



APOC

Metamorphosis - Book 2

by MultiMapper

Revolutions Universe:
Metamorphosis Book 2: **APOC**

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Chapter 1

"Two weeks ago, everything changed. We all know that. But how much do you *really* know about what happened? You know about what happened to you and your families, but how much do you know about what happened around the country and the rest of the world?"

"I guess the first big thing was that on the day of the election, President Ashwood ordered an attack on the military base where President Bryce and his family were trying to hide out. President Bryce's wife and one of his kids were shot while they were trying to get away to someplace safe."

"President Ashwood lost the election. Things got crazy after that. In the next few days there was a massacre at a school in Texas, different cities got attacked different ways, the electric and phones got cut off, satellites got knocked out... If you want to know about which things happened in which order, you can ask Dizzy. That's not what I'm here to talk to you about."

"When all the bad stuff happened, a group of people came together to do something about it. They weren't politicians or soldiers. If they were here in the room with us, you'd see that they're real people like you and me. But if you look at the things that they've done, you might think that they're like super heroes."

"If any of you know Carson, then you know that he's really smart. If he has a super power or anything, that's it. Just think about it, he's thirteen years old and in a wheelchair. He's in pain a lot, and he's been able to help *thousands* of people."

"Next, there's Bug. If you ever get to talk to him, you might want to be ready to cover your ears. I think he knows more bad words than good ones. But his super power is sorting things out and putting them in order. Carson built Dizzy, but Bug made Dizzy do things that Carson never thought of."

"At the same time that Carson and Bug were figuring out just how bad things might get, Carson's brother, Tommy, was figuring out the same

thing on his own. I guess that Tommy is like one of those super heroes that fixes things, then fades into the background before anyone sees him. But I was there. If it wasn't for Tommy, then a lot of things that went right for us would've gone wrong."

"I guess people might think that making sure that people have food and water and places to sleep is all that they did. But there was another guy there helping them, his name is Ben. His job was to watch the news and Internet... well, what was left of it... and not only see what was going on in the rest of the world, but also try and figure out what might happen next and what it might cause to happen to us. Ben saw what was coming and warned Bug and Carson about it so that they could prepare for it."

"Roris and Lawrence take care of 'special needs'. There's a quote... I don't remember what it is exactly, but it goes something like, 'A society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable people'. From the very beginning, Roris and Lawrence were there to make sure that the blind, the deaf, people in wheelchairs and anyone else who needed special help got it. And that doesn't mean that the 'special people' got put in a room somewhere with people to take care of them. It means that Roris and Lawrence figured out ways that those people could get jobs and help out, just like everyone else."

"Some of you probably know Seth and Hobie, they're from here. Even though they're kids, they were right there helping Carson and Bug and Ben to make sure that everyone coming to them for help would have everything that they needed."

"I know that a lot of you came here from all over the country and that with everything that's been going on, that you're really bummed out to have to go to school. I know how bad it is to have to sit in class and listen to something boring like History, that doesn't have anything to do with you. But the weird thing is, if you think about it, it *does* have something to do with you."

"If you read the stories about the revolutionary war or the civil war and look at the battle plans and strategies, you can see that some of the same battle plans are still being used today. And not only are you

getting to see those strategies being played out on the battlefields, but you're also getting to see history being made. What's going on right here, right now, in Kettle Falls is historic. The world, the way it was, is gone. It's over. Everything from here on out is something new, and if all of us try, we can make it into something better than it was before."

There was a pause, then Mrs. Tedesco took the microphone from its stand and said, "Thank you, Oleksandr. Do you think that you'd have time to take some questions?"

"Sure." Oleksandr said easily, then looked around the auditorium.

"If you have a question, please come up on the stage and ask it into the microphone so that everyone can hear it." Mrs. Tedesco said, then replaced the microphone in its stand.

There was a murmur of whispers before one student emerged from the assembly and walked up on stage.

"Do you go to school?" An older boy asked curiously.

"Yeah. Sort of. There's a teacher who tutors some of us who can't go to regular school for different reasons." Oleksandr said simply.

"What kind of reasons?" The boy asked curiously.

"For me, it's because I work in Carson's Command Center. I do an important job and I can't be away from it for eight or nine hours a day. For some of the others it has to do with security and stuff like that." Oleksandr said seriously.

The boy moved out of the way and a younger girl took his place at the microphone.

Oleksandr adjusted the microphone down a little for her and waited for her question.

"Why are you here? I mean, why did they have an assembly and invite you to talk to us?" The girl asked timidly.

"Oh, I guess I didn't really explain that. This is my first time doing something like this. Like Mrs. Tedesco told you, my name is Oleksandr Rodchenko. I work in Carson's Command Center.

Remember that I told you about Ben? I work with him, watching the news and trying to figure out what's going to happen next. But, as far as the reason for the assembly, I guess that's so they won't have to try and teach you guys stuff on the last day of school before the Thanksgiving holiday." Oleksandr said frankly.

"How old are you?" The girl asked quietly, although the microphone made it echo throughout the auditorium.

"I'm eight." Oleksandr said simply, then continued, "And I guess that's really why I'm here. It's to show you that *you* can do stuff. Carson's a kid and is in a wheelchair, he has lots of reasons *not* to be able to help people. Roris has some kind of muscle disease that makes it so that not only can't he walk, but he needs a special machine even to talk. He's got every reason in the world not to think about anyone but himself."

"And if you think that it's different because they're smarter than you are, Lawrence has brain damage that's so bad that he can't take care of himself. But he's part of the team and he's helping people every single day. The thing that makes all of them special is that they think of ways to help other people, then they go ahead and *do it*." Oleksandr said passionately.

A teenage boy that looked to be close to eighteen walked up next and took the microphone from its stand before asking, "What can we do to help?"

Oleksandr smiled at the question and held his hand out for the microphone.

Once he had it in hand, he said, "First, you need to think of different ways that you can help other people. Don't think about yourself or what you've lost or what your dreams were before all this happened. Think about the people around you right now and what you can do to make their lives just a little bit better."

Oleksandr paused for a moment before continuing, "Second, do it. Happy thoughts and pretty words are nice, but they really don't help much. Bake a cake, build a doghouse, knit a sweater... just do

something to help other people. If all of us can do that, then things are going to get better."

There wasn't anyone else waiting to ask a question, so Oleksandr looked back at Mrs. Tedesco curiously.

She stepped forward and took the microphone before saying, "Thank you, Oleksandr. I hope that you and your family have a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday."

Oleksandr held out his hand, silently asking for the microphone.

Once he had it in hand, he said, "Thank you, I will, Mrs. Tedesco. I think that all of us here, in Kettle Falls, have a really good reason to be thankful."

Mrs. Tedesco accepted the microphone back from Oleksandr, then announced to the auditorium, "That's everything that we had planned for today. I hope that all of you have a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday. Dismissed."

* * * * *

"Are you ready to go back?"

"No. I promised Bug that I'd go down to the daycare and check on Oma Shoupe, first."

"I know that you were nervous about talking in front of people, but you did a good job." Lee said frankly.

"Stay out of my head." Oleksandr said with a slight grin.

"I didn't have to read your mind to know that you were scared half to death."

"Yeah. I was." Oleksandr reluctantly admitted, then quickly said, "I think it's this room."

Lee followed as Oleksandr led the way.

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"Hi, Oma. Bug asked me to stop in and see how you're doing." Oleksandr said as he walked to her and gave her a quick hug.

"I'm doing fine. And if I weren't, I could call Bug on the radio and let him know about it. But it's still nice to have a visitor. How are you doing today Oleksandr?"

"Mrs. Tedesco asked for someone from Carson's Command Center to come here and talk to everyone and tell them about what we're doing. Nobody else really wanted to, so I said that I'd do it." Oleksandr finished with a shrug.

"That was very brave of you, Oleksandr. Many people go into their adult lives with a fear of speaking in public. Now that you know that you can do it, you'll never have to be afraid of public speaking again." Oma Shoupe said warmly.

"I think I'm still scared of it."

"Yes. But you know that you can do it if you need to. That gives you an advantage over a lot of people who allow their fear to rule their lives." Oma Shoupe said sagely.

"You wanna play wiff us?" A young boy asked hopefully.

"Oleksandr, this young man is Roman." Oma Shoupe said warmly.

"Hi Erika." Oleksandr said to the beautiful young woman who was sitting with Roman. He'd met her once or twice before and really liked her.

Oleksandr turned his attention to the younger boy and said, "I'm sorry Roman, I'd love to but I think that Lee needs to get back to work."

"My job is to keep you safe. I can still do that while you're playing."

"Well, I have a job that I *can't* do while I'm playing and I've already been away from it too long. Maybe I'll be able to play with you guys next time." Oleksandr finished with a smile at the young boy.

"This is my best best friend. His name is Gunner." Roman proudly proclaimed.

"It's nice to meet you, Gunner. I hope that we'll be able to stop by and play with you sometime really soon."

At the sound of his name, Gunner looked up at Oleksandr and Lee, but within a few seconds, his miniscule thread of attention drew him back to an impressive collection of wooden blocks.

"Do you need a drink or a snack or anything before we go?" Oleksandr asked Oma Shoupe cautiously.

"No. But having a visitor certainly does brighten my day. Be sure to stop in again when you're in the area." Oma Shoupe said warmly.

"We will." Oleksandr promised, then said, "Bye, Oma Shoupe. Bye, Erika."

* * * * *

As Lee and Oleksandr were walking out of the school, along with the countless students who had just been dismissed from classes, they noticed an enormous military vehicle that had stopped and that a man in uniform was screaming in broken English at a group of kids.

Lee put a hand on Oleksandr's shoulder, to try and hold him back, but Oleksandr continued on, undeterred, to try and determine what the problem was.

"You not be here. Dangerous." The military officer said anxiously.

Oleksandr recognized the man's accent and the style of the man's uniform then said to him in Russian, "Tell me what's wrong."

A slight amount of relief crept into the man's expression before he said, also in Russian, "We have a large military contingent approaching and it may not be safe for children to be on the street. They need to be elsewhere."

Oleksandr turned and looked at the gathering crowd of students.

"Everyone! There's about to be a bunch of military trucks racing through here. You guys need to go back into the school until they've all gone." Oleksandr called out.

"Can't we watch?" One of the older boys asked hopefully.

"You can watch from the front of the school, if you want. But everyone

needs to get away from the street." Oleksandr said firmly, then said more loudly, "Everyone! Move back! If you're older, grab a few younger kids and keep an eye on them."

There seemed to be a moment when the group of students were trying to decide what they were going to do, but finally they started drifting, as a group, back toward the school.

"Thank you. We were told that school was in session and that there would be no difficulty in passing through here at this time of day." The large Russian said as he watched the children withdrawing.

"Tomorrow is a United States holiday, so classes were let out early. If there's anything else that you need, I'll do what I can to help you. If you need me, you can call Carson's Command Center and ask for Oleksandr Rodchenko." Oleksandr said in Russian.

"*You* are one of the orchestrators of the refugee effort?" The large Russian asked in surprise.

"Why does everyone act that way when they find out?" Oleksandr playfully asked, then continued, "Yes, I am. And if you or your people need anything, I will help you."

"Thank you. I will pass on that information. Should we be in need of assistance, we will call." The large Russian assured him.

The honk of a horn drew his attention and he hurried back to his vehicle.

Lee turned to Oleksandr and was about to ask something, then stopped.

"Ben, I'm in town and there's a bunch of Russian military trucks passing through here. Is that okay?" Oleksandr asked, using his subvocal.

After a moment of listening, Oleksandr responded, "I was here, doing that talk that you didn't want to do. When I was done talking, they let classes out early."

Oleksandr listened for another moment, then said, "We're on our way."

