need someone who will be able to look at our team from the outside and tell us where we can go to do the most good." Lee said frankly.

"What about you? If you're Quaid's grandfather, doesn't that give you a different perspective?" Ms. Mordigan asked curiously.

"I might be able to inject a little maturity when things seem to be about to go off the rails, but honestly, I think being here with the kids is reminding me of some things that a hard life and some bad decisions have caused me to forget. I have a feeling that I'm exactly where I need to be." Lee said thoughtfully.

"No. You need to be over here, in this hexagon." Beau said as he pointed to the freshly drawn diagram.

Lee flashed a smile at Ms. Mordigan before going where he was told.

A movement caused Steve to look up from his diagram to see Andrew, Dr. McCoy, Cynthia, and Bobbo standing in a wide doorway, behind Marc and Gar in their beds. Marc's bed was located mostly within the drawn diagram on the ground.

"It looks like you've got quite the support group, Marc." Steve said with a grin.

"Yeah. More like my own personal pit crew, ready to jump in and bail me out in case I crash and burn." Marc said frankly.

"No chance of that. If you start to fall, everyone here will work to catch you." Seth added from his place in his own circle.

"Fallen, I need for you to come over here and stand in this circle for me. When the time comes, I'm going to drape a shroud over you and it should bond to you and give you a vague physical form. Don't fight it, just let it happen." Beau instructed as he guided the invisible form of Peter to stand in his own unique diagram.

After a moment of looking around, Beau quietly asked, "Dawn, could you help me with something?"

"What's that?" Dawn asked curiously as she approached.

"It's possible that when I hollowed out the nygo-husk shroud for Fallen that I might have made it a little bit more... hungry, than it really needs to be." Beau said reluctantly.

"I'm guessing that by 'a little bit' you actually mean 'a whole helluva lot'." Dawn said with a slight smile.

"Pretty much, yeah." Beau reluctantly admitted.

"What can I do to help?" Dawn asked warmly.

"Just keep Emily over here with you and protect her if she's being irresistibly drawn to enter the shroud." Beau said hopefully.

"I can't see or hear her." Dawn cautioned.

"The slightest touch of the phoenix's power can grant the ability to see the forces of death and rebirth. If you will accept the gift, I can ask the phoenix to brush you with her wing." Beau carefully offered.

"The slightest touch of the phoenix's power can also squash a person flatter than an armadillo on a highway, but I'm not an ordinary person. I think I can handle it." Dawn assured him.

"Are you talking about armadillos because I'm a Texan?" Beau asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I thought I'd try to speak your language." Dawn admitted with a grin, then continued, "Go ahead. Lay it on me."

Beau slowly and carefully raised one hand, about two feet away from Dawn, however none of those watching could deny the impact that Dawn felt as she was thrown about six feet back.

Much to her credit, Dawn was able to land on her feet and seemed to be none the worse for wear as she walked back to stand in front of Beau.

"Just like Sunnydale." Dawn said as she checked to see that her hair and clothes hadn't become too mussed.

"Can you see them?" Beau asked as he indicated the pale young ghost at his side.

"Look at you! When I heard about a ghost I imagined someone about my age." Dawn said happily.

"Can you keep Emily safe while we do the ritual?"

Beau asked hopefully.

"Yeah. No problem. Go do what you need to do and we'll be fine." Dawn assured him.

* * * * *

"How's this going to work with you being the one casting the spell as well as one of the represented houses?" Andrew asked carefully.

"That shouldn't be a problem. Thanks to everyone doing the layout in the correct order, all I'll have to do is stand in my proper house when I perform the naming. The rest of the time I'll be free to walk around." Beau said thoughtfully.

"Would it be easier if I did the naming for you?" Andrew asked cautiously.

"No. This spell is based in necromancy. The naming is death and rebirth. I have to be the one who does it." Beau said frankly.

"Yeah. Well, I'm just as happy to stick with fire." Andrew said honestly.

"If that's the case, then maybe you could attend to the brazier for me. I could do it myself, but it would take a lot of extra walking, adding ingredients to the fire after each naming."

"I would be happy to do that for you. Just tell me what you need." Andrew said seriously.

"It's all laid out beside the brazier. Just add a pinch of each thing to the flame, then wait for the next naming." Beau said instructively.

"Got it." Andrew promised.

* * * * *

Beau looked around the diagrams to see that everything was satisfactory for the spell.

Suddenly Beau seemed to realize that he had missed something and hurriedly asked, "Tara? Would you mind helping me with something?"

"What can I do?" Tara timidly responded.

"Could you just keep this shroud with you until I need it? I'm afraid that if I put it on the ground one little breeze could blow it away." Beau explained.

"Yes. I'd be happy to do that." Tara said timidly.

"Oh, and if Dawn or I tell you to run, carry it as fast as you can through Marc's portal into the MedLab." Beau thought to add.

At Tara's surprised look, Beau explained, "The shroud is a spiritual void which seeks to absorb displaced spiritual energy. If Emily or Fallen get pulled into it, we could lose one or both of them forever."

"I'll be ready to run." Tara promised him.

"You probably won't have to, but I want for us to be prepared." Beau assured her, then walked toward Marc.

"Are you okay with what we're doing?" Beau asked him quietly.

"Yeah. Lisa filled me in. I'm actually glad that you're doing it this way to make sure we're all on the same page as to who the team members are and how we relate." Marc said seriously.

"Your house is said to have a quick wit. You're already living up to the reputation." Beau said with a grin and a little extra drawl.

"Go on, Tex. Make it happen." Marc said firmly.

* * * * *

"Andrew?" Beau prompted.

"Creo Ignem." Andrew said clearly as he made a complicated hand gesture.

In response, the brazier burst into flame.

Beau smiled with approval at the result, then walked to Quaid's diagram before saying, "In the house of the tiger was one known to us as Quaid, now to be our brother, Godling."

Beau glanced over in time to see Andrew expertly adding pinches of the necessary spell ingredients to the brazier.

After taking a few steps, Beau continued, "In the house of the rabbit was one known to us as Lisa. Now and forever let our sister be known as Lepus."

Andrew once again responded by adding pinches of herbs and minerals to the flame.

With a smile, Beau quietly said, "In the house of the dragon resides one who I am proud to claim as brother, his name was Slash, but now is become Blackout."

Slash couldn't resist Beau's smile and broke into a beaming grin as all the color drained from his hair and eyebrows, making him turn completely white.

"Our newest brother be welcome. In the house of the snake Steve resides, where now he can claim autonomy from what has always been and unity with other people, sovereign of mind, working toward united purpose. So let it be for he, known as Nightfear."

Steve looked surprised for a long silent moment, then he quietly said, "Thank you."

Beau gently smiled as he walked to the next diagram and quietly said, "In the house of the horse resides one who was Marc. Through peril and persistence, he has come to us now as Archer, the heart of us."

Marc and those surrounding him looked on curiously at Beau's declaration.

Andrew added the required pinches and dabs to the fire as Beau walked to the next diagram in the circle and said, "In the house of the goat resides Seth, emerging from innocence into a world of wonders, both beautiful and profane. We who accompany our brother on his journey call him Sideway."

Seth had a curious look and seemed to be about to say something but then appeared to think better of it and simply nodded.

Beau walked to the next diagram and reverently said, "In the house of the monkey resides our brother Brian. By way of infinite possibilities and unfathomable choices this brother of ours has come to us to be known as Chesser."

Brian looked surprised by the words, but ultimately pleased.

Beau stepped into his own spell diagram and took a long slow breath before declaring, "In the house of the rooster I am Beau. Humbly I stand before you seeking to be accepted as your brother, Tex."

While no one responded audibly, the outpouring of goodwill from his teammates was nearly a tangible thing.

Not to belabor the point, Beau moved to the next diagram and said, "In the house of the dog is our elder, Lee. In this new way of being and doing, he is our equal, our brother, Hellport."

Lee smiled contentedly at the announcement.

"In the house of the boar resides Louie, he who transcends adversity. Likewise, his resilience will inspire us all not to succumb to despair. The enduring soul of us, our brother Cricket." Beau said reverently.

Louie beamed at the definition of him and his team name.

"In the house of the rat resides Jesus, who at a glance seems to be the least human of us. At the core, he is perhaps the most, our brother Vile." Beau said respectfully.

//You're really getting good at this.// Jesus said happily.

As Beau walked to the next diagram, which appeared to most to be empty, he held out his hands and received the large piece of nygo-husk webbing from Tara.