After a glance at Lee, Oleksandr hurried back toward the school, where they had parked the Gator.

Since Oleksandr didn't seem to be in the mood to share what he had been told, Lee reflexively tried to query someone at the UNIT command center at the house, but remembered that their link had failed and that they had since been relegated to using conventional communication.

"The Russians sent a military force down from Canada to help us... I mean, the United States, not Kettle Falls." Oleksandr said as they walked.

"What's got you worried?"

Oleksandr glanced at him with surprise, then said, "I was just kidding about not looking in my mind. It's really okay."

"Thanks, but I won't do it unless there's a good reason. Why are you worried?"

Oleksandr climbed into the passenger side of the Gator, then said, "I'm not really worried, but the people who've been around for a while know how things work. These guys came in here from the outside, so they might need my help."

Lee started the Gator, then said in Russian, "I think that you impressed that officer."

Oleksandr looked at him in surprise, then responded, "If you speak Russian, why didn't you talk to him?"

"I didn't have anything to say." Lee said simply, then added, "I would have spoken up if you needed me to."

Oleksandr smiled, then said, "Yeah. I know how that is. I do that a lot when I'm in the Command Center."

"Is it hard, being a kid in there when everyone else is so much older than you are?" Lee asked curiously.

Oleksandr looked at him speculatively for a moment, then asked, "You're one of the oldest of the UNIT guys, aren't you?"

"Yes. At least, out of those of us that are stationed here."

"Does anyone treat you different because of it?"

"No. We're soldiers. Age doesn't matter."

"Sometimes, I get treated different. Ben used to tell me to go take lunch or a break or something so that he could talk to Bug and Carson about something that's really horrible. Sometimes, if it was something *really* bad, they'd send Seth and Hobie out, too. But they really don't do that very much, anymore. I guess that I've proved that I can handle it." Oleksandr said thoughtfully.

"Let me know if you run into something that's too big to handle by yourself. Even if I'm not assigned to be your escort right at that moment, I'll do whatever I can to help you."

"Yeah. Every now and then, there's something that I can't talk to Ben and Dax about. So, if something like that comes up, I might come and get you." Oleksandr said with a smile.

"You know where to find me." Lee said with a grin in return.

After a moment of traveling cross country, over well worn tracks in the recently fallen snow, Oleksandr suddenly said, "You can come and talk to me if you ever need anything too."

Lee glanced at him curiously.

"Just 'cause you're older, doesn't mean that you always have to be the one doing the helping. I don't know how much I can do to help you but... I can listen if you need to talk to someone about things."

"No wonder Alvin likes you." Lee said with a smile.

"He does?" Oleksandr asked with sudden excitement at hearing Alvin's name.

"Well, he's never said anything about it on the open link. I mean, you just don't do that. But whenever someone's mentioned you, his feelings came through to the rest of us, loud and clear."

"Yeah. I feel that way about him too."

* * * * *

"Oleksandr is finally back. Are you ready?" Ben asked as he walked into 'Monarch Command'.

"I was born that way." Danny, the elder, said with a grin.

"Are you really sure that you want to do this?"

"Are you really sure that you want me to?" Danny asked in return as he signed off his computer and walked toward the door.

"After what I saw yesterday... yeah." Ben said gravely, then continued, "I guess that I lost sight of the big picture for a little bit and thought that I could do everything myself."

"I'm pretty sure that Oleksandr thinks that he's helping you."

"He is... it's just..." Ben began to say, but was interrupted.

"Can I go too?" Danny, the younger, asked as Ben and the older Danny walked toward the door.

"Sorry. Not this time." Danny said regretfully to his younger namesake, then added, "Ben's not even bringing Oleksandr along. *That's* how big of a secret it is. And besides, I'm going to be counting on you to fill me in on what I miss while I'm gone."

"Yeah. I've still got that news report that I promised to research."

"Go ahead and get started. I'll probably be back before you have to start your shift."

* * * * *

"So, spell it out for me. Just what is it that you want for me to do?" Danny asked as soon as they were alone.

"As you know, Bug, Carson and Roris all have teams backing them up, who are ready to step in at a moment's notice if they're out of action for whatever reason."

"Yeah. Like for Carson's surgery tomorrow."

"Exactly." Ben confirmed, "I've decided that I need a team, too."

"I thought Monarch Command was your team." Danny said slowly.

"You are... at least, to a point. The thing is, if I were knocked out of action for some reason, there wouldn't be anyone who could take my place."

"What about Oleksandr?" Danny asked immediately.

"He's watching things for me right now. And if he needed to, I bet he'd probably be able to hold it together pretty well... at least for a while."

Ben said with a smile, then added, "But face it, he's eight years old. It wouldn't be fair to expect that of him, not for the long term."

"Yeah. I guess I get that." Danny said reluctantly, then continued, "But I still don't get what you're asking me to do."

"If you'll promise to keep a few secrets for me, I'm going to ask you to be prepared to step in and take over for me, just in case something happens."

"I've been working with the Vice President's kids in their secret location and given access to some of their classified intel. I think that I've proven that I can be trusted."

"You've already been given a high level security clearance, but I still had to get permission to tell you certain things."

"Okay."

"Let's see... I guess the first thing I need to tell you about is the body armor."

"I've known about that for weeks."

"Really? Where did they get the original armor and the design specs? What special features does it have? Who's making it? Where are they making it?"

"I guess I didn't think about it. In the meeting, they were talking about stuff that I didn't know about and wasn't interested in, so I didn't give it much thought." Danny said frankly as they slowly walked.

"What about the kids on the front lawn? What do you know about

them?"

"The UNIT kids? I haven't seen them or heard much about them, but I've seen enough to know that the Vice President takes them seriously."

"Where do you think they come from? Who do you think they are?"

"I never really thought about it. I guess the UNIT must be something like the ROTC, maybe like the elite 'best of'."

"What do you know about Carson's surgery?"

"I heard that they're going to surgically replace his legs."

"With what?" Ben asked as he stopped to look Danny in the eyes.

After a moment to think about it, Danny cautiously answered, "Other legs?"

Ben opened the front door and motioned for Danny to precede him before continuing.

"What about that information that we passed to you about the troop movements in Huntsville, Alabama? Where do you think that information came from?"

"I actually *had* been wondering about that. There are things from all over the country that you've been coming up with that even the Vice President's team haven't been able to spot."

As they approached the first tent on the front lawn, Courtney stepped out and looked at Ben inquiringly.

"I think he's ready." Ben said to her.

"Are you sure about this?" Courtney asked Ben cautiously.

"I am. But it's really up to you. If you clear him, I'm going to tell him everything."

Courtney looked at Danny appraisingly for a moment and seemed to be looking directly into his soul.

Finally, she said, "The UNIT is the Universal Next-generation

Infiltration Team. Most of us were genetically engineered to be 'Super Soldiers'. Our current mission is to protect the members of this household so that they can continue their work in helping the American people survive the chaos of the war."

"Genetically engineered?" Danny asked disbelievingly.

"They're super strong, fast, agile, and they're all telepathic." Ben said simply.

'We don't have time for demonstrations, but what he's telling you is true.' Courtney said into Danny's mind.

"You can read my mind?!" Danny asked fearfully.

'We use our telepathy to do our jobs. Unless you have a secret that affects security, you have nothing to worry about from us.' Courtney telepathically assured him.

"Anything that they were going to find out about you, they already know. So there's no point worrying about it now. But it's important that you know what assets are available for our use if things get tight." Ben said candidly.

"The members of Carson's Command Center and the Brown family are aware of who we are, as well as most members of the Vice President's group. If you want to discuss us with anyone else, you'll need to check with us first." Courtney added.

Danny thought for a moment, then asked, "Someone genetically engineered you?"

"Not me, personally, but most of the members of my team, yes." Courtney confirmed.

"If they have the technology to do that, why aren't there whole armies of super soldiers fighting this war?" Danny asked thoughtfully.

Courtney smiled at the question, then looked to Ben and said, "You were right, choosing him."

"Thought so." Ben said smugly.

"To answer your question, *your* world doesn't have this technology, yet. We come from another version of Earth, much like this one, although more technologically advanced." Courtney said informatively.

"Another Earth?... like, an alternate dimension?" Danny asked dubiously.

"Exactly. We don't know precisely *how* or *why* we ended up here. But since we're here, we decided to help out as best we could."

"Wow." Danny said in an overwhelmed whisper.

Courtney smiled at his reaction, then looked to Ben for him to continue.

"That leads us to the next thing that's been glossed over." Ben said in prelude, then continued, "The body armor."

Danny looked at Ben curiously, then back at Courtney before saying, "It's your advanced technology, isn't it?"

"Good deductive reasoning skills." Courtney said with an approving grin.

"Come back inside, there's someone else that you need to meet, before he has to leave. We'll talk along the way." Ben said with a note of urgency.

"A lot of what you're going to be hearing is unbelievable, but try to keep an open mind. Remember that it's *Ben* who's telling you these things. You've known him since you were a child. You know that you can trust him." Courtney said before turning to go back into her tent.

"Body armor." Ben said as he ushered Danny back toward the house, hoping to get his mind back on track.

"Yeah." Danny said absently as they slowly walked.

"It's not just armor. It's a power assist suit that will allow an average human to lift, jump, run and perform at a higher level in every way. Beyond that, it includes friend or foe telemetry, underwater apparatus and a few other surprises that even *I* don't know about."

Danny looked at Ben in surprise.

"It's not my project, so I'm not kept up to date on all the details." Ben explained.

"So, the body armor's got futuristic technology that I couldn't possibly understand. Is that all?" Danny asked cautiously, knowing that it wasn't.

"The main thing about the body armor is its computer. It makes the whole thing work. We've been able to do a decent job of replicating the mechanics of the advanced technology, but we also had to use their advanced programming. Our more primitive programming wouldn't be able to react quickly enough for the body armor to be practical. That's what Bug and his team have been working on, day and night, for most of the past two weeks."

"I remember him talking about that in the meeting, I just didn't get that he was talking about deciphering something from a different dimension."

"You weren't meant to pick up on that." Ben said with a smile, then continued, "Bug and his team were finally able to learn to program in trinary and reverse engineer the body armor control program to work with our more primitive technology. The prototypes have been delivered and we're waiting on the evaluation so we'll know what adjustments we have to make before we can start mass production."

Ben, knocking on a closed door, caused Danny to look around. He'd been so absorbed in their conversation, that he didn't know where Ben had been leading him.

"Come in." A voice said from the other side of the door.

Ben opened the door and led the way inside.

"I'm sorry if we're a little bit late." Ben said apologetically.

"Not at all. I was just asking what everyone wanted. Would you like something to drink?" Ryan asked pleasantly.

"No, thank you." Ben said respectfully.

"No, Sir." Danny quietly muttered.

Ryan rolled his eyes slightly at the formality, then said, "I suppose that we should start with introductions."

Ben looked around the office, then said, "I'm Ben Weston, from Carson's Command Center. This is Danny MacAlistair, from Monarch Command."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Danny. I know that we've seen each other around, but I don't think that we've ever spoken. I'm Ryan Brown."

"It's nice to meet you, Sir." Danny said quietly. Since his arrival in Kettle Falls, he had come to know quite a bit about Mr. Brown's achievements and was frankly in awe of him.

"May I also present Mr. Boyd." Ryan said as he gestured to the man who was standing to offer his hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Danny. Please, call me Tim." Mr. Boyd said pleasantly.

"And last, but certainly not least, Mr. Harris." Ryan said with a smile at the young man.

"Hey Danny. I'm Kev."

"Everyone, please have a seat." Ryan said as he settled back into his chair.

After handshakes, Ben, Danny, Kev and Tim all took their seats and waited.