"In the house of the ox resides Piotr, whose death closed the door on more things than I can know. Here, we open a new door, so that our brother, Fallen, may rise from the ashes of his destruction and once again bring goodness into the world." Beau said reverently, then with his last word, cast the shroud like a fishing

net high at the seemingly empty space within the spell diagram.

"With this shroud I house the freed essence of one held dear. I give of my own power to fuse this spirit with the substitute for flesh that we have created. Let it be." Beau said as he held his hands, palms outward, to channel his power into the shroud and Fallen.

There was a long moment when the group held their collective breath, waiting for what was going to happen next.

"Godling, I need a cube... a big one." Beau suddenly called.

"How big?" Quaid asked nervously as he noticed dark clouds rumbling in all around them.

"Surrounding all of us. I think my spell might have pulled in some rain." Beau said as he glanced at the suddenly darkening sky.

As Quaid made a grand expressive gesture, an enormous cube surrounded them just in time to stop a deluge of torrential rain from pouring in on them.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone watched the heavy rain pounding on the outside of the cube.

"What do we need to do next?" Ms. Mordigan asked, breaking the long silence.

"Nothing. It's done." Beau said as he gestured toward the black shrouded figure standing in the spell diagram for the house of the ox.

"Peter? Is that you?" Lee asked cautiously.

"If I understand correctly, no. Now I am Fallen."

[Chapter 27: Being and Been]

//I heard that.// Jesus said in surprise.

"Now that Fallen's spirit is anchored to a physical object, it creates a bridge from the spiritual plane to the physical plane." Beau explained.

"Is it okay if we leave our spell boxes now?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's done. The ceremony's over. You can go anywhere you want." Beau said with a smile of accomplishment.

"You... you really captured a ghost?" Cynthia asked as she stared wide-eyed at the enormous shrouded black figure.

"It's more like he made the shroud absorbent so that Fallen's spiritual energy could soak into it and permanently become part of it." Tara gently explained.

"When I came here, I knew about the mutant thing... I never had a problem with that. It's a new field of medical study and I thought I might gain some valuable experience and get in on the ground floor..."

Cynthia babbled, but fell silent when the shrouded figure approached her.

"Be at ease, good lady. I am no threat to you. I wish you no harm." Fallen said in a low, sultry voice.

"Oh, okay. I thought they were grieving... I just didn't expect..." Cynthia stammered as she continued to stare disbelievingly.

"I am called Fallen. These surrounding me are members of my team." Fallen said gently.

"My name is Cynthia, but my friends call me Thia."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance Cynthia..."

"I'd really like it if you'd call me Thia." She said timidly.

"I am honored that you wish it to be so. Thank you, Thia." Fallen said warmly.

"Fallen, if you're done flirting, I think we need to get these guys back to the mansion before we miss lunch." Lee said with a playful grin.

//Lunch service is nearly complete. I've had them set some food aside for you. There is no need for you to rush.// Professor Xavier informed the group.

"You've got telepaths all over the place here, don't you?" Bobbo asked curiously as he looked around.

"Probably about as many as we have big dumb jocks." Steve said with a playful grin at him.

Bobbo considered that for a moment, then slowly said, "Meaning that *what* you are doesn't make you *who* you are."

"Is that what I meant? Wow, I'm really getting all kinds of deep and stuff, ain't I?" Steve asked playfully.

"If you'll all cross through the MedLab door, I'm going to close the portals. I think that Dawn, Tara and I all have jobs that we need to get back to. Have the professor give me a yell if you need me for anything." Andrew said pleasantly.

"You're not going to do anything about my magic?" Beau asked cautiously.

"You said that you're only going to use it when it's the right tool for the job. I think that's a fair and responsible way of approaching it, so I'll hang back. Later on, if it becomes a problem, we'll talk again." Andrew said seriously.

"Thank you, Andrew, but can you hold on for just a minute more? I can't go yet. I need to get the spellcasting supplies put back into the gingerbread house." Beau said as he looked around.

"Everyone doesn't have to wait for you. Quaid and I can hang back and help you, then hell surf us back to the mansion when we're done." Lee quietly offered.

"That sounds great. Thanks guys." Beau said sincerely.

"Excuse me, but I am not aware of a great many things. Should I remain here with you or go with the others?" Fallen asked Beau helplessly.

"That's up to you. But I can understand that you're feeling adrift right now. Until you're ready to be on your own, I'm sure that any member of the team would be happy to have you go with them." Beau said seriously.

"Perhaps it would be best for me to go with Lisa, since it is for her sake that I have been resurrected." Fallen said slowly.

"She's your partner on the team. When we're training, you'll be expected to work with her. That's it. In your off-time, you're free to do whatever you feel like."

Beau explained as the rest of the team waited for Fallen's decision.

"I am at a loss..." Fallen trailed off weakly.

"You can come with me if you want. We can cruise around the mansion and take bets on which one of us is going to be more uncomfortable around our old teammates when we finally run into them." Steve said frankly.

"This sounds like something to be avoided." Fallen said uncertainly.

"Yeah! Good idea! We could run away to Havana and change our names to Zozo and Benny. We could start new lives as free-lance chiropractors. That'd make everything alright, wouldn't it?" Steve asked with a smile.

"I remember you now. You were so small and so... different. I was afraid for you." Fallen said thoughtfully, then quietly added, "You've grown."

"It's only been a couple weeks since the last time you saw me." Steve said hesitantly.

"You're more confident now, more of your own person." Fallen said carefully.

"Maybe so." Steve tentatively agreed, then asked, "So, what d'ya say, Zozo? Do you want to hide from your problems or face them?"

"I will go to the mansion with you, and should we encounter our former teammates, we will stand forward and face them together." Fallen said firmly.

"Actually, I was kinda hoping you'd pick Havana, I hear it's beautiful this time of year. But yeah, you're probably right. This'll be a whole lot easier."

"I have my doubts about *that*." Fallen said hesitantly.

"Fallen, before we go, I need to know if you can move around alright." Beau said seriously.

"It is strange. I have no sense of moving my legs, yet I seem to move much the same as I did before." Fallen slowly explained.

"Before you go off on your own, would you allow Lisa to wear your shroud for a few seconds? I just want to see if it works the way that it's supposed to." Beau said seriously.

"Yes. I suppose it would be best..." Fallen trailed off as he drifted in Lisa's direction.

"Do I have to do anything?" Lisa asked anxiously.

"Not that I know of. I've done everything that I can to give you access to Fallen's abilities and to give him access to the world of the living. I know how I planned for things to work, but... from here on out, we take what we've ended up with and do our best to make the most of it." Beau said frankly.

"He has no clue." Seth paraphrased.

"Just do what you can and let me know if you're having trouble with anything." Beau said seriously.

"Are you ready?" Fallen asked Lisa cautiously.

"Yeah. But just remember, I'm stronger than I look. Don't hold back because I'm a girl." Lisa said seriously.

"As you wish." Fallen said respectfully, then his shroud seemed to engulf Lisa in one fluid movement.

"Can you move?" Beau asked curiously.

"We're still negotiating. Give us a moment." The dark figure said in a voice that was neither Lisa's nor Fallen's.

"Fallen, listen to Lisa. Amplify her reactions." Brian quietly coached.

The new being had Fallen's coloring, but Lisa's size and general shape. The shroud didn't seem to be draped over her, but more like it was 'bonded' to her, encasing her.

"Let us try something." The combined being said seriously, then began to fluidly move through a series of precise poses.

"Tai Chi?" Bobbo asked curiously as he watched their movements with interest.

"A variation thereof. It is something I, the part of me that is Fallen, learned in hope of gaining some grace in my... his movements, due to my big clumsy size."

"Maybe we could get together sometime and you could show me that. It looks like something that I could do." Bobbo said with obvious interest.

"Since you are helping to care for Marc, I am certain that we will have many opportunities to do so." The combined being said in a voice that was decidedly more Fallen's.

"That shows us that Fallen can move, but can Lisa do something?" Marc asked with concern.

"I don't know any fancy graceful moves like Fallen does, but I know how to run. Who wants to race me to the field house and back?" The combined being asked, the tone and inflection sounding much more like Lisa this time.

"Yeah. I'll race you." Steve said quickly as he slithered forward.

"Do you want to?" Louie asked Jesus on his shoulder.

//I would *love* to.// Jesus said frankly.

"Vile Cricket's in." Louie proclaimed as he and Jesus merged into one being.

"Okay. That's just creepy." Cynthia said in amazement.

"I wish I could race with them." Gar grumbled.

"You're recovering well. In a short time you will be allowed to engage in such activities if you wish." Dr. McCoy gently assured him.

"What d'ya say, Quaid? Wanna join them?" Lee asked with a grin.

"Racing cube!" Quaid called in response as he spread his arms.

"Count Hell-God in." Lee said with satisfaction.

"Shouldn't we have a name like that too?" The dark creature asked with more of Lisa's voice than Fallen's.

"Remember what I was telling you about before? What about Jackalope? Even though you don't have the antlers, I'd say you're close enough." Beau asked with a grin.

There was a long pause until they finally said, "It is a *good* name. It has character and a mythology behind it. I accept."

"Anybody else want to get in on the race?" Beau asked as he looked around.

"I'm not usually one to back away from a physical challenge, but I suspect that they might be a bit out of my league." Bobbo said honestly.

"Beau, you call it." Steve said loudly as he turned himself to face toward the field house.

Jackalope, Hell-God, and Vile Cricket lined up beside him to await the countdown.

After a moment to confirm that everyone was ready, Beau called out, "Ready? 3... 2... 1... Go!"

As the competitors sped away, Vile Cricket was immediately in the lead, leaving a trail of spray hanging in the air.

"Andrew, if you want to go on back, Hell-God can take us to the mansion when the race is over." Slash said as he stepped up to the portal where Marc and Gar were laying with their entourage watching over them.

"Are you kidding? Do you even know how boring it is in MedLab? If you try to make us go back without seeing the end of the race, Marc and I will make you pay." Gar said as a vow.

"Considering how fast they move, it should only take an extra minute or two." Dr. McCoy said in support of his patients.

"I guess anyone who *needs* to go back, can just walk through the portal whenever they want. It won't hurt if I hang back for a few minutes." Andrew relented.

Slash looked around to find that, as expected, no one chose to leave before the end of the race.

"If you like, you can look at this as a practical way of gauging their abilities." Dr. McCoy said informatively.

"Who do you think's gonna win?" Gar asked excitedly.

"I don't know. Vile Cricket has the most speed in a sprint, but I don't know how long he can maintain top speed. On the other hand, Steve seems to be able to move faster than usual in the wet grass." Slash said thoughtfully, then looked to Brian and asked, "Do you have any insights into the matter?"

"It could go a few different ways. Even though I'm not going to use my ability to influence things, I'm rooting for Steve." Brian said frankly.

"You know, with all the outrageous abilities that everyone has, I think I'd like to see him win." Ms. Mordigan said with a soft smile at the thought.

"I have to root for Lisa, it's part of my job as her boyfriend, but I wouldn't mind it if Steve won." Marc said thoughtfully.

"From the way they took off from here, I'd bet Jackalope's going to take it. They set a really good pace." Seth said thoughtfully.

"So I'm guessing that you don't have any superspeed powers like that." Bobbo asked Seth curiously.

"Not exactly." Seth said simply, then seemed to wink out of existence.

Bobbo looked around to try and find where he had gone, when Seth's voice said from behind him, "I'm better at short distances."

Bobbo turned to find Seth standing beside Marc's bed.

"How you doin'?" Seth asked Marc gently.

"Pretty good. You know, besides the whole being shot thing." Marc said as he matched Seth's tone.

"Yeah." Seth said sympathetically, then added more firmly, "Be sure to let us know if you need anything."

"You seem to be a lot more confident than you were yesterday." Marc quietly observed.

"Yeah, yesterday I was a regular guy who had horns all of a sudden. Today, I'm part of a team. They're willing to trust me and help me learn how to help people." Seth said happily.

"Jackalope was the first to touch the field house, followed closely by Steve. Hell-God materialized, but

never actually 'touched' the field house, so I don't think they can be counted as qualifying." Andrew said distantly as his eyes glowed golden.

"What about Vile Cricket?" Brian asked with concern.

"They were the last to tap in, but they *did* reach the halfway point and are still in the race." Andrew announced.

"Do you have any way of keeping an eye on Vile Cricket? Going full-blast for too long could be dangerous for them." Brian asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'll follow along just to be sure that they don't run into trouble." Andrew said seriously.

A burst of flames and plumes of orange smoke drew everyone's attention to the central clearing.

When the smoke cleared, it revealed Lee and Quaid standing inside a smoky blue and white cube.

"We did it! We won!" Quaid crowed.

"Hold on. Even though you went there and back, you didn't get out of your cube and touch the field house, so you didn't 'officially' win." Andrew said carefully as he continued to stare with glowing golden eyes.

"Nobody said anything about us having to touch the field house." Lee said in their defense.

"You can look at it as if you had won if you want to, but unless all the competitors are flying, I don't see it as being a fair contest. The others tapped in, you didn't." Andrew said reasonably.

"Next time, we'll get out and touch the field house." Lee told Quaid gently.

"We didn't win?" Quaid asked confusedly.

"Your ability is so good that it puts you in a different league. It's not fair to other people to compare you to them." Lee carefully explained.

"Okay. I actually understand that. I mean, no matter what powers I have or don't have, deep inside, I'm still Q." Quaid said seriously.

"Maybe so, but you won that race without Q powers. You won it with your totally cool, ultra impressive mutant ability." Lee said with a smile.

"Yeah." Quaid agreed, then gave Lee a firm hug.

* * * * *

A sudden movement caused everyone to turn in unison.

"Did we win?" Jackalope asked while breathing heavily.

"That's kind of up in the air..." Beau said reluctantly as he looked at Lee and Quaid, who were still hugging.

"You won." Lee said decisively.

"Yeah. Good job, you two." Quaid confirmed.

"Aww man! I really thought you'd start slowing down on the way back." Steve said as he slithered up behind them.

Jackalope began to slightly expand, then Fallen separated himself from Lisa.

"We would have fallen behind, if I had been making the decisions on my own." Fallen said seriously, then explained, "Lisa knew just how much effort to apply and how much energy to conserve. It was a valuable learning experience for me."

"Even before... this, me being like this, I mean, I liked to run. Right before my mutation kicked in, I was training to run in a full marathon... well, I was starting to train, just a little." Lisa timidly admitted.

"Maybe when we start our training for the team you could show the rest of us how to pace ourselves so that we don't wear out too soon." Steve suggested.

"Speaking of which..." Andrew said as he made a show of looking in the direction of the field house.

"I thought we were faster than that." Vile Cricket said as they hurried to join the others.

As before, their smudged blackened form didn't appear to be entirely stable. Even the tattered black cape that they wore didn't appear to be in its final form.

"Steve was just saying that we need to get Lisa to teach us how to pace ourselves and conserve our strength when we run so that we don't run out of juice before the race is finished." Beau said frankly.

"I thought we figured all that out when we ran to the mansion for cleaning supplies." Vile Cricket said frankly as the blackness began to fade.

Within a few seconds, Jesus and Louie were sitting side by side, panting on the ground.

"That might be why you're so tired out now. Maybe you need to rest up more before you go on another long run." Slash said frankly.

"It looks to me like Fallen and Lisa have proven that their combined form is capable of functioning well enough. That being said, *some* of us have classes that we need to attend." Andrew said frankly, then continued, "Now that everyone's back, I'm going to be closing the portal."

"Lee, would you mind hell surfing the team back to the mansion when we're done getting Beau's stuff put away?" Seth asked curiously.

"What do you say, Quaid? Do you think we can handle that?" Lee asked with a smile.

"Hang on. Just a minute. I'd like to spend some time with Marc, if no one minds." Lisa hurried to say.

//I'll call you when we get there.// Jesus said decisively.

When it was obvious that no one had the slightest problem with her suggestion, Lisa hurried through the portal to stand beside Marc's hospital bed.

"Do you think it would be alright if Emily could visit with us for a while?" Dawn asked with a smile in the ghost's direction.

When Beau noticed that Emily seemed to be interested, he said, "Sure. She can visit with you if she wants."

Those present watched as Beau and Dawn followed Emily with their eyes.

Ms. Mordigan glanced around the group, then slowly started toward the open portal.

"Don't you want to come with us?" Quaid asked suddenly.

"I thought that this was something that you would want to do with your team." Ms. Mordigan quietly replied.

"You're part of our team. Hellport already told you that." Louie said quickly.

"Yeah. Let us show you what we can do." Quaid quickly added.

"If you're sure you wouldn't mind having me along." Ms. Mordigan said uncertainly.

"Actually, I think having two mythical beasts sharing time and working in harmony is probably the best thing we can do for ourselves as individuals and as members of the team." Beau said frankly.

"Many times such alliances turn out to be a wise investment." Ms. Mordigan said thoughtfully.