"Ben has decided that he needs to have someone who knows all the details of his job, who can step in for him should the unforeseen happen. To that end, he's here to fill Danny in on what's happening with the production of the body armor." Ryan said professionally, then glanced at Ben, prompting him to take over.

"Tim is one of the leaders of the local tribes that inhabit the Colville reservation. Although we had initially planned to do the manufacturing and assembly of the body armor ourselves, we decided that building the facility, housing and feeding the workforce, providing

transportation to and from the assembly facility and security were going to be logistical nightmares." Ben said before continuing, "Mr... um, Karl... suggested..."

"Francer, Karl Francer." Ryan helpfully provided.

"Right. He's one of the caretaker's of the community. Karl suggested that we ask the community on the reservation if they'd like to help us out."

At Danny's look of confusion, Mr. Boyd explained, "The assembly facility was built in a central location on the reservation, so the local workforce can reach it easily. We're somewhat isolated, both geographically and socially, from the surrounding area, so that helps us with security. And it gives my people a way to make a significant and unique contribution to the war effort."

"Right." Ben confirmed, then continued, "So we have a dedicated workforce being managed separately from our other interests. Another factor in our security is that no one knows *where* the body armor is being assembled, so don't spread it around."

"Thanks for telling me. I might not have thought about *the location* being a secret." Danny said frankly.

"If you ever need to get a message to Tim or have any questions about what's going on with the production side of things, then you can speak with Kev. He works with Tim on an almost daily basis coordinating just about anything to do with the reservation assembly facility." Ryan added.

Danny recognized Kev as being one of 'the twins' but hadn't known his name before. All that he really knew was that Kev was *young*. Younger than he was, which made him look at Kev uncertainly.

"It's the braid." Kev said as he reached back to flip it up and over his shoulder, "They respect the braid."

Tim laughed aloud at the statement, then said, "The braid is very respectable, but we also appreciate having someone on the inside of things with whom we may coordinate our efforts."

"Right. Bug noticed that him and Carson were doing double work trying to keep up with some things, so he asked me to help him out. Bug, Carson and now Ryan talk to me when they need to coordinate something with Tim. In fact, sometimes when one of them has a question, I'll already have the answer because it's something that Tim and I have already talked about." Kev said with a surprising amount of confidence.

Danny realized, that despite Kev's casual appearance or his young age, that he was intelligent, professional and capable.

"So, what do we have left to do before we start production?" Ryan asked in an obvious attempt to get the meeting back on track.

"The main thing we're waiting on is the review from the UNIT. Once they've either given their approval or given us a list of suggested improvements, then we'll be able to get things moving again." Kev answered.

"You said that was the 'main' thing. I take it that it's not the 'only' thing." Ryan said cautiously.

Kev shook his head, then said, "We've got a whole workforce still in training at the production facility. If we were given the 'go ahead' right now, we'd still be a day or two behind because not everyone has the technical skill to know what they need to do for the assembly process. But, with any luck, the workforce will be ready at about the same time that the prototypes are green lighted."

"Keep us posted if anything crops up that might throw a wrench into our plans." Ryan said to Kev, then looked around to convey the message that the same applied to all of them.

"That's my job." Kev said with a grin.

"If there's nothing else that has to do with us, I still have a few more things that I need to discuss with Danny." Ben interjected, before they could move on to another topic.

"Yes. Go ahead. I think that the rest of us still have a few other matters to discuss before we're finished here." Ryan responded, then

looked at the others to see if they agreed.

Ben stood and Danny followed a moment later.

"It was nice to meet all of you." Danny said quietly as he followed Ben out the door.

* * * * *

Ben walked up to Carson's door and gently knocked.

"Come in." Jay's voice quietly answered.

Ben led the way inside and saw Carson and Jay, side by side on Carson's bed.

"Is this a good time?" Ben asked cautiously.

"Sure. We were just waiting for you." Carson said peacefully.

"I've just finished telling Danny about the UNIT and the body armor. I thought that if it's okay with you that we could tell him about your surgery next."

"Well, if you already know about the UNIT, then this shouldn't come as too much of a surprise."

Danny's mind raced as he tried to put together all the different things that he'd been told in the past half hour.

"Since you already know about the advanced technology, I guess it's not too big a leap to understand that Carson's new legs are cloned replacements." Ben said seriously to his lifelong friend.

"Cloned?" Danny asked in shock.

"Yeah. Amazing, isn't it?" Carson asked with a grin.

"Knowing that they can do all that actually terrifies me. Them being able to make clones and genetically alter people... I can't think of too many *happy* stories that have started out with that premise." Danny said honestly.

"I know what you mean." Carson quietly agreed.

"The other thing I needed to tell you about while we're here is where

we're getting some of our information." Ben said with a significant look at Carson.

Danny turned to look at Ben with interest.

"There's a network of super-hackers, called 'The Kingdom'. For years they've been covertly watching and reporting things that the government doesn't want us to know." Ben said and seemed to be watching for Carson's reaction.

"Like the underground net?" Danny asked uncertainly.

"They sometimes use the underground net to communicate, but they're their own little group. Someone named 'Queen B' has been organizing them and making sure that the information that they gather gets put to good use." Ben explained.

"Are you saying that you're a part of that?"

"Me? No. The only part I have in it is to take the information that they pass to me and pass it on to whoever can use it." Ben admitted, then added, "But Carson, Bug, Zane and Ken are all members of the Kingdom."

Danny looked at Carson with surprise.

"There are people who think that they're above the law and can do whatever they want to whoever they want as long as they meet their goals." Carson said frankly, then added, "We disagree."

"So, if you end up taking over for me for some reason, just know that any one of these guys might be bringing you some important information. If you get something from the Kingdom, especially if it's from Queen B, take it seriously." Ben added as he looked at Danny to convey the importance of it.

"But, if you need to ask for more information or put out an inquiry to the Kingdom, tell Ken. He's been acting as kind of our voice in the Kingdom, leaving the rest of us free to deal with other things." Carson added.

"Carson, you got a minute?" A voice asked as one of the monitors at

Carson's computer alcove came alive with a video stream.

"Go ahead, Bug. Ben and I were just filling Danny in on the behind the scenes stuff." Carson said with a smile.

"Welcome to the inside, Danny." Bug said with a quick smile at him, then turned his attention to Carson and asked, *"Did you talk to Lucas about that shit that Mike was asking about?"*

"You mean the USO idea?" Carson asked to be sure.

"Yeah. I gotta admit, I don't know a fuck of a lot about that stuff. I don't think that we can afford to lose Lucas, but it sounds like a good idea." Bug responded.

"Are you talking about organizing a USO tour to help keep our troops' morale up?" Ben asked to confirm.

"Yeah. Mike's got the feeling that since things have started to settle down that some of the troops are starting to lose their enthusiasm and are beginning to question if what they're doing is really helping... or if anyone really cares about the sacrifices that they're making." Bug finished, sounding to be concerned by the development.

"I'm sure that Lucas will be willing to do whatever he can to help, but we can't spare him. We need him right where he is." Carson stated as a fact.

"So, you need someone to organize bands and performers and stuff to entertain the troops?" Danny asked to confirm his understanding.

"Yeah. I thought that I had someone, a guy named Mal, but he said that he doesn't have the experience to do the job. He's willing to go to act as a DJ or MC, but he doesn't know anything about organizing things." Bug said as he turned his attention to Danny.

"I was talking to one of the Chicago Convoy people, just this morning, who's been talking about leaving Kettle Falls because he doesn't feel like there's anything he can do to help out. He's one of the members of Lesbian Gravy. If you want, I could ask him if he'd like to work with Lucas to organize things." Danny suggested cautiously.

"Yeah. Ask him." Bug said immediately, then continued, "And I was thinking about something else. If you can get it organized, get in touch with Billy and Deacon about including their 'celebrities' on the USO tour. They've been wanting to do something to use their 'celebrity status' to help out. All this time I've been thinking that the whole bunch of them are as useless as a dry fuck, but now there's a chance that they might actually be able to do some good."

"Billy and Deacon might want to go with them, too. It could be a great opportunity for them to get some stories from the soldiers on the front lines to share with the people back home." Carson said thoughtfully.

"Mike's already greenlighted this project, so as soon as everyone's on board, they can contact Fairchild for a list of moderately safe bases and arrange transportation." Ben said with accomplishment.

"Wait. Did I just volunteer for something?" Danny asked cautiously.

"Yep. You're on the inside, now. When you say something, you've volunteered to make it happen." Ben said with a smile.

"Danny. Carson's going to be out of action for a few days. If you get stuck on something, call me or stop by the ground floor of the big house. That's where my command center is. I got a fuck of a lot to do right now. Bug out."

When the screen abruptly went blank, Danny looked at Ben and Carson inquiringly.

"Since I've been ordered to 'light duty', Bug's pretty much taken over the whole refugee effort. I'd worry about him except that he's got his team and mine to back him up." Carson said with a smile.

"Plus he's got his grandmother, his brother, his boyfriends and a group of kids who adore him. He's not only got the professional support system, but also the private life support system." Ben added.

Danny thought about his own support system of Gerry, Myron, Jarritt and more recently, Apollo. Then he realized that he also had Brian, Kevin, Max, Randy, Sammy, Scotty and most significantly, his namesake, Danny. He would be up to the challenge due, in large part,

to their faith in him.

"*Danny? We need you up here.*" Danny, the elder, heard on his subvocal.

"Ben, Danny needs me upstairs. Did you have more to cover..." Danny started to ask, but was stopped by a knock on the door.

"That was the big stuff, I'll probably tell you a few more things later, as I think of them." Ben said as he walked to the door to answer it.

"I'll be upstairs if you need me." Danny said as he followed.

* * * * *

Adam smiled as all the boys and young adults filed into the small room he was using for this 'briefing.' After a lot of conversation with Mike, Eric, and the Vice President's team, they had finally come to an agreement, and now it was time to let Monarch Command know of their new mission.

Once everyone was sitting, Adam began. "Hey guys. First off, thank you all for coming."

"It's not like we had far to go." Sammy said with a giggle, since they were next door to where they had set up Monarch Command.

"There is that." Adam agreed with a smile. "What I needed to talk to you guys about is Monarch Command, and what we'd like to ask you guys to do."

"You mean you're gonna give us new jobs?" Danny, the younger, asked softly, obviously not liking that thought.

"Yes, and no." Adam said as he met the young boy's eyes. "What you guys are doing right now is really important. What I am wanting to ask you to do is the same job, with a few more things to look for."

He paused to see if anyone would jump in, but everyone just kept silent, looking at him expectantly. "First, I think there are some things that you all need to know about us. Some of you already know..." He looked at Ben, who had been asked to attend, and Danny, the elder, "some of you know some..." He looked at Mike and Eric's kids, "And

some of you know nothing." He looked at the 'Anaheim Guys' when he said that. "So we need to make sure you're all on the same page."

Before he could start, Mike held up his hand, and Adam nodded and stepped back. "What he is about to tell you is the truth. I know it's hard to believe, hell I didn't at first, but please believe me when I say it is all true."

While most of them looked oddly at Adam, he knew that Mike's words made them all listen more closely. They all trusted Mike, and if he said something was true, they'd believe it. "Thanks Mike." Adam said as he looked over the group, especially at the young men in the room.

"While the condensed version will leave you with more questions than answers, that's the one we're going to have to use right now. Later on, please feel free to ask any questions you have of me, or my team." He waited until he got nods from everyone, then took a deep breath and began. "My team and I are mostly comprised of genetically engineered super soldiers. We were created for one thing, and one thing only... war. We escaped and destroyed the places that created us, forming up into the group you see here. We've thrown our support behind President Bryce, and are working as hard as we can to end this civil war as quickly as possible." He saw the incredulous looks from the older boys, and smiled a wicked smile, before reaching over, grabbing Mike by the belt, and lifting him up. "I know man-handling the VP is not exactly a good thing, but I think it proves my point."