"We'll leave you to your work now." Andrew said as the oversized portal to the MedLab closed.

* * * * *

After a few minutes of gathering the brazier and an odd variety of small items back into the gingerbread house, Beau took another couple of minutes to make sure that everything was properly stored and that the evidence of his summoning diagram inside the door had been swept away.

"How's the book?" Seth asked Steve curiously.

"I don't know. It reminds me of a few other books that I've read where the author gets so involved in describing the setting that he forgets to include a plot." Steve said slowly as he maintained the majority of his focus on the book.

"Yeah. I remember reading something like that. They spend, like, a page and a half describing the couch cushions or something." Seth said sourly.

"Don't get me wrong, there are some really vivid descriptions in here, the only thing is that once you've

pictured them, in all their glorious detail, nothing happens. You've got this really vivid picture that just sits there."

"As pictures are sometimes known to do." Slash interjected.

Steve looked at him curiously for a moment, then slowly said, "I guess if you look at this book like a photo album or a gallery and don't expect it to be anything else, then it's actually pretty awesome. There are some really beautiful and creative pictures in here."

"So you're appreciating visual art from a book with no pictures." Seth said slowly.

"It takes a little more work, but the beauty you end up seeing is all yours. No one else will ever see exactly the same thing that you did because everyone would interpret the descriptions their own way." Steve said honestly, then turned to Fallen and asked, "I hope we're not boring you. Are you okay hanging with us like this?"

"Yes. Although I am still uncertain what I should be saying or doing in this type of situation. Even before my... before, I was uncomfortable in a group setting." Fallen quietly admitted.

"Yeah. I'm not great in groups either. Usually I just pay enough attention to know what I'm there for, then I use the rest of my time trying to plot an escape." Steve finished with a smile.

"Although I don't recall thinking of it in those terms, I believe I might have unknowingly used the same strategy." Fallen said thoughtfully.

"I'm done!" Beau called out triumphantly as he stepped out of the gingerbread house.

"Are you ready to go?" Lee asked curiously.

"Actually, I was thinking that this might be a good time to let Chesser give us a heads up about what might be waiting up ahead for us." Beau said seriously as he approached the group.

"Just, in general? You don't have a specific question?" Brian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Just give us a hint if you see any undead hoards, pitchfork waving mobs or evil gopher infestations in our possible futures." Beau said frankly.

"You're weird." Quaid said to Beau with a grin.

"Thanks." Beau responded, then waited as Brian seemed to be counting off a particular number of playing cards before turning one up to look at it.

"Ouch." Brian winced, then went back to counting off cards.

"Tell us. What do you see?" Slash asked curiously.

"Nothing that can be easily avoided. Most of it seems necessary. The only advice I can give you based on this is to go to the mansion, do what we have to do, then get back to the Wagner School as quickly as possible. The longer we stay here, the worse things will be." Brian said carefully.

"Worse? How?" Seth asked with concern.

"Don't worry. It doesn't involve you. I have a feeling that Fallen and Steve know what I'm talking about. We need to go, do, and get the hell out." Brian said firmly.

"I've got the 'hell' part covered." Lee said with a grin.

"My dad would have liked your sense of humor." Quaid said with a look up at him.

"Ouch! Okay, point taken. I'll try to make sure that my jokes are actually funny before I say them." Lee said reluctantly.

Quaid's only response was a grand smile of accomplishment.

* * * * *

"Is everyone ready?" Beau asked as he looked around.

"You should have some kind of battle cry like we did with the attacks that we planned." Seth said honestly.

"How do you mean?" Beau asked curiously.

"When you want us to get into 'cube formation' you could call out one or two words and we'd all know what you're talking about." Seth explained.

"I think I've done everything that I said I was going to do. Why don't you decide what our call to assemble should be?" Beau asked reasonably.

"Does anyone mind?" Seth asked uncertainly as he looked around.

//Just go ahead and do it. If anyone has a problem with it, they can tell you.// Jesus said frankly.

"Okay. Does anyone know what you call a group of Meerkats? Are they, like, a herd or a litter or what?" Seth asked uncertainly.

There was a long moment of silence as the members of the group looked at each other, hoping that someone knew.

//Meerkats group themselves into 'Mobs' or 'Gangs'.//
Professor Xavier said informatively.

"Those little punks." Lee said with an amused grin.

"How about, 'Meerkats, stand tall'?" Seth asked seriously.

"What kind of sense does that make?" Slash asked curiously.

"It'd be kinda stupid to call out, 'We're all going to stand in a little group where one grenade can take us all out at once.'" Seth said frankly.

"So the 'Stand Tall' order is letting us know to get together so Godling can put a cube around us?" Louie asked seriously.

"Yeah. What do you think?" Seth asked with sincere interest in Louie's opinion.

"Meerkats! Stand tall!" Louie called out loudly enough so that everyone present could hear.

As expected, the group clustered together, not crowding each other, but obviously consciously trying not to be too spread out.

"Team cube!" Quaid said firmly as he made a gesture.

As soon as the cube formed, Lee turned toward the mansion and raised his hands as a doorway into hell formed before them.

"Zoom zoom." Quaid said with a mischievous grin, then the cube launched itself through the opening at high speed.

* * * * *

Slash had his eyes firmly closed, but didn't seem to be nervous about their trip otherwise.

Ms. Mordigan wore a smile of mild amusement, and perhaps a slight glint of reminiscing.

"This isn't too fast for you is it, Fallen?" Seth asked with a smile.

"Perhaps it would have been at one time, but no longer." Fallen said simply.

"Yeah. He has nothing to fear from this, he's already dead." Beau helpfully added.

"Also, I no longer have bowels." Fallen added with deadpan delivery.

There was a moment of silence before Lee started the infectious laughter that overtook the cube.

* * * * *

"Over there, that way. See that flat patch?" Lee called as he pointed.

"Got it!" Quaid announced, then swiveled and tilted the cube to glide in for a textbook landing.

"Then we're back to reality." Lee said as the hellish world around them dissolved into the driveway in front of the mansion.

"We're going to have to try 'husk surfing' one of these days." Seth said frankly.

"Yes. But not today." Lee said firmly.

"Yeah. We've got things to do... Like lunch." Louie finished with a smile.

"You can't possibly be hungry again already." Lee said disbelievingly.

"Oh yes I can. Being Vile Cricket makes me hungry." Louie said in his defense.

After a moment to consider, Lee finally said, "Fair enough."

"Steve, since you're from this place, do you know where we can go for food?" Seth asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's probably set out for us in the dining room. I'll show you where it is." Steve said as he slithered forward to the door.

* * * * *

"Steve may live here, but Quaid, Slash, and I are all familiar with the mansion too." Lee said as they followed Steve inside.

"As am I." Fallen said as he glided along beside them.

"Yeah. He was here long before I was." Lee said seriously.

"While that may be true, I doubt that Fallen feels much like leading at the moment. Give him a chance

to get himself up-to-date with his new situation." Ms. Mordigan said seriously.

"It's right in here." Steve said from ahead of the group, obviously relishing a chance to make a unique contribution.

As Steve passed through the doorway he suddenly stopped.

The people following him weren't expecting the abrupt stall and stumbled over each other in their attempt not to fall into a heap in the doorway.

Before anyone could ask what had happened, Steve looked back over his shoulder and quietly said, "Fallen, I'm going to need you up here."

* * * * *

"How may I be of assistance." Fallen asked as he easily glided past the other members of the group to Steve's side.

"You know that thing we were talking about before?" Steve asked quietly, then pointed into the dining room as he said, "This is my former team."

"I am here to stand with you, as are we all." Fallen said firmly and confidently.

"Okay. I can do this." Steve said as he started to slither into the room again.

"The professor said that you've been recruited to another team." A woman who was their leader, or teacher, said firmly.

"Yeah." Steve reluctantly admitted, then looked back over his shoulder and said, "Guys, this is my old team, they really don't have a name of their own. I think everyone calls them 'The X-Men,Team B'."

Before the silence could become too uncomfortable, Steve continued, "This is Miss Sloss. Her team name is Olympia. Behind her are Herman, Felicity, Grace, Mira and Mung."

Steve's statement didn't seem to require a response, so everyone from both groups stared stupidly at each other until Steve continued, "This is my new team, the Meerkats. We've got Fallen, Slash, Seth, Brian, Quaid, Lee, Louie, and the rat is Jesus. We've also got our school administrator and mentor, Ms. Mordigan."

"So what? Did they promise to make you their leader or did they just laugh at your stupid jokes and pretend that they like you?" The short, stout, hunched-over, young man hissed in a mocking tone.