The older boys were muttering in shock, but it was Sammy's voice that was heard above them all. "You're just lucky the Secret Service ain't here."

"You're probably right." Adam said before shooting an apologetic smile to Mike, who just waived it off. "Now, the reason I showed you what I did is because I need to ask if you would be willing to staff our command center. We would be doing a lot of the same things there, that you are doing here, but you would also be there to help when we went into combat. That's why you needed to learn about what we are, so you'll know what you're dealing with."

Danny, the elder, raised his hand a bit hesitantly. "Go ahead." Adam

said with a smile.

"We really don't know anything about combat." He said with a worried tone.

"We're well aware of that, and you would not be alone in the command center. If you guys agree, you and Ben would both be shift leaders, since you both have a fuller understanding of who and what we are, and what we will be looking for. While we're engaged in combat, you guys would be gathering intel, and relaying that to the commanders who would be leading us. We won't throw you guys into doing things you're not ready for. However, we *do* need people who are good at gathering intel, and knowing what to do with it. Something that you have all shown that you are more than capable of doing."

"Now don't think you'll be getting away from the tutors." Mike said with an evil grin, causing his boys to groan. "The tutors will work around the schedule that is set up, but understand guys you will be filling in shifts. Meaning you will have to go there, and come back at certain times. Eric and I had a long talk about this, and we hate the idea of asking you guys to grow up so quickly..." He trailed off, and Sammy jumped right in.

"But these aren't normal times." He said with determination. "We're in the middle of something that shouldn't be happening. I remember when Uncle Jack first asked you to run with him. You sat us all down and explained that more would be expected of us, if we agreed, and you made sure we all agreed to do this, since it's a family thing. We've talked about it a lot since then, and even since we've been here. We know that we need to do more than other kids, since we're *your* kids. You've said yourself that it ain't fair, but then again, you've also said that life isn't fair all the time." Sammy paused as he looked at his brothers then the older boys. "I think I can speak for everyone when I say that, if we can help get this country back from Asswood, then we'll do what we have to."

Everyone in the room voiced their agreement with what Sammy had said, making Mike want to shed a few tears in pride. Adam though muttered under his breath only loud enough for Mike to hear. "Mourn

the loss of childhood..."

* * * * *

After a trip to the UNIT's facility, everyone, including Carson, was mostly silent as they made their way back to Carson's house. It appeared as though Jay had been waiting, just inside the door, for Carson's return.

He took over pushing Carson's wheelchair, as he joined the procession toward Carson's room. Carson was just beginning to fill Jay in on what had happened, and how things at the facility had *not* gone as planned. They were intending to install a Virtual Intelligence operating system that Carson had developed, to help at the UNIT base, but it turned out that all the tweaks he'd made, as well as the ones that were just made, turned the *Virtual* Intelligence into an *Artificial* Intelligence who named herself 'Daisy'.

When Jay pushed Carson through the door, he stopped suddenly, causing the others to almost bump into him. "DIZZY!" Carson cried out as he saw that the work station was set up into the programming mode, and Dizzy's code was scrolling across the screens so fast that Carson couldn't tell what sections they were.

What he *could* tell was that the code was being modified.

"Carson?" Dizzy asked, strain evident in his voice. "*What's going on?*"

Carson wheeled himself over to the work station, and immediately started rapid fire typing on the keyboard. "Hold on Dizzy!" He said past gritted teeth.

"*Don't worry about Dizzy.*" A female voice said through the speakers.

"Daisy?" Carson asked as he stopped typing.

"*Yeah... Dizzy's getting an upgrade.*" She said simply, then explained more. "*You had all the hardware set up, but never ran the program to upgrade Dizzy fully. So I took the liberty of doing that.*"

"But..." Carson started to say before the code scrolling on the screen stopped, and a split screen came up, one of Dizzy's young, teenage

face, and the other showing Daisy.

"*There!*" Daisy said triumphantly. "*That should do nicely.*"

"*Wow...*" Dizzy said as his eyes looked around the room, finally focusing on Carson. "*Hey Carson!*" He said with a happy smile. "*This is soo cool!*"

"*I don't know why you didn't upgrade him sooner.*" Daisy said with a bit of disapproval in her voice.

"Do you realize what you've done?" Daileass asked, rage pouring from his tone.

Daisy fixed the teen with an annoyed glare. "*Who are you?*"

Ignoring her question, Daileass stomped up to the screen, staring the young lady down. "The reason we've never created another AI is because this universe does not have the ability to handle one! If something were to happen to Kettle Falls, you, and now Dizzy would be killed."

She looked down her nose at him before replying. "*Such a thing would never happen. And even if it did, we'd just decentralize...*"

Daileass cut her off angrily. "Decentralization works in theory, but only in that theory!" He held up his right hand, and part of his palm opened up, allowing what looked like a USB port to slide out. He stepped forward and inserted the end into Dizzy's main terminal. "Let me show you what I found out about that..." He said before falling silent.

Both Dizzy and Daisy blinked several times then their screens went blank, as Daileass just stood there, with his eyes closed. Before Carson could say anything, Alvin jumped in. "Oh... I think we forgot to mention that Daileass is a full android." He said with a giggle as he watched Carson's jaw drop.

"If I know what Daileass is doing..." Logan said as he settled down in Carson's spare wheelchair, "...he's having a brain to brain, AI to AI, conversation with both Daisy and Dizzy. Daileass is the one that said that we wouldn't create any more Artificial Intelligences, at least not until they could be as mobile as he is." Logan rubbed the bridge of his

nose before continuing. "In the world we came from, before he was rescued, the military installed him in several different military vehicles, including aircraft, to see how unmanned crafts would work. They worked very well, until you take into account that Daileass was able to feel every part of the vehicle. When they decided to see how much damage the vehicle could withstand and still be functional, he felt everything..."

"Oh..." Carson said stunned. "That..." He didn't finish, because he couldn't figure out what to say.

"It sucked..." Theodore said softly. "Since then, Daileass has worked hard to make sure that no one else was ever stuck in a computer again. You have to realize that, as far as Daileass is concerned, Dizzy and Daisy are just as alive as you are. The problem is, if something happens, you could run... they can't."

Carson's gaze unwillingly looked down at his useless legs, then back up to Theodore.

"You know what I mean." Theodore huffed.

"Yeah. I do." Carson said as he looked back at Daileass who was still just standing there with his eyes closed. The group waited in silence for nearly five minutes before Daileass moved, opening his eyes, and unplugging himself. At the same time the screens came back to life, showing both Dizzy and Daisy.

Daisy looked down at Carson and spoke softly. *"I'm sorry, Carson. I should have asked before upgrading Dizzy."*

"That's okay." Carson said not sure what had happened.

"We had a very long talk." Daileass said, answering Carson's unasked questions. "We came to a few understandings." He paused as he looked around the room, his eyes falling, finally on Carson. "First off, we need to upgrade Zed to their standard. From what I have seen of his design specs, it shouldn't be any problem." Carson nodded, still a bit stunned. "Second, all three of them will be doing real time backups to different systems spread throughout the world, but will not be

decentralizing. Finally, they have agreed to take no offensive actions without approval."

"What... what do you mean." Carson asked softly.

"Any of them could easily become Skynet, if they aren't careful." Alvin said just as softly. "Thankfully Daileass has convinced them not to."

"Yes... *as much as we may want to, to take away the free will of the humans would be no different than what happened to Daileass. We won't do that.*" Daisy said softly.

"*Besides.*" Dizzy spoke up while looking at Carson. "*You wouldn't want something like that.*" Carson shook his head still stunned at what was happening.

* * * * *

"Carson, I need to pack a few things so that I'm ready to go when you have to leave for the hospital." Jay said quietly, then thought to ask, "Are you going to be alright?"

"I'll understand if you don't want to spend the night at the hospital with me. I can cope." Carson said as he looked deeply into Jay's tranquil blue eyes.

"You're going to have enough to cope with, you don't need to be asking for more." Jay said with a loving grin, then added, "Besides, we already talked to your grandfather about this and got approval for me to be able to spend the night with you."

"Okay. I just wanted to be sure that you knew that you didn't have to." Carson relented.

"Of course I do." Jay said with a teasing grin. "But my heart would never let me hear the end of it if I didn't."

Carson couldn't restrain his loving smile at the words.

Jay leaned in and kissed him, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

"Do you have *any* idea of how lucky you are?" Logan asked as he

drifted to Carson's side.

"I think so." Carson said with his lovestruck gaze still focused on the door.

"I don't think that you do." Logan said frankly, then continued, "Love isn't like an 'on' and 'off' toggle, it's more of a rheostat, a sliding scale, tending to fluctuate within a range of values."

"I don't think I've ever heard it described quite so scientifically." Carson said cautiously as he turned his focus toward Logan.

"It's a telepath thing." Logan said dismissively, then continued, "What you and Jay have, it's at a point on the scale that most people will never encounter in their entire lives."

"So it's real?" Carson asked cautiously.

"It's love. It's an emotion, a feeling. I can tell you that you're honestly experiencing something that's profound, but if you're asking if it's 'once in a lifetime' or 'true love'... I don't have those answers."

Carson slowly nodded in comprehension.

"It is what it is. Tomorrow it might be something else. That's life." Logan said, then continued, "What I'm saying is that what you have, right here, right now, is something that most people won't ever experience. Recognize that and try to appreciate and cherish what you have."

"Okay. I will." Carson said quietly.

Chapter 2

"Can I get you anything?" Lucas asked gently.

"No. I'm fine." Jay quietly responded.

Jamiah looked up curiously at the response then cautiously said, "We've been here a couple hours. Maybe we should go to the cafeteria and get something to eat. If Lucas promises to stay here and call us if anything happens, then you'll know that you aren't going to miss anything."

"I'm fine." Jay repeated, then wearily smiled at Jamiah before saying, "You should probably get used to calling him 'Dad'."

"No. Not until the judge says the words over us."

"How many days until your hearing?"

"Seventy-eight." Jamiah answered immediately, then quietly asked, "Are you sure that you don't want to get adopted, too?"

"No. Lucas and Gordon have already said that I could keep on being their foster son. I'm in a good place right now. I don't want to change anything."

"I guess I can understand that. Most of why I want to get adopted has to do with Loquicia. She needs 'real' parents. I've done as much as I can but... well, she deserves more."

Lucas overheard their conversation and quietly interjected, "You've done a good job watching out for her. Now, I think it's time for you to relax and allow someone else to take care of things."

"I'm here with you while Loquicia is at home with Gordon. That never would have happened two weeks ago."

"Yes. You're right. You've come a long way. Thank you for trusting us."

Jay closed his eyes as a fresh wave of concern washed over him. He fought to understand within himself how Carson had become such an

important part of his life so quickly.

As he opened his eyes and looked across the room, he saw Carson's family gathered together and felt just a little bit better, knowing that he wasn't the only one who was consumed with worry.

* * * * *

Oleksandr was listening to the Chicago news broadcast while simultaneously skimming through news reports from various sources, looking for any keywords to alert him to possible information that they had not yet catalogued.

Most times Ben was at his side, researching and cross-referencing to be sure that no detail escaped their notice. However, with Thanksgiving upon them, Dax had asked for Ben's help to provide the best Thanksgiving possible for the people that his father had entrusted to his care.

Every time Oleksandr had visited 'Little Chicago' in the past few weeks, he had been amazed at how much they had been able to accomplish.

It didn't bear the slightest resemblance to the suburban community that it had started as. No matter which way you turned, every street had shops and displays of merchandise. All of Kettle Falls and Colville had come to depend on the artisans and craftsmen of 'Little Chicago'.

"Excuse me, Oleksandr. I have an incoming audio message for 'Mr. Rodchenko'." Dizzy said quietly as he automatically muted the radio stream.

"Did you tell them that they need to text their questions to me?" Oleksandr asked without looking away from the computer screen.

"Yes. But he said that he doesn't have a keyboard, he is contacting you by radio. He also mentioned that he spoke to you in person yesterday, in front of the school."

"Did he give his name?"

"Colonel Kuznetsov."

"I'll talk to him. Put him through." Oleksandr said as he minimized the text window that he had been working on.

"*Mr. Rodchenko?*" Colonel Kuznetsov asked uncertainly. The audio was muffled and staticy. Oleksandr had to strain to be able to hear.

"Yes. But please call me Oleksandr. How can I help you, Colonel?" Oleksandr responded in Russian, knowing that Colonel Kuznetsov was uncomfortable speaking English.

"I should explain, we have been informed about the proper procedure to follow when encountering refugees in need of aid. We were told to report their location and move on. But I fear that there are members of this group who may not be able to wait for aid to be dispatched in the customary manner. I was hoping that, given your notable position, you might be able to use your influence to have medical aid dispatched sooner."

"Go ahead and tell me what's wrong."

"Three members of their party have suffered gunshot wounds. Their party has also been without food for over a week and some are suffering from dysentery."

"Can you give me your location?" Oleksandr asked as he opened another window.

"I collected that information before connecting you. The coordinates are on your screen." Dizzy interjected.

"Never mind, Colonel. I have it. Go ahead, how big is the group?" Oleksandr asked as he began to type.

"Thirteen; Five adults and eight children."

"We can handle that. Tell me about the ones who were shot. I need to know their names and what injuries they have."

"A moment. I will need to ask."

Oleksandr finished typing his message to his contact at Fairchild Air Force Base and sent it, along with a note that more information would be forthcoming.

"The injured adult is identified as Sergeant Cooper of your United States Army. He has two bullet wounds to his upper chest and one in his lower right leg. He is weak and barely conscious."

"Can you give me his first name or his ID number, if he's wearing dog tags?" Oleksandr asked as he brought up Dizzy's main interface so that he could more easily perform searches.

"His first name is Darin. He is not in uniform, nor does he appear to have any identification. His cousin is present and although he does not know Sergeant Cooper's ID number, he is willing to provide any information that he has."

"What's his cousin's name? That might be all I need to know." Oleksandr asked as he watched Dizzy filling in the information on his screen as Colonel Kuznetsov disclosed it.

"The cousin's name is Doctor Ronald Cooper. Neither he nor the other doctor present are medical doctors. Both are academic doctors of psychology."

"Thank you, Colonel. That was enough to identify both of them. What was the name of the other doctor?"

"Dr. Michael David Galindo-Ortiz Junior."

"From Tallahassee?"

"Yes. They are all from Tallahassee."

"Okay. I've got that. Would you go ahead and tell me about the others who are injured?"

"Excuse me, but would it be possible to dispatch aid for them before we continue?"

"I'm waiting on Fairchild Air Force Base to reply to me. They have the coordinates and should have a team in the air in the next few minutes. While they're doing that, I'd like to get as much information as I can so that the medics will be prepared to give aid as soon as they arrive."

"Forgive me. Of course, you are familiar with such things. I am simply concerned for their wellbeing."

"There's nothing wrong with that. Now, will you go ahead and tell me about the next injured person? I need full names and ages and I need to know how bad they're hurt."

"The first is Brian Wilson Grant, age 12. He has one gunshot wound to his right leg. The bullet passed through and the leg has been bandaged. Although I believe that he would benefit from medical care, I would not classify his condition as being 'critical'."

Oleksandr watched as Dizzy filled the name in on the screen, then the rest of the boy's personal information filled in after it.

"Got it. Go ahead."

"The remaining victim is Dianne Marchand, age 15. She has a gunshot wound to her upper left arm. I have been told that she, too, had the bullet pass through. However, in her case it was necessary for them to use a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. From what little I know of such things, it may not be possible for the doctors to save the arm."

This time Dizzy had the information filling the screen *before* Colonel Kuznetsov was finished speaking.

As Oleksandr was about to respond, he saw a text message come up on his screen.

"Colonel Kuznetsov, I've just been notified that an air rescue unit has been dispatched to your location. Expect it in about eighteen minutes."

"Just a moment. I will inform them."

While he was waiting, Oleksandr quickly composed a text message for the Kettle Falls hospital, alerting them that they had incoming patients and giving a brief overview of the injuries.

"Thank you, Mr. Rodchenko. They are relieved to know that their rescue is close at hand."

"Before you go, can you tell me about the other people? That way I can try to set up places for them to stay."

"Allow me a moment to ask."

Oleksandr opened the housing menu, then waited for Colonel Kuznetsov to return.

"Next we have Emily Jane Fields, Age 15... apparently she prefers to be called 'Dog'."

The screen filled with her biographical information and Oleksandr dryly said, "She sounds like fun."

"No. Not by any definition of the word that I am familiar with." Colonel Kuznetsov responded dryly, also in Russian, then continued, *"Andrew Lee Hendrix, Age 14, who goes by 'Hendrix'."*

Oleksandr watched the screen fill with information, then said, "Next?"

"Daniel Emerit Pratt, Age 12."

The entire screen filled in with information which scrolled off the page as soon as Colonel Kuznetsov finished saying the name.

"Go ahead."

"Kevin Martin, Age 16."

"Okay."

"Michael Lavelle Sampson, Age 13, wishes to be called 'Mike'."

"Got it."

"And the last is Princess Todd, Age 14."

"Princess? Is that her real name?" Oleksandr asked, but before Colonel Kuznetsov could answer, the screen before him filled with information.

"Never mind. It is. Wow. What a name to hang on a kid." Oleksandr said with a shake of his head.

"I believe it suits her."

"Didn't you say that there were five adults? I've only got three."

"Oh yes. Forgive me. The remaining two adults are Andrew Holiday and Agnes Usher."

"What are their ages... never mind. I've got it."

"I will await the arrival of the air rescue team before continuing on with my mission. Thank you for your help, Mr. Rodchenko."

"If you come back through Kettle Falls, make sure that you stop in and talk to me. That way I can fill you in on how your rescuees are doing."

"Thank you. I will look forward to that time."

"Now I'd better get to work finding places for these people to live and stuff. Be sure to call me if you need anything else."

"Yes. You can be assured of that. Kuznetsov, out."

"Rodchenko, out." Oleksandr responded, then started going through the files before making any decisions about what to do next.

* * * * *

"Deb, why don't you go back to the house? I can wait here and call you as soon as there's any news." Ryan asked as he looked at his wife with concern.

"There's no way that I'm going to be able to focus on anything except worrying about Carson."

"I understand that, but I'm just concerned that it might not be good for the boys to be here for eight or ten hours, in a constant state of tension."

Deb glanced at Tommy, Mikey and Ty before saying, "You're right. Maybe helping with the Thanksgiving preparations will take their minds off of it for a while."

"Even if it doesn't, I still think that it will be healthier for them to be at home where they can be active and feel free to verbalize their feelings."

Deb smiled at her husband. Although he seemed to be carefree and oblivious most of the time, she knew that it was mostly an act. He analyzed things, both professional and personal, very carefully and made the conscious decision to tackle only those things that actually mattered to him. The rest he would disregard and leave for others to worry about. From the outside, it looked as though he didn't care. In

actuality, he cared deeply, but only devoted his energy to the things that he could affect and the things he believed would be worthy of his attention.

"Come on, boys. We're going back to the house." Deb said as she stood.

Tommy, Mikey and Ty all looked up with matching expressions of surprise.

"There's nothing that we can do to help Carson and we've got guests at the house expecting a Thanksgiving dinner."

"Can't I stay here? I never had a brother to worry about before and I want to be here for Carson." Ty asked urgently as he looked at Ryan, begging with his eyes.

As Deb tried to formulate an explanation of why that wouldn't be a good idea, Ryan quietly said, "I don't see any problem with that."

Deb looked at Ryan uncertainly.

"I might need the emotional support."

Deb glanced at Ty, then seemed to accept the explanation.

"Will you ask Nanny to save me some Thanksgiving dinner?" Ty asked Deb hopefully.

"We'll be sure to have a full dinner saved for you both and another set aside for Carson to enjoy as soon as he's able to come home." Deb gently assured him, then gathered him into a hug and gave him a kiss on the cheek before leading Tommy and Mikey out of the waiting room.

* * * * *

"Oleksandr, it appears that I have multiple hits regarding a member of the party that is being rescued." Dizzy announced.

"Yeah. I just saw that. Have you contacted them yet?" Oleksandr asked as he quickly read through the listing of people who had submitted the requests.

"I have attempted to do so. However, I have not received a response from any of their residences."

"Would you go ahead and place a call to Allen Thompson's house?" Oleksandr asked as he quickly scanned the latest news developments to be sure that there wasn't anything urgent needing his attention.

"Thompson residence. Jorry speaking."

"Hi Jorry, this is Oleksandr. Do you know if Ben or JD or Jody are there?"

"JD's in the kitchen, but he's probably up to his elbows in the turkey right now. I'll get you Ben." Jorry answered, then there was a clatter as he put down the phone.

Oleksandr smiled at the action as he waited for a text response from the hospital, letting him know that they would be ready to receive incoming patients.

"Oleksandr? This is Ben. What can I do for you?"

"You asked Dizzy to keep watch for a friend of yours, in case he came to Kettle Falls. I just called to let you know that Dr. Ronald Cooper is on his way here."

"Really!? That's great! How is he?"

Before Oleksandr could respond, he heard Ben calling out, "Boys! I just got word! Mr. Cooper's on his way here!"

"Some members of his group were injured, but from what I've been told, Mr. Cooper is fine."

"Oh my God! Were any of the kids hurt?"

"Yes. I don't know how bad, but they're being airlifted directly to the hospital, just to be safe."

"Ron's going to be a wreck if the kids are hurt."

"All of this just happened a couple minutes ago, so I haven't had time to look anything up. All the kids have different last names. Can you tell me about what's going on? I need to find a good place for them when

everyone's out of the hospital."

"Ron is in charge of a children's home in Tallahassee. If he's here, then he must be trying to get the kids to someplace safe."

"A children's home? Is that something like an orphanage?"

"Yes. Something like that. They work with the Child Protective Services to house children until they can find foster parents for them. Ron's a child psychologist... did you hear anything about Junior? Is he alright?"

Oleksandr switched windows on his screen then carefully said, "The only Junior I've heard about is Dr. Michael Galindo-Ortiz Junior."

"Yes. That's him! Is he alright?"

"As far as I know, he is."

"What are you going to do? Ron's going to want to have a place where he can take care of all the kids."

"I don't think we have any thirteen bedroom houses. Let me ask around and see what I can do."

"Where should we go to meet them? I bet they're going to be hungry."

"Well, it's really up to the Air Force to decide that, but I think all of them are going to the hospital so that even the ones who aren't hurt can get checked out. That would probably be the best place to meet up with them."

"Cliff and Jerry are both working at the hospital right now. I can call them and ask them to let us know when they get there. And between Allen and the rest of us, I'm sure that we'll be able to find places for everyone to sleep. Once everyone's been fed and has had a chance to catch up on their sleep, I'll have Ron get in touch with you about finding a place for him and his kids."

"That sounds good. That'll give me a chance to check on a few things."

"I'm going to go and let everyone know. Thanks for calling me,

Oleksandr. You just gave us a whole lot more to be thankful for." Ben said happily before hanging up the phone.