"They didn't say I could be in charge, but they said that I can speak up if I've got a good idea about how things should go." Steve said frankly, then added, "As far as the jokes, Quaid and Lee have made it so that my jokes seem almost funny."

"Glad I could help." Lee said under his breath.

"So what are you doing here? Are you just trying to throw it in our faces that you got onto a 'real' team?" Mung continued.

"No. We missed lunch. We came here for the food." Steve said simply, then thought to ask, "What are you doing here?"

"Professor Xavier told us that you had chosen to join another team and said that we could meet you here to discuss it with you." Miss Sloss said seriously.

"We got to talking and kinda clicked. There's not much more to it than that." Steve said simply.

"Think carefully about what you're doing. This is your home. You have a history with our team." Miss Sloss said slowly.

"Um, yeah. History. That's what we've got. With my new team, I've got a future... or at least I've got a shot at one. I'm willing to take that chance." Steve said frankly.

"Can we go ahead and eat? The food's *right* there." Louie asked imploringly.

"Yeah. I think I've said what I need to." Steve said as he looked at the expressions of his former teammates. Mung seemed to be boiling with rage, but that wasn't out of character for him. The others exhibited varying degrees of disinterest.

"Miss Sloss, this doesn't have anything to do with how you ran the team. I'm just ready for something else." Steve said frankly.

After a long moment to consider his words, Miss Sloss quietly said, "Let us know if you need anything."

"Oh come on! You're not going to let him get away with this are you? Tell him 'no!'. Make him stay with us!" Mung barked.

"Watch out. He can turn you to stone and he doesn't have the best self-control." Steve quickly warned.

"Mung, walk it back. Remember what I've told you." Ms. Sloss said slowly.

"Meerkats! Stand tall!" Quaid called out firmly.

As soon as everyone had pulled together, Quaid called out, "Stone cube!"

Immediately, a solid gray cube formed around them.

"I hope that the cube *being* stone will keep him from turning any of us to stone." Quaid said seriously.

"Wanna go sideways?" Seth asked the group.

"Do it!" Lee said simply.

There was a bright flash and the group found themselves in the nygo-husk, without the cube.

"But what about the food?" Louie whined.

"As soon as we know it's safe, we can go back." Lee assured him.

"Either that, or I'll make the dining room table go sideways too." Seth said with a smile.

"Can you see what they're doing?" Slash asked curiously.

"They're talking to Mung. It looks like they're getting him under control." Lee said slowly.

"Don't take us back until they're gone." Brian said seriously.

"Do you think he's going to try and attack Steve?" Slash asked with concern.

"I see that happening in more than one possible future." Brian said honestly.

"So you knew about this?" Ms. Mordigan asked cautiously.

"I knew that something like this *could* happen, I didn't know that it would. That's how it works. Now that I know which future we're in, I can see a lot of different ways that it can go. We need to wait right here until Mung has left the dining room." Brian said confidently.

"What about the food? Did you see anything about that?" Louie asked anxiously.

"Seth? Would you mind?" Brian asked with a restrained smile.

"No problem. I got this." Seth said as he glanced in the direction of the dining room table.

After abrupt flashes of golden and blue light, the dining room table appeared in the nygo-husk dimension.

* * * * *

Steve's old team were mostly forgotten as the Meerkats helped themselves to the buffet of soups, salad, coldcut sandwiches, and a variety of chips to choose from.

"You know what is to come?" Fallen asked Brian cautiously.

"Yeah. I can see lots of things, but I know what you're asking. Usually I'm all about nudging things one way or the other and giving people hints about which way they should go. But I know that you've had a hard day, so why don't I just lay it out for you?"

"Yes. Would you please?" Fallen asked hopefully.

"When we go back, if you leave right away you can avoid your former teammates. Hide out in MedLab and we'll take you back to the Wagner Institute when we're ready to leave." Brian said simply.

"And my other choice is to remain here and face my old teammates." Fallen quietly guessed.

"You've had a hard day. If you choose to go, you'll be forgiven. Of course, if you choose to stay, you won't need to be forgiven. It's totally up to you." Brian said honestly.

"This is your only power, to see the future?" Fallen asked curiously.

"I can also make people forget that they ever met me." Brian said honestly.

"Such a gift would be of much use to me in this situation." Fallen said frankly.

Brian looked at him sympathetically, then quietly said, "It's the coward's way out. Believe me."

[Chapter 28: Due Change]

When Lee, Seth, and Jesus could confirm that the B Team had finally left, Seth brought the Meerkats and the table of food back to the dining room.

"You know, once all the craziness is done, maybe we could go on picnics or campouts in the nygo-husk sometimes. It's kinda creepy and cool there. I bet it'd be fun." Louie said happily.

"I might *have to* camp out there if I can't find another place to stay." Steve said frankly.

"You don't have to worry about that. We have plenty of room at the boathouse. Everyone stayed there last night, so there's no doubt that we can find a place for you." Lee said encouragingly.

"That is, as long as sharing a room with someone who gets turned off and plugged into a charger at night doesn't creep you out." Seth quietly added.

"That's just you. No one else has a problem with it." Lee told him with a grin.

"All joking aside, I'll talk to Julia and make sure that you won't have to stay on couches and in guest rooms

for more than a night or two. I will personally see to it that you will have a space that you can call your own." Ms. Mordigan promised.

"And if you think about it, we're all kind of in the same boat with you. We never even got to spend a night in our rooms before the shooting and everything happened." Beau said honestly.

"You don't need to be worryin' bout that no more." A voice said from the doorway.

The group turned to see Matt entering the room with his teenage entourage following closely behind.

"Did you find who was shooting at us?" Beau asked hesitantly, not wanting to reveal what he already knew.

"We found some things. Those task force guys ended up with the actual shooter and his weaselly little partner. The one who put them up to it seems to have gotten away." Matt reported emotionlessly.

"So, does that mean that we're going to have to be looking over our shoulders all the time to see if she's got someone else going to shoot us?" Louie asked anxiously.

"Nope. I said that she *seems* to have gotten away."

Matt said simply, obviously not wanting to expound on the subject.

"What should we tell the task force?" Seth asked cautiously.

"There's no reason you should know anything about it. I doubt that they'll ask. But it'd probably be best if you didn't volunteer what you know about *her*." Matt said with a pointed look at Beau.

"Peter?" Bobby quietly asked from over Matt's shoulder.

"Let it go, Bobby. He's gone." John said sympathetically.

"Perhaps not. The person before us appears to have exactly the same dimensions as Peter." Robert stated as a simple fact.

"This illusion or hologram does not register as having any mass nor does it have a heat signature." Trey said curiously.

"What do you say, Fallen? Are you ready for this?" Steve asked as he moved to Fallen's side.

"No. But that does not negate the need to face it."

Fallen said solemnly.

"Damn skippy." Steve said confidently.

"Peter, is that you?" Bobby asked as he stepped around Matt.

"I am sorry. The person you knew as Peter is dead. What I am now was created using what was left of his essence that had been roaming the Earth without purpose." Fallen said in a low, regretful voice.

"It's you. I can see you. I can hear you." Bobby said as he took another step forward to stand directly in front of Fallen.

"Be that as it may, who I am now is not the same person that you remember. As nice as it might be to pretend, it would not be fair to any of us." Fallen insisted.

"Look me in the eyes and tell me that you're not my friend." Bobby dared him.

Before Fallen could respond, Bobby reached forward and pulled on the shroud to reveal what was hiding underneath... which was nothing.

"Where did he go?" Bobby asked as he released the edge of the shroud and looked around to detect where Peter had gone.

After a long moment, the shroud began to rise from the floor, once again appearing to drape loosely over Piotr's body.

"You're not really here? Am I dreaming this?" Bobby asked disjointedly as he stared in wonder, and a bit of fright, at what was happening before him.

"I cannot tell you that you are not my friend, Bobby. I would never wish to say that. I am simply doing my best to navigate my new situation. I would not wish for you to believe that things are as they once were." Fallen fought to explain.

"But you're still my friend?" Bobby asked to confirm.

"Yes, Bobby. But please just try to keep in mind that things are not as they were before. Not only has my situation changed, but so has my physiology. Without particular pains and hungers to drive me, my resulting decisions are bound to be different." Fallen fought to explain.

"Do you want for us to stay away from you?" Clark asked hesitantly.

"No. I simply want for you to understand that I will not be able to pick up where *he* left off." Fallen said urgently.

"Who did this to you?" John asked darkly.

"I did." Beau said firmly.

"We all helped." Slash quickly added.