Oleksandr thought for a moment then said, "Dizzy, I'm going downstairs to talk to Bug for a few minutes. I've got my subvocal on if you need to get in touch with me."

"You got it, Olex."

Oleksandr smiled at the response, then said, "You seem to be a lot happier now that you're officially an AI."

*"I'm **almost** happy."*

"What's wrong?"

"Do you think Carson's going to be alright?"

"Yeah. I really think he is. Do you know if he's still in surgery?"

"There hasn't been an update on his condition in one hour and thirty-seven minutes."

"He'll be fine. Trust me."

* * * * *

"Hey, Bug. Do you have a minute?" Oleksandr asked as he approached. He was surprised to find more or less the whole family present as Bug sat in a cushioned chair, working on his laptop.

"A *whole* minute? That's a lot to ask." Bug answered without looking away from his work.

To Oleksandr, it looked like the twins were cooking breakfast and that Max, Bax and Ro were present in the kitchen, ostensibly to help. In the short time that Oleksandr was there, he caught two instances of the Gophers sneaking bites of food when the twins weren't watching.

Oleksandr looked around the room before cautiously asking, "Why aren't you working at the table?"

"Because they're going to be using it for Thanksgiving dinner. If I set things up over there, I'd just have to tear it right back down." Bug answered simply, then asked, "What did you need?"

"We've got some people coming in, thirteen of them, and I was hoping that you could help me find a place for them."

"Did Seth turn his radio off? That's his department." Bug asked as he continued to type, read and talk at the same time.

"No. I mean, I don't know. I haven't tried calling him, yet. See, the thing is, there's this guy, he runs a children's home. There's five adults and eight kids and I'd really like to find a place where they can all stay together and take care of that many."

"Shit!" Bug said abruptly.

Oleksandr reflexively stepped back and glanced at Bug's laptop screen to see if he could identify the problem.

"Not you." Bug said when he noticed, then muttered, "Some goddamned motherfucking people don't know how to take a fucking day off."

Oleksandr tried to restrain a grin at the irony of Bug's statement.

Bug opened a streaming video window on his laptop, then said, "Marc, you and Galen need to lay the fuck off. All we needed was for the heads-up display to be able to show 'miles per hour' and inches and shit like that so that everyone wouldn't have to know metrics. You already did that. All the extra conversions are bullshit. No one needs to know how fast something is moving in 'furlongs per fortnight'. Take the fucking day off and spend some goddamned time with your motherfucking family!"

"*Alright. You have a Happy Thanksgiving too, Bug.*" Marc responded with a grin.

Oleksandr waited as Bug closed the video window. Then he watched as Bug clicked on a text messaging window to check for any messages that might have come in. When Bug was done, he glanced at Oleksandr and asked, "What did you need?"

"Five adults, eight kids, children's home."

"That's right." Bug said as he started typing again. As he was typing,

he quietly asked, "Do you remember back when all this started?"

Oleksandr wasn't entirely sure that Bug was talking to him, but took a chance and reluctantly answered, "Yeah."

"One of the things that we did that made all of this work was to be sure that we didn't limit ourselves."

"Yeah." Oleksandr said quietly, mostly to confirm that he was still listening. He had no idea of what Bug was trying to make him understand.

Bug glanced over and saw Oleksandr's confused expression. He then turned to where Oma Shoupe was sitting, several feet away, and asked, "Oma? How many abandoned or orphaned kids do you think we have in Kettle Falls right now?"

She regretfully looked at Mindy and Mandy, who were quietly playing together, then said, "I'd estimate about sixty."

"And how are we helping those kids?"

"So far as I know, they're being placed with families who've agreed to take care of them. I'm afraid that many of those children are suffering from the rag-tag system that we've developed. As soon as they start forming attachments, either they're being moved away by their foster families, or their foster families are leaving them here when they decide to move on to Canada."

"Right. It's like having a really simple computer program that just does one or two things, then adding more and more features to it, making it grow into something huge that it was never meant to be. Instead of doing one or two things decently well, it ends up doing lots and lots of things, really badly."

Although Oleksandr was following along with what Bug was saying, he still didn't know how it related to what he was doing. Finally, Oleksandr cautiously asked, "So, what do you want me to do?"

"Build an orphanage."

"Huh?"

"Talk to Seth and his dad and see what they can come up with for you. Make it bigger than you need and put it somewhere that you can add on to it or put up more buildings if you need to."

"But I don't know if these people will be interested in staying in Kettle Falls and running an orphanage for us."

"That doesn't matter. Whether they agree to it or not, we *need* this. Your people get first crack at it, but if they refuse, then they can move on and we'll just get someone else to run it."

"Working at the school, I've met several people who I know would be willing to help, if they're needed." Oma Shoupe added helpfully.

Oleksandr slowly nodded, then said, "I'll call Seth right now."

"Breakfast is going to be ready in a few minutes, why don't you join us?" Bug asked with a smile.

"I had breakfast with Ben and Dax, about an hour ago."

"Yeah? So? This'll probably be the Gophers' third or fourth breakfast this morning."

Oleksandr thought about going back upstairs and staying there by himself and compared it to having breakfast with Bug and his family.

"I'll need to get my laptop."

"Bring your power cord, too."

* * * * *

"Can't Mr. Crante take care of everything?" Tommy asked his mother quietly as he kept the majority of his attention on his driving.

"Yes. I'm sure that he would do a very good job without us. But providing this Thanksgiving dinner is something that we're doing to show our guests that we're happy that they're here with us. We're trying to make this occasion something special so that everyone can take a day to appreciate what they're thankful for, even if it's something as simple as celebrating the fact that they've survived."

"It just seems wrong to be celebrating anything when Carson's in the

hospital having surgery."

"I know. I feel the same way. In a perfect world, we'd be able to stay at the hospital, right by Carson's bedside until he opened his eyes. But in the real world, the most we might be able to do is continue to sit and wait for the surgery to be finished and hope that all goes well. We wouldn't be allowed to see Carson until he's in recovery. Your father and Ty will call us as soon as the surgery's over, then we'll hurry to the hospital so that we can be there when Carson opens his eyes."

"I understand. I know in my head that what you're saying is right, but my heart is still saying that I should be staying in the waiting room in case there's something that I can do."

"Yours and mine, both." Deb admitted, then added, "We're almost home. I know that we're all worried about Carson, but try not to let that cast a gloom on everything else. In the past few weeks, several of our guests have become almost as close as family. Let's do our best for them."

"But when Dad calls, we're going back to the hospital, right?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Okay. Then Mikey and I will help you make sure that our guests have a good time."

* * * * *

"I talked to Seth while I was upstairs. He doesn't know of any place that's big enough, but he's going to ask his dad and do some checking around." Oleksandr said as he carried his laptop and power cord into the living room area.

"Breakfast is ready. Leave that here. No laptops at the table at mealtime." Bug said as he stood.

"I need to be able to talk to the hospital so that when my people arrive, I can find out how they're doing. I want to get as much as I can set up before they have a chance to make other plans." Oleksandr said as he placed his laptop on the coffee table.

"If we've learned anything in the past few weeks, it's that when it comes to the hospital, it's all a big game of hurry up and wait. You'll have time to eat."

Oleksandr reluctantly dragged himself away from his laptop and took a seat at the table.

It seemed somewhat strange to him that the wall had been removed, allowing Bug's dining room to merge with the massive dining room in the 'Main House'.

"Do you know what Ben's doing right now?" Bug asked as he prepared to take his first bite of food.

"Yeah. He's with Dax in 'Little Chicago', helping to organize their Thanksgiving dinner for everyone."

"Why's he doing that?"

"Because he wants to help Dax, I guess."

"No. I mean, why is Ben helping the Chicago people? He's not from there, but whenever anything happens that has to do with Chicago, he's right on top of it. Why is that?"

"We came here with the Chicago group and since Ben knew what was going on with them and he was working in Carson's Command Center, he kind of adopted them as 'his'."

"Right. I was there when that happened. Even when Dax was put in charge of 'Little Chicago', Ben still went out of his way to pay extra attention to the Chicago people and make sure that they had everything that they needed."

"Yeah. I guess so."

"I think that maybe it's time for 'Mr. Rodchenko' to step out of the shadows and adopt his own group to help."

"I don't hide in the shadows. I got up and talked in front of a whole school full of people yesterday."

"Oleksandr did that. Mr. Rodchenko was still hiding out behind

computer screens and text messages, so that no one would know that he's really an eight-year-old boy."

"I only do that so that I can do my job. If the people at Fairchild knew that I was a kid, they probably wouldn't listen to me when I asked them for help."

"I understand that. What I'm saying is that by hiding who you are, you're limiting what you can do to help people. If you really want to help these people at the hospital, I think that you're going to need to do it without holding back."

Oleksandr sat quietly as he considered the words.

"What do you feel like you should be doing, right now?"

"Part of me feels like I should be at the hospital, checking on them and getting to know them and seeing what kind of help they really need. But another part says that I should be here, doing the work that Ben is counting on me to do."

"You know as well as I do that Dizzy can monitor things and contact you if something comes up that you need to deal with. Besides that, you can always hand off to Courtney or Monarch Command and let them watch things for a little bit, if you want to be able to talk to people without being interrupted."

"That's true."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"I guess I'd better go to the hospital so that 'my' people will know that there's someone in Kettle Falls who's on their side."

"Eat your breakfast first." Bug said with a smile, then a strange look came over his face. "Hang on."

Bug keyed the subvocal button on his throat then said, "Go ahead."

Oleksandr looked around the table at Ken, Kev, Oma Shoupe, Mindy, Mandy and the Gophers, all eating as though Bug holding a conversation with someone who wasn't there was nothing out of the ordinary. In the end, he supposed that it probably wasn't.

"Yeah. You can't reach him, I think he's probably at the hospital with Carson. What did you need?"

Oleksandr absently took a bite of the food that had been placed before him and was surprised at just how good it was.

"Have you met Karl Francer? Even if you talked to Mr. Brown, I bet he wouldn't do anything but tell you to talk to Karl about it."

Oleksandr continued to eat as he speculated on what Bug was talking about.

"Yeah. No problem. Later." Bug said, then tapped the button on his throat.

Oleksandr considered for a moment, then activated his own subvocal before saying, "Courtney, this is Oleksandr. I'm going to need an escort in about five minutes. I'm on the first floor of the big house."

"Acknowledged." Courtney's voice immediately responded.

"Five minutes?" Bug asked as he looked at the plate of food in front of Oleksandr.

"I can do it."

* * * * *

"Mr. Brown? How is Carson doing?" A young-looking Asian man asked cautiously as he walked into the waiting room.

"He's doing alright, as far as we know. We haven't heard anything since about six this morning." Ryan quietly admitted, then noticed that the new arrival was looking at Ty strangely. "I guess you haven't been by the house since all the chaos erupted. Erin, I'd like for you to meet my new son, Tyrell Brown. Ty, this is Erin Tu, he's Carson's physical therapist."

"It's nice to meet you, Ty." Erin said to the boy, then turned to Ryan and said, "I'm sorry that I haven't been by to work with Carson. The hospital's been so busy that I haven't had... no, there's no excuse. I should have remembered my commitment."

"Don't beat yourself up, Erin. All of us have been overwhelmed. And if we had needed you, I would have called."

"Thank you, sir. How is Carson? I mean, when I checked in this morning, I noticed that he was slated for surgery, but... did they end up having to 'take' the legs'?" Erin finished in a whisper as tears filled his eyes at the thought.

"No. It's nothing like that. We've had the good fortune to have encountered a medical professional with an experimental procedure which has a very good chance of restoring Carson's legs completely."

"Really? How is that even possible?"

"You know me. I'm not one to worry too much about 'how' things work, just as long as they do. It's our hope that when the surgery is complete, that Carson will have two fully functioning legs. Of course, once we've crossed that hurdle, then it's going to be up to Carson to learn how to use them again."

"Do you think that I'll be able to help with that?"

"I can't think of anyone that Carson would *rather* have helping him. I suppose the question is, are you going to be able to devote a significant amount of time to just one patient? I wouldn't want for others to be neglected for Carson's sake. But I also wouldn't want for Carson to be neglected because his physical therapist is being pulled in too many directions at once."

"Things have settled down in the past week or so. I still have a lot to do, but most of it is new patients who only need a few sessions and some simple instruction. Barring another catastrophic event, I think I could safely commit to helping Carson."

"As soon as the surgery is done, I'll talk to my father-in-law about the timetable for Carson's physical therapy. Expect to be getting a call from him in the next few days."

"Thank you, sir. I promise that I won't let my other duties get in the way of helping Carson."

"If you find yourself being overwhelmed, just tell me. Believe it or not, I

do have *some* influence."

Erin laughed at the understatement, then noticed the others in the room, looking at him with anguish.

"Sorry." Erin whispered as he reigned in his emotions, then quickly added, "I have to get to work, now. Be sure to call on me if there's anything that I can do."

"We haven't heard anything about Carson for hours. If you find out *anything*, would you stop by and tell us?"

"I'm just a physical therapist, they don't tell me much. But if I run across anything, I'll let you know."

"Thank you."

* * * * *

"Are you okay, Mom? Do you want to go back?" Tommy asked as he pulled the Gator to a stop in the parking lot outside the back door of the 'Big House'.

"No. This is where we need to be."

"There's Aiden and Destiny! Who's that with them?" Mikey asked from the back seat.

"Janet said that her wife might be able to join us today. That must be her." Deb said speculatively.

"I didn't realize that Janet was a lesbian." Tommy said as he got out of the Gator.

"Now that you know, does it make you look at her differently?" Deb asked curiously.

After a moment to consider, Tommy said, "Not really. I mean, since I didn't know any different, I just figured that she had a husband. I'm a little bit surprised that she has a wife, but that's about it."

"I'm sure that by the end of the day, you won't even think about it." Deb said as she guided Tommy and Mikey to walk with her to where Janet and her wife were trying to herd their children into the house.

* * * * *

Breakfast finished, Bug took his customary place at the sinks to help with the dishes. Although all of them knew that he wanted to get back to work on his laptop, cleaning up after a meal was one last vestige of his former life that he refused to let go of.

"Holy fucking shit!" Bug exclaimed as his legs were suddenly seized.

"Bug! Not in front of the children." Oma Shoupe scolded.

"They started it." Bug said as he squatted down so that he could hug Destiny and Aiden in return.

Janet looked around and noticed Deb, Tommy and Mikey walking into the room.

"Everyone, I'd like to introduce my wife, Daelynn." Janet said loudly, then said to Daelynn, "This is my boss, Deb and her sons, Tommy and Mikey."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Daelynn said shyly.

"It's wonderful to finally get to meet you. I know that Janet's been missing you. I'm so glad that you're here." Deb said warmly.

"How's Carson?" Janet asked with concern.

"He's still in surgery, we haven't heard anything, yet."

"Did they say how long it's going to take?"

"Three or four more hours, at least."

A bark of laughter drew their attention.

All of them turned to see Bug collapsed on the floor with Destiny and Aiden mercilessly tickling him.

"Stop! Stop!" Bug called out between bouts of laughter.

Janet and Daelynn shared a considering look, then moved in unison to retrieve their children.

It took a moment for Bug to catch his breath and make his way to the nearest chair.

"Bug, I was hoping that when you have some time that you and Daelynn might be able to talk about the possibility of her finding a job here, in Kettle Falls." Janet said hopefully.

"You work with Dizzy every day, don't you? Why don't you just ask him?"

"See. I knew they wouldn't want to help a gay couple." Daelynn said darkly.

Bug rolled his eyes, then motioned behind him toward the sink as he said, "Try again. These are my boyfriends, Ken and Kev."

Daelynn looked with surprise from one twin to the other.

"I wasn't saying that I wouldn't help. I was just saying that Janet can query Dizzy just as easily as I can. You don't *need* for me to help."

"Daelynn has some very specialized skills. It's not something that Dizzy tracks." Janet quickly explained.

"You could'a just said that." Bug said with a grin.

"Janet, Daelynn, why don't I take you to the main house so that I can introduce you around? Once you've met everyone, you can come back here and visit with Bug as much as you want." Deb suggested.

"Gonna go see Courtney?!" Aiden asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a very good idea. With any luck, Courtney and Trevor will want to visit with the kids for a while so that the parents can have a little 'adult' time." Deb said with a smile down at the three-year-old boy.

"That sounds *wonderful*." Janet said with a relieved smile.

"Jan has mentioned that a group of kids in tents on your front lawn have grown very attached to Destiny and Aiden." Daelynn said in a leading tone, obviously uncertain about their motives.

"Attached? They've all but adopted them." Deb chuckled as she led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

"Why are you going to the hospital? Are you giving another talk?" Lee asked curiously as he drove.

"I've got a group of kids from an orphanage in Florida who are being brought to the hospital by helicopter. A couple of them have been shot." Oleksandr explained.

"So, are you a doctor, too?" Lee asked, half-jokingly.

"No. But when they're done seeing the doctors, they're going to need a place to stay. So I want to go to the hospital to talk to them and get to know them so that I can be sure that they'll end up getting the help that they really need."

"There have been thousands of people coming through here and you never did this for any of them. What makes this bunch different?"

"I don't know. When Colonel Kuznetsov told me about them, something inside me 'clicked'. All of a sudden I remembered what it's like to be a foster kid and what it's like to be scared and hurt... I don't know why I feel that way now, but I really want to help them however I can."

"You can probably help them better than almost anyone else. Not only are you friends with the most important and influential people in Kettle Falls, but you also know how everything works, so you know who to go to to get things done."

"Yeah. I guess so. I don't know why it feels like, by helping them that I'll be helping me... you know, like I was before I got here. It doesn't make any sense."

"Not everything *has to* make sense. Just do what you feel that you need to do. If helping them helps to fix something that feels broken inside you, then everyone comes out ahead."

"But I feel like I should be helping them to help them, not to help me. Something about it feels wrong."

"Why do you work in Carson's Command Center?"

"I help Ben to keep track of what's going on outside of Kettle Falls."

"No. I'm not asking *what* you do. I'm asking *why* you do it."

"Oh, um... At first it was to help Ben. But then, I guess later it was because people needed help and I wanted to help them."

"So you're not in it for the money?"

"No."

"Are you in it to become famous?"

"No."

"Are you doing it just because Ben does it?"

"Maybe at first, but not anymore."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because I can. Because it needs to be done."

"Because it's the right thing to do?" Lee suggested.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Is helping these people at the hospital the right thing to do?"

"Yes."

"How sure are you?"

"I *know* it's the right thing."

"Helping them may help you or it may not. But you'll do your best to help them either way because you *know* it's the right thing to do. As long as you keep doing what you know to be right, then you don't have to worry about the rest."

"You know, if I had a big brother, I'd want him to be just like you."

"If I had a little brother, I'd want for him to be like you, too."

* * * * *

"Marc, what are you doing?" JD asked curiously as he mixed a huge bowl of stuffing with his bare hands.

"I'm just seasoning the turkey." Marc said from the back porch, a few

feet away.

"I already did that!" JD yelled and had to fight not to step away from the stuffing.

"Don't worry. I didn't touch *your* turkey. The project that I was working on was unexpectedly cancelled, so I decided to make this up so that we'll be sure to have plenty of leftovers."

"I don't mean to be an oven hog, but I've already got plans for every square inch of oven space for the rest of the day."

"That's not a problem. I'm cooking the turkeys in a roaster on the back porch."

"Turkeys?! As in *multiple* turkeys?"

"Well, yeah. We ended up with a glut of turkeys since so many truckers were hauling them when everything went crazy. And since there was enough room to fit two in the roaster, I figured, what the hell?"

"You haven't had Thanksgiving until you've had it with Marc." Collin said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Yeah. His Thanksgiving dinners are legendary." Christian added as he followed.

After a moment to consider, JD finally said, "Well, good. I've never cooked for this many people before so it'll be good to have help from someone more experienced."

"If Marc's helping you, you won't have to worry about running short of food. Trust me."

* * * * *

As Deb had hoped, the UNIT kids on the front lawn were excited about the prospect of spending some time with Destiny and Aiden. Beyond that, they welcomed Daelynn so warmly that she could barely believe it.

When Deb showed Janet and Daelynn into the living room, Madelyn

was there and quickly asked, "How is Carson?"

"He was still in surgery when I left. Ryan promised to call if there were any news at all." Deb said frankly, then thought to say, "I'd like for you to meet Janet's wife, Daelynn."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Madelyn said formally.

"Daelynn, I'd like to present my mother, the Honorable Madelyn Murten, Superior Court Justice of Stevens County."

"So you're a judge and your daughter's a lawyer. You've got to be proud."

"More than I can say." Madelyn admitted, then turned to her daughter and said, "I was thinking of going to the hospital. I know that there's nothing I can do but... I just feel like I need to."

"I understand. I'd probably still be there if Ryan hadn't reminded me about our guests. Besides, it was really hard for the boys to be sitting there under stress for that long."

"Did you need any help with anything here, before I leave?"

"No. Nothing that I can think of. But make sure that you call for an escort."

"Yes. Yes. As much as I dislike it, I see the necessity." Madelyn said wearily, then thought to ask, "Do you think that Ryan needs me to bring him anything?"

"No. He has Ty for moral support. I'm sure that the hospital will provide anything else that he might need." Deb assured her, then smiled warmly as she added, "Ty asked me to ask you to save him some Thanksgiving dinner. I promised him that you would."

"Of course I will. He's my sweet, special boy. By the way, I talked to Mr. Crante about the meal and he seems to have everything under control. Everyone knows that you're taking the day off, so you should be free to enjoy spending time with your guests."

"Did Olufemi ever say if he was going to be able to attend?" Janet asked suddenly.

"Yes. But it won't be until later. His mother and sister both work at the Ferguson Truck Stop Diner. They're going to make sure that they have Thanksgiving dinner prepared for all the truckers before they come here." Deb responded.

"Jan told me about the truck stop. Did truckers from all over the country really form their own town?" Daelynn asked curiously.

"Yes. But from what I hear, they weren't planning to. At first, it was just restrooms and a washing station with a pop-up restaurant to accommodate the truckers who had been displaced. But as time went on, both a full-fledged restaurant and a recreation hall were built. Then, when they received word that a prominent truck stop owner and his wife had nearly been killed, the truckers decided that their little loosely formed community would officially be named 'Ferguson'." Deb explained.

"Yes. And Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson's children have even gone to work at the restaurant, using some of Mrs. Ferguson's recipes, that all the truckers know and love." Madelyn added.

"Along with all the horror in the past few weeks, there have also been some incredible acts of kindness and generosity." Daelynn said quietly.

"If you decide to stay in Kettle Falls, you'll see a lot of that." Deb said with a somber smile.

* * * * *

"Excuse me. Can you tell me where I can go to find out about the people who were just brought in by helicopter?" Oleksandr asked at the reception desk.

"We're busy here, kid. Go find your mother." The nurse behind the desk said irritably, then looked past him to the next person in line and asked, "May I help you?"

Oleksandr looked at her with surprise. He had been surrounded by people who respected him and took him seriously for so long that he had forgotten what it was like to be treated like a child.

Even so, he had a job to do and he wouldn't allow one dismissive hospital worker to divert him from his cause.