"You should have just let him rest in peace." John said with a disturbed look in Fallen's direction.

"If he were at peace, there wouldn't have been anything for me to do." Beau said simply.

"We didn't steal him from heaven, we saved him from becoming nothing." Seth hurried to explain.

"Please don't be angry at them for saving me. They didn't do this simply out of the goodness of their hearts. They had no reason to have anything to do with my spirit. The truth is, a member of their team was lacking the training and skill to effectively use her mutant ability. By giving my spirit a physical form, they have given me the opportunity to perform a

unique and valued service. Please allow me the time to adapt to my new circumstance. There is much that is still uncertain for me." Fallen said thoughtfully.

"I am interested to know how you were able to transfer Peter's thought processes into this fabric and further how you are able to animate the fabric to take on Peter's features." Robert said honestly.

"Do you believe in magic?" Beau asked simply.

"I can't say that I understand it, but I've seen the application of it with my own eyes, so yes, I believe." Robert said frankly.

"Then you have your answer. I did all of it by way of magic, plain and simple." Beau said seriously.

//It was neither.// Jesus interjected.

"But the explanation is." Beau countered.

//I suppose.// Jesus relented.

"It doesn't matter what you *say*, you hurt our friend. We can't let you get away with that." John said as he flicked his lighter and brought forth a small ball of flame into the palm of his hand.

"You don't want to trade fireballs with me. There would be no survivors." Beau quietly warned.

"Robbie, you need to leave now. It looks like we're about to throw down." Bobby said as he shifted to stand in front of Robert and the temperature around him suddenly began to drop.

While Robert took a few steps toward the door, he didn't go so far as to step through.

//If you don't start it, nothing will happen.// Jesus said simply.

"You already started it by yanking Peter out of his grave." Ronny said frankly with his fists balled at his sides.

"Guys, can you hang on just a minute? I think there's something going on here." Steve interrupted.

"This is kind of important, Steve. We're trying to figure out if you saved our friend or desecrated his spirit." Clark said seriously.

"It doesn't matter what we did or what you decide about it, we're probably going to end up in a fight. But what's bothering me right now is that I'm feeling

something that I have no reason to feel." Steve fought to explain.

//You believe that someone is empathetically manipulating us?// Jesus asked cautiously.

"Yes. And when you put it that way, I think I know who it is." Steve said frankly.

//Quite right, Steven. Your former teammate, Ermenegildo, seems to not want you to leave his team.// Professor Xavier said slowly.

"Yeah. It feels like him, except that he usually isn't this subtle about it." Steve said speculatively.

//It appears that he was attempting to influence your groups without anyone, be it telepath or otherwise, noticing his manipulation.// Professor Xavier said more assuredly.

"When I felt my anger growing toward John and Bobby, I knew that something was wrong. I've never felt anything but admiration for both of them and I have no reason to be mad at them." Steve finished timidly.

"Your former teammate must be a very good friend to you to take such a risk on your behalf." Fallen said slowly.

"Actually, no." Steve said simply, then explained, "Herman's never cared anything about me. I think that he just doesn't want for things to change. Maybe he's afraid that if I leave, that the whole team will come crashing down, because we were barely holding together before."

//It's okay Professor. I can block him if you want. I just didn't notice him there before.// Jesus said confidently.

//I will leave it in your capable hands... or forepaws, as the case may be. Meanwhile, I will take the opportunity to reevaluate the dynamics of the B Team.//

"Please don't be too hard on them, Professor. They're just afraid of change." Steve said anxiously.

//Perhaps. But change is sometimes necessary. When a system becomes ineffective and stagnant, change will erupt to dislodge whatever is blocking progress, a *mutation* if you will.// Professor Xavier helpfully explained.

"Were you waiting for this to happen?" Steve asked curiously.

//I was waiting for *something* to happen. As we were saying earlier, if you attempt to force things to happen before their time, no one is better off for it.// Professor Xavier said sagely.

"So, how you doin, Pete?" John asked awkwardly.

"I am called 'Fallen' now. Please, let the person who I was be at rest. The person who I am now, will continue forward on the new and unlikely path that I've found myself on." Fallen said carefully.

"So, you're okay?" John asked hesitantly.

"Many things are uncertain, but of those things that I am aware, I am content." Fallen said carefully.

"You know that if you need us, we'll be here for you, right?" Bobby asked gently.

"Yes. I know. Likewise, if you should have need of me, I will be willing to help." Fallen said carefully.

There was a long moment of awkward silence, before Ms. Mordigan hesitantly asked, "Matt, am I to

understand that the danger to the students has been eliminated?"

"Eliminated, yeah. That's right." Matt said shortly.

"So there's no reason we couldn't take the students back to the Wagner Institute right now, is there?" Ms. Mordigan asked in a leading tone.

"None that I know of. Last I heard, Julia and Kurt just about have the gas leak fiasco sorted out. I'm not sure if the task force guys have released the crime scene yet, but I can't think of any reason for them to keep it locked down now." Matt said speculatively.

"Don't forget about Lisa. We didn't tell her when we got here." Louie said quickly.

//Lisa, we got sidetracked when we arrived. Would you like to come upstairs to the dining room or would you like for us to bring you a sandwich?// Jesus asked carefully.

After a long silent moment, Jesus said to the group, // She's on her way up.//

"Ms. Mordigan..." Matt began to say when he was interrupted.

"Please, call me Mad. Remember?"

"Yeah, Mad, the original plan was for my guys here to attend classes with the new students to help them adjust to being in a new place in an unfamiliar situation. But since the new guys have been able to come together as a team and accomplish their goals, do you think that there's any point to them all being grouped together now?" Matt asked curiously.

"Yes. I'm aware of the academic accommodations that Julia was planning. While there may not be the anticipated need for your Junior X-Men to handhold the Meerkats while they're at school, I believe that both groups have the same need for education that can best be achieved by keeping them together." Ms. Mordigan said thoughtfully.

"Good enough." Matt said easily.

"So what are we going to do now?" Clark asked cautiously.

"If any of you are hungry, you could go ahead and eat. Lisa should be joining us shortly. Then, when everyone has finished, we could go as a group to the Wagner Institute and find out what we can do about

accommodations for the members of the team who aren't already settled in." Ms. Mordigan said decisively.

{Come on.} Louie whispered, then took Quaid by the hand and led him to the table.

"You can't possibly be hungry again." Lee said incredulously.

"Yes I can." Louie said simply, then proceeded to load a plate with food.

"Looks like y'all had best get in there before the new team eats it all." Matt said with a chuckle under his words.

John was next in line behind Quaid, but the non-Borg members of the 'Junior X-Men' were soon to follow.

"You don't have to eat?" Robert asked casually as they watched the others going through the service line.

"No. I have no mouth... or stomach." Fallen reluctantly admitted.

"Do you have to regenerate periodically to recover your expended energy or repair damage?" Robert asked curiously.

"I do not know. I have only existed in this form for approximately an hour. There is much that I have yet to discover." Fallen said quietly.

"Trey and I don't have to eat either. If you start feeling too different from your teammates, you can spend time with us if you like." Robert said seriously.

"It's too soon for me to make any such decision, but I will keep your kind offer in mind." Fallen assured him.

"Did you leave any for me?" Lisa asked as she walked into the dining room.

"You'd better hurry." Beau said as he glanced at the table.

"Even though he wouldn't admit it, I think Marc was needing to get some rest." Lisa said as she walked up to the table and took a plate and silverware.

"That works out, then. As soon as everyone is finished, I can drive you back to the Wagner Institute so that we can sort out what everyone will be doing tonight." Matt said seriously.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Ronny asked as he stepped away from the table.

"That snack earlier took care of me. I'll pick up something later." Matt said simply.

Ronny looked down at his sandwich and considered for a moment, then placed his plate on the table.

"You should go ahead and eat while you've got the chance." Matt encouraged him.

"I'm not really hungry. I was just going to eat because there's food. It's best if I don't pick up that habit." Ronny said seriously.

"Fair enough." Matt said simply.

* * * * *

"Even though things are kind of messed up, at least you won't have to be looking over your shoulder all the time, worrying that someone's going to shoot you." Slash said quietly.

"That's not how things work. Just because Lavinia Loomis is out of the picture doesn't mean that the contract has been rescinded. Sooner or later someone else will take it up." Beau said frankly.

"That's no way to live." Slash said sympathetically.

"These are the cards that I was dealt. I can either play them or live in fear, hiding from everyone and everything for the rest of my life." Beau said a bit sadly.

"And here I thought I had it bad being thrown out on the street when my mutation came out." Slash said frankly.

"You fought your battle and I fought mine. We both did what we had to and survived. That's it." Beau said wearily.

"Well, at least now we can face it together." Slash quietly offered.

"Yeah." Beau grudgingly agreed.

* * * * *

"If everyone's done, why don't we pile into the bus so that we can get this show on the road?" Matt asked as he did a quick head count.

"You don't have to drive us. We can meet you there." Seth said happily.

"Yeah. And we can take your guys with us too..."

Steve easily volunteered, then thought to ask, "...can't we?"

"Yeah. That's no problem." Quaid confirmed.

"Is that alright with you?" Matt asked Ms. Mordigan cautiously.

"I will need to gather my test books and drive my car back to the institute. But I've traveled with the group and found it to be exhilarating." Ms. Mordigan said pleasantly.

"If you're comfortable with it, I've got no problem." Matt said easily.

"Is everybody ready to go?" Quaid asked as he looked around.

"What are you going to do?" Trey asked cautiously.

"We call it 'hell surfing'." Seth said simply.

"Don't worry about it, Trey. It's just a way for us to get from one place to another. Give it a try and if you don't like it, next time you can travel another way." Lee said reasonably.

"If you find this method of travel to be adequate, then I am certain that I will as well." Trey said confidently.

"If anyone isn't up to a ride in the cube, I'm going to be driving over. I wouldn't mind some company." Ms. Mordigan said as she looked around the group.

"Is this going to be dangerous for Robert?" Bobby asked with concern.

"I know that hell surfing bothers Slash a little bit, but he just closes his eyes and seems to be alright with it." Lee said honestly.

"This sounds like something that I'd like to experience with you." Robert said with a timid smile.

"No danger, right?" Bobby asked as he looked Lee in the eyes.

"No danger. I promise. He may be your boyfriend, but he's my *grandson*." Lee said firmly.

"Ready?" Quaid asked uncertainly.

"I need to drive the bus to Wagner's, so we'll have it when we're ready to go." Matt said seriously.

"I'll walk you out." Ms. Mordigan said with a smile in his direction.

"Anyone coming with us?" Matt asked as he looked back at the group.

When no one answered, Matt turned to leave as he said, "We'll meet you at Julia's office. Remember not to go to the dorm until the task force okays it."

"We'll meet you there." Ronny confirmed as he watched Matt and Ms. Mordigan go.

* * * * *

"Meerkats, stand tall." Quaid announced.

Several people moved to be closer to Quaid as others stared at him uncertainly.

"That means to get into formation so that Quaid can put a cube around us." Slash quietly explained.

"Why didn't you just say that?" Lisa asked as she moved in a bit closer to the team.

"It's just like the battle calls we planned before. It's a way of telling you what we're doing without telling the bad guys." Seth explained.

"Is everyone ready?" Quaid asked as he looked around.

"Do it." Lee said with a grin.

"Double team cube!" Quaid called out as he spread his arms wide.

Lee took one last look to confirm that everyone was in place before calling out, "Welcome to hell!"

Rather than pass through a doorway, this time the doorway enveloped them.

The fiery sky illuminated the sandy hellscape as the cube lurched forward.

"That way." Lee said as he pointed.

"Hang on!" Quaid said as he launched the cube into the air at high speed.

"To what?!" Clark squeaked.

"Close your eyes and it's just like standing still." Slash said quietly.

When Clark looked at him, he saw that Slash was calmly standing facing forward with his eyes firmly closed and didn't appear to have a care in the world.

Clark closed his eyes and consciously fought to maintain even breathing.

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"I'm gonna try something!" Quaid yelled excitedly.

"Holy shit!" Ronny yelped.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Seth screamed.

"What's going on?" Clark asked, fighting to keep his eyes closed.

"Rest assured that you are better off not knowing."
Trey said with a note of concern under his words.

"He's skipping us like a flat rock across a lake of lava."
Robert said in a voice that was obviously fighting to sound emotionless.

"Hey! Check this out!" Quaid shouted, then Clark heard multiple gasps, yelps, and a distinctive scream.

"Lisa? Are you alright?" Beau asked with concern.

"I'm fine. That wasn't me." Lisa responded quickly.

//Is it too late to catch a ride with Matt or Mad?//
Jesus asked in a quaking mind/voice.

"Yeah. They're part of our team too, we shouldn't make them feel left out." Steve said anxiously.

"Quaid, you might want to think about saving the more adventurous maneuvers for when you've got

passengers who *want* to be scared half to death. When you've got people who are sensitive to high speeds or radical stunts, you might want to show your respect for them by restraining yourself a little bit." Lee gently suggested.

"Okay. As long as we can go hell surfing some other time for fun." Quaid said thoughtfully.

"Just say when." Lee promised, then thought to add, "And maybe we can bring one or two people along who honestly want to have their wits scared out of them."

"Yeah. More is better." Quaid easily agreed.

"How much longer till we get there?" John asked as he looked around, seemingly trying to see everything at once.

"Five minutes or so. Quaid diverted us a little so he could do that rooster tail." Lee answered simply.

* * * * *

"This place we are going, it is the new school for mutant education?" Fallen asked curiously.

"It's for anyone to get an education. They let regular people in too." Lisa explained.

"I doubt that I will be required to attend classes since I am no longer 'of the living'." Fallen said honestly.

//I'm a rat and I'm going.// Jesus said frankly.

"Do you have to take tests and earn your grade?" Fallen asked curiously.

//Actually, we haven't been to any classes yet, so I don't know what they're going to have us do.// Jesus said honestly.

"Whatever it is, maybe you could do it together, so you don't get too bored while you're waiting on Louie and Lisa to finish their stuff." Seth said seriously.

"Once everything else is settled, I can see about having one or both of you helping me as the liaison between the two schools." Lee said with a grin at them.

//That sounds like it might be interesting. I've never thought about getting a job before.// Jesus said slowly.

"Were things to develop that way, I believe I would not be disappointed." Fallen added seriously.

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"Hold it here for a second. I can't see a spot where we can materialize a group this big without landing on top of someone or something. We may have to go to the gymnasium or find some other large secluded open space." Lee said thoughtfully.

"Or I could just move us to the sideways." Seth said simply.

"Yeah. You could do that, then I could make a doorway so we can walk right into Julia's office, if you want."

"Do you want me to put us down here?" Quaid asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. This is good. We're in the reception area outside Julia's office." Lee said as he looked around with glowing red eyes.

"We're down." Quaid said seriously.

The cave where they found themselves bore little resemblance to the administration office, or anyplace else that had been formed by human hands.

There was smoke in the air that made it impossible to see more than a few feet in the milky white light of Quaid's cube.

"Going sideways." Seth announced.

No one had any complaint. They had all had more than their fill of the hellish scenery.

With a burst of light from his horns, Seth relocated the group from inside the cube to the nygo-husk equivalent of the reception area of the administration office.

"Who wants to go and make sure that Julia has time to see us? I need to stay and watch the door." Lee asked seriously.

"I have to stay so you'll have light." Seth quickly added.

//One of the 'official' students should go. Even though Julia has been good to us, Fallen and I shouldn't be the ones to ask her for favors.// Jesus carefully added.

"I'll go." Lisa said easily, then thought to ask, "But can you give me a couple minutes to talk to her before you appear?"

//Just let me know when you're ready for us and we'll be there for you.// Jesus assured her.

"Do you want to phase in, or would you prefer a doorway?" Lee asked helpfully.

"Whatever's easiest for you." Lisa said gently.

"Seth? Do you want to?"

"My pleasure." Seth said with a grin, then a brief pulse of light emanated from his horns. When the pulse faded, Lisa was no longer with them.

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The girl behind the reception desk, obviously a student worker, jumped at Lisa's abrupt appearance, apparently from nowhere.

"Would Doctor Hoffman be available to see me for a few minutes?" Lisa asked hopefully as she noticed the girl's name badge.

"I don't know. She's been kind of busy with the emergency earlier. What was your name?" The girl, Kira, asked uneasily.

"Lisa Brogan." Lisa said pleasantly.

Kira pressed a button on the phone, then said, "Doctor Hoffman? I have a Lisa Brogan here who would like to speak with you. Will you be able to see her?"

"Lisa is here? Please send her in." Julia said with obvious concern.

"Doctor Hoffman will see you." Kira said as she gestured toward Dr. Hoffman's door.

"Thank you." Lisa said as she stepped away from the desk.

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"Lisa! How is Marc? Is everything okay?" Dr. Hoffman asked with concern.