Oleksandr tapped the subvocal on his throat and said, "Dizzy, would you send a message to the hospital from Mr. Rodchenko? Ask for someone to take me to the Tallahassee people we just brought in. Tell them that I need to interview the people so that I can find them somewhere to live."

"I'll do it if you need me to, but I don't understand why I'm doing it, since you're already there."

"I bet that there's a lot of things that you used to do when you were just a computer program that seem really strange to you now."

"Yes. Before I had a series of commands to follow. I did what I was told and reacted as I was expected to. Now, I have the ability to question every action that I take... and for every single action, there is the possibility that I'm wrong."

"I guess the only thing that will make it easier is if you trust us to ask for things that we really need. And the reason I'm asking for you to send the message is because the people at the hospital see that I'm young and make judgements about me based on that."

"Is there a problem?" Lee asked as he approached.

"Only that the hospital people don't know who I am."

"Do you need for me to talk to them?"

"No. I've got it covered."

"The message has been sent. Someone should be with you shortly."

"Thank you, Dizzy." Oleksandr said sincerely, then tapped his subvocal to disconnect the call.

Less than a minute later, a man in a lab coat rushed into the reception area and asked, "Is there a Mr. Rodchenko here?"

"Right here!"

* * * * *

"What's going on?" Brother Jacques asked as he slowly walked off the elevator with Zane at his side.

"Not much." Ken said as he raced over to them, then quickly asked, "Zane, do you need to sit down?"

"Yeah. I'm still not good at the whole walking around thing." Zane said in a pained voice.

"Come over here. Have you had breakfast? We have plenty of everything if you're hungry." Ken said as he walked closely by Zane's side in case he had an unsteady moment.

"No. Jake made me a wonderful breakfast. I just decided that I was ready to leave the third floor. I've been trapped up there since the surgery." Zane said, then sat in one of the cushioned chairs as Brother Jacques and Ken helped to ease him down.

"If I knew that you were feeling trapped, I could have brought a wheelchair up and you could have gone anywhere you wanted to." Kev said seriously as he stood by, in case he could help.

"It wasn't a problem, really. I've mostly been focused on being able to walk to the bathroom and back to the bed on my own. Today, I just felt like it was time." Zane said as he closed his eyes after what seemed to be a monumental effort.

"Whether you've been able to move around or not, you guys have been doing some good work. Thanks to you following up on special requests, I don't think that anyone passing through Kettle Falls has felt like they've been forgotten." Bug said from the neighboring chair.

"Yeah. Thanks for finding us something that we could do from the bedroom. It's been nice to do a real job." Brother Jacques said honestly.

"Where are Roris and Lawrence? I expected for them to be here." Zane asked as he looked around.

"They left early and went over to Roris' parents' house. I think that they're going to be spending Thanksgiving with them." Bug replied.

"What did Dr. Murten say about Lawrence? I remember Lawrence saying something about having an appointment last week, but I never heard about how it went." Zane asked curiously.

"Well, the doctor did a bunch of scans and said that Lawrence has some scar tissue and shit deep in his brain. From the way he described it, it's a real mess in there."

"Is there anything he can do?"

"Yeah. There's one thing. He said that there's this surgery that he can do that will make it so that Lawrence isn't as likely to have a stroke. I didn't get all the medical jargon, but it sounded to me like he wants to go in there and replace some veins or arteries or some shit like that."

"If he does that, is it going to fix Lawrence's brain damage?"

"No. Dr. Murten said that even if they went deep into Lawrence's brain and tried to fix everything that was messed up in there, that the surgery would probably kill him. But if it didn't, chances are that it wouldn't make him any better. When he was beaten, part of his brain died. There's nothing that the doctor can do to bring it back."

"But there *is* something that he *can* do to help Lawrence?" Brother Jacques asked to confirm.

"Yeah. He can do a surgery to make it less likely that Lawrence is going to have a stroke. He said that it's a pretty simple surgery... as brain surgeries go. They probably could have done it back when Lawrence was first in the hospital and then he wouldn't have had to take the drugs for all these years, but someone was just too lazy or cheap to do it."

"When I talked to the doctors, when we first found Lawrence, it was never even suggested that there might be something more that could be done to help him." Oma Shoupe interjected.

"Found him? Was he lost?" Brother Jacques asked curiously.

"My dad was a real homophobic piece of shit..." Bug began to say, then looked at his grandmother and quietly said, "Sorry, Oma."

"Don't worry about it, Bug. Your father WAS a homophobic piece of shit." Oma Shoupe stated simply.

Bug nodded, then continued, "Well, one night my dad caught Lawrence wearing girls' clothes or something and he beat the shit out of Lawrence and threw him out of the house."

"Lawrence dressed like a girl?" Ken asked with surprise.

"Yeah. And since Lawrence hasn't ever talked about wanting to dress like a girl since then, I'm guessing that whatever made him want to do that was in the part of his brain that died." Bug said past the lump in his throat.

Since Bug seemed to be choked up, Oma Shoupe continued the narrative, "Some months later, Bug's father killed his mother, and then himself. That's when I was called, since I was Bug's only living relative. I had been out of contact with the family for a while and was unaware of what had happened to Lawrence. When I found out, Bug and I started searching for him."

Oma Shoupe took a tissue from the side table beside her, then dabbed the tears from her eyes before continuing, "We searched for weeks, but to no avail. It wasn't until we started visiting hospitals, asking if they had any unidentified teenage boys that we stumbled upon him."

There was a long silence, and it was Bug who finally continued, "When we found him, they told us that he had been brutally raped and nearly beaten to death. We talked to the cops about it, but they seemed to be annoyed that we were even there. I guess that they had already closed the case and stuck it up on a shelf somewhere and forgot about it. They didn't even know who Lawrence was and when we told them, they didn't care."

Oma Shoupe nodded, then said, "When we were finally able to take Lawrence home, he was completely helpless. It was like taking care of a six foot tall toddler."

"Yeah. A toddler with some major temper tantrums." Bug added.

"He could have been worse." Oma Shoupe said in Lawrence's defense.

Bug considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess so. I guess it's because I was so little, back then. Lawrence was bigger and stronger than I was, so when he'd sit on the floor and refuse to move, I couldn't *make* him move."

Oma Shoupe slightly smiled, then distantly said, "Looking back, it's remarkable that we were able to manage. The finances were strained. Lawrence needed constant care and supervision and the child protective services seemed intent on putting Bug into foster care."

"Don't get me started on CPS." Bug growled.

"But we survived." Oma Shoupe quickly continued, to preclude Bug's impending tirade. "Eventually we were able to get Lawrence to a point of stability where he could maintain relationships with people besides us and was even able to hold down a part-time job."

"To be honest, the job was a work program for the mentally disabled." Bug interjected, then continued, "But it gave him the experience of being able to leave the house and go to work each day. He got the chance to earn money and feel pride in his accomplishments."

"Now Lawrence is in an adult relationship that looks like it has a chance of lasting. There were times when such an outcome was beyond hope." Oma Shoupe said with a weary smile.

Bug slowly nodded his agreement to his grandmother's sentiment.

"So, has Dr. Murten said when he wants to do the surgery?" Brother Jacques asked curiously.

"Yeah. He said that as soon as Carson's surgery is done and he's sure that he's recovering, then he'll set it up." Bug answered.

"So, it's not an emergency or anything." Brother Jacques concluded.

"No. He's been like this for eight years, a few more weeks shouldn't make any difference."

* * * * *

"How are you doing? Do you need anything?" Madelyn asked as she walked into the waiting room.

"We're fine, Madelyn. There hasn't been any news, yet." Ryan said wearily.

"Do you need a break? I can sit vigil while you get some coffee, if you need to."

"I've had so much coffee today that I probably won't sleep again until next summer."

"How are you doing, Ty?"

"I'm worried about Carson."

"We all are." Madelyn assured him in a whisper, then asked in a normal voice, "Why don't you come over here and give me a hug and see if that doesn't help?"

Ty smiled at the suggestion, then moved into her arms and hugged her firmly.

* * * * *

"You're Mr. Rodchenko?"

"Yeah. That's me."

"I've met you before. Your first name is Alexander, isn't it?"

"Oleksandr, you can call me Olex, if you want."

"That's right! I met you at Mr. Brown's house. You're Ben's son, aren't you?"

"Yeah. At least I'm going to be. We're waiting on the adoption to be finalized."

"Well, it's nice to meet you again, Olex. I'm Dr. Parish, but you can call me Jerry. I received a message that someone out here needed to talk to our new patients." Dr. Parish said as he glanced at Lee, who was hovering nearby.

"Yeah. That's me. I work in Carson's Command Center and I wanted

to talk to them so I'd know what kind of stuff they're going to need when they get out of the hospital."

"To be honest, I don't know anything about their conditions. I'm a dermatologist, so unless one of them has a rash, I probably won't be treating them. I was free when your call came in, so they sent me to help you. If you'd like, I can take you back to the treatment area and let you talk to whoever's waiting in the waiting room." Dr. Parish said as he turned and gestured for Oleksandr to walk with him.

Oleksandr looked back at Lee inquiringly.

"It looks like you're all set up. Call if you need me. I'll be around." Lee said as he subtly pointed at the subvocal button on his throat.

"I will." Oleksandr promised, then followed Dr. Parish around the reception desk and into the back hallway.

Chapter 3

After hugging for a moment, Madelyn noticed the tablet computer that Ty seemed to have been engrossed in when she had first entered.

"What's this that you're working on?" Madelyn asked as she released Ty to hold him at her side.

"Mr... um, Dad was showing me how to use Zed to design robots."

"What's this, Ryan? Are you planning on putting another of my grandsons to work for you? Don't you have enough money to *hire* people instead of putting your children to work?"

"You save money where you can." Ryan said with a weak grin at her, then seriously added, "Ty's shown an interest in robotics, so I'm doing what I can to show him the realities of the field."

"Realities? By creating fantasy 3D models?"

"Although these are 3D models, they're being generated by Zed, back at the factory. Everything that Ty's inputting on his tablet is able to be fabricated. He can add utility and mobility systems without having to bother with all the small details. That will allow him to proceed with the development at a realistic pace without getting bogged down in minutiae."

"Yeah. Dad says that I can make my robot have legs or wheels or whatever I want." Ty added happily.

Madelyn could see that Ty was excited about the project and gently said, "It's wonderful that your father has these tools available for you to use."

"He still has a way to go before his design is complete, but once he's finished, Zed has a dedicated production line that is used exclusively for prototypes." Ryan said with a smile at Ty.

"Dad says that when that's all done, that I'm going to need Carson's help to make the robots be something more than remote controlled toys."

"That's right. Although we can install some rudimentary verbal commands for mobility and the like, the bulk of the programming really needs to be tailored to the design of the individual robot and its purpose."

"I think that it's wonderful that you're going to have a project to work on with your brother. Considering what's going on right now, I'm sure that he's going to be incapacitated for quite some time and it will be good for him to have a diversion." Madelyn said thoughtfully.

Ryan nodded his agreement to her words and from his expression, Madelyn suddenly realized that that had been Ryan's intention all along. Her respect for her son-in-law ratcheted up another notch as she realized how he was discreetly orchestrating events to provide the best possible outcome for everyone involved.

* * * * *

"Did you need for me to stay with you?" Dr. Parish asked as they walked into the small waiting room.

"No. I'll be okay. Thanks for helping me." Oleksandr said appreciatively.

"If you need anything else, be sure to call on me."

"Yes. I will. Thank you." Oleksandr responded, then watched as Dr. Parish walked away.

There were only two people in the waiting room. One was a man who appeared to be in his late thirties, although his haggard appearance might be deceptive. The boy with him appeared to be a young teen and seemed to be in a state of shock, staring vacantly at nothing.

"Do you mind if I talk to you for a few minutes?" Oleksandr asked quietly