"He's fine. He's improved a lot and he seems to be in a good mood about things." Lisa said happily.

"Oh good. I was worried." Julia admitted, then cautiously asked, "So what brings you here at this particular moment?"

"Everyone who was still testing with Ms. Mordigan stopped for lunch and that's when we heard that the task force has the people who shot Marc in custody. Since it should be safe for us here now, we thought that we'd come back and see what you wanted for us to do next." Lisa carefully explained.

"I only heard from the task force a few minutes ago, so I haven't really had time to plan anything in regard to your group." Julia said frankly.

"That's okay. Before everyone else comes in, I wanted to take a minute to tell you how much I appreciate what you said to me in my interview. The best future I could possibly see for myself was to be someone that Marc could be proud of. My entire self depended on his perception of me."

"I take it that you've had a change of heart about that." Julia said warmly.

"In just a day I've gone from being a cardboard cutout of a person who only takes up space into being someone who can think and decide and change things." Lisa said joyfully.

"I'm glad to hear that." Julia said honestly.

"And to top it off, Marc is as happy as I am about how things have changed. He said that the changes that I've been through are what he wanted for me when we were talking about going to school together." Lisa said with a smile at the thought of her boyfriend.

"You can count yourself as fortunate. Not everyone is lucky enough to have someone who is supportive of their growth." Julia said honestly.

"I don't know how I got so lucky, but I'll do my best to see that neither of us regret it." Lisa swore.

"Just remember that I'm here for you if you need to talk about anything. I'll do my best to help you uncover your options so that you can make an informed decision." Julia said slowly and sincerely.

"I know. Even though I've still got a long way to go, I wanted to thank you for pointing me in the right direction."

"It was my pleasure." Julia said with a smile.

"If you've got time right now, the guys are here so we can go ahead and decide what we're going to do next." Lisa said enthusiastically.

"Although I haven't been *officially* notified that the crime scene has been released, I suppose that we can make the assumption that it will be available soon." Julia said consideringly.

"Are you ready for the guys to join us?" Lisa asked hopefully.

"I can't think of any reason that we should wait. Yes. Ask them to come in." Julia said pleasantly.

"Jesus? Julia's ready for you." Lisa said into the air.

//Lee is going to open the doorway into the inner office. There's no reason to frighten that poor receptionist more than we already have.// Jesus said seriously.

Lisa chuckled, then said, "I didn't think of that. Good idea."

Julia watched curiously as a hole seemed to burn through reality, leaving a more or less rectangular doorway, rimmed in flames.

The fire and hint of sulfur in the air inspired Julia to ask, "Would you mind if Kurt joined us for this discussion?"

"That'd be great." Slash said enthusiastically, then quickly added, "If Mr. Worthington or Mr. Wainwright are here, it'd be okay if they joined us too."

"I get the impression that they prefer for their investment to be 'hands off' as much as possible." Julia said pleasantly, then pressed a button on her phone before saying, "Kurt? The students that were testing at the Xavier school are back. I thought you might want

to be involved in deciding what happens next, since circumstances seem to have changed."

"*Yes, Doktor Hoffman. I vill only be a moment.*" Kurt immediately responded.

"Before we get too into things, Steve has joined the Meerkats and if there's a way to do it, he's going to need a place to stay." Lisa said in a rush.

"I'm rooming with a member of my old team right now. If I try to go back there it's probably going to be really uncomfortable." Steve said weakly.

"That is, if he doesn't just turn you to stone." Seth said frankly.

"Well, yeah." Steve reluctantly admitted.

There was a gentle ::bamf:: as Kurt appeared beside Julia's desk.

"See? *That's* how you do it." Quaid said with a grin at Lee.

Lee arched an eyebrow at him, then without any indication that he was going to do so, Lee disappeared in a ::bamf:: and reappeared a second later on the

other side of Julia's desk, just a few feet from where he had previously been standing.

"You haff *meine* ability? If you would like, I may be able to show you some zhings you haven't zhought to try." Kurt said hopefully.

"I've had my ability for nearly thirty years, but I've only intentionally *tried* to use it in the past week. If there's anything you're willing to teach me, I'd be happy to learn." Lee said appreciatively.

"Vonce ve haff zhings sorted for zhe students, ve vill see about a time to train." Kurt assured him.

"Before we do that, we're going to need to decide what we're going to do about sleeping arrangements for tonight. While it looks like the male dorm will be available, we still need to see about having the broken window replaced and another room opened up." Julia said seriously.

"Fallen's going to need a room, too." Seth quickly added as he indicated the shrouded figure at the back of their group.

"Piotr? *Ist* zhat you?" Kurt asked anxiously.

"I am a ghost. I am called Fallen."

"From what I made of it, what was left of Peter was scraped together and put into that sheet. That's not him like he was before, but it's what's left of him." Ronny explained.

"Thank you, Ronny. I believe that is the best explanation of me that I have heard to date." Fallen said gratefully.

"If we were to room Fallen and Steve together, then we could room the other two new students in the remaining room on the third floor. That would leave us with the fourth floor available as other new male students arrive." Julia said speculatively.

"New students?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Yes. Last week we announced that we were accepting precollege students regardless of whether or not they had a mutation. The students here are the first, but they certainly aren't the last. We're expecting three new students to arrive later today, two boys and a girl."

"And you said that there are two more rooms on the third floor?" Seth asked in a leading tone.

"Yes. Rather than have unused rooms serving no good purpose, we decided to wall them off until they're

needed. The task force already agreed to allow us to open the hallway, provided that we didn't disturb their crime scene. As far as I know, the workman may have finished with that by now." Julia said informatively.

"So, what do you want us guys from Xavier's to do? I mean, you're kind of paying us to help the new guys." Bobby asked cautiously.

"From what I've seen, you've done a stellar job so far. In one day, the new students have not only formed a variety of good solid relationships with each other, but they've also banded into a rather impressive team... are you still calling yourselves the Meerkats?" Julia asked with a smile.

"We haven't come up with anything better." Lisa said frankly.

"I, for one, wouldn't want you to. I find it whimsical." Julia said warmly.

"How do you want us to handle it with the new students?" Slash asked slowly, seeming not to be paying close attention to the current topic of conversation.

"My first instinct is to tell you to do your best to be good roommates. The Meerkats can help them in their 'off-duty' hours and the 'helpers' that we've recruited can help them at school. But until you have a compelling reason to do so, don't bring them into either 'extracurricular' group. I'm not saying that they can't join you at some point, I'm only recommending that you not automatically assume that every precollege student will automatically become part of your teams." Julia said seriously.

"I belief zhat *Doktor* Hoffman is correct. Zhere vill be more zhan enough opportunities for zhem to choose how zhey vill make a contribution. For now, ve vill help zhem to be comforted and secure in zheir new homes." Kurt said decisively.

"I've been told in the phone interview that one of the boys, his name is Curt, is somewhat androgynous. I haven't seen for myself, but I wanted to mention it to hopefully forestall any difficulty that might result as a consequence." Julia said carefully.

"He hasn't met the other new students yet, has he?" Slash asked cautiously.

"No. Not that I know of." Julia quietly answered.

"Well, if it looks like there's going to be a problem, we could switch things around so that he rooms with me. I don't have any problem with the androgynous thing, and I might even be able to help him if he's having any trouble dealing with it." Slash said frankly.

"If you want to just room with him, I'll room with Buell. Let's face it, unless I go out of my way, he won't even remember that I'm there." Brian volunteered.

"You already know what's going to happen, don't you?" Louie asked Brian curiously.

"I can see lots of possible futures." Brian said seriously, then added with a grin, "When it comes to Buell, most of them aren't very interesting. It sounds tailor made for me."

"So Marc and Beau get their room. Louie, Jesus, and Seth get their room, Slash and Curt get Slash and Brian's old room, Brian and Buell get the first new room which leaves Steve and Fallen in the second new room... is that right?" Quaid asked as he looked around.

"That sounds right. Plus you and I can hell surf into school every morning." Lee said happily.

"That is going to be great!" Quaid said happily.

Julia smiled at his reaction, then said, "And since we only have one new female student, she'll get her own room, next to Lisa's."

"What's her name?" Lisa asked with interest.

"Bethany... and just so you know, she's a low-level empath with absolutely no training. Be on the lookout for that." Julia warned.

"Let me know if you need any help with it. I've been shielding myself from an empath for years. I've gotten pretty good at it." Steve volunteered.

//I can help you with it too.// Jesus added.

Lee smiled at the confident words, then looked at Julia and declared, "No need to worry about us. The Meerkats can handle it."

The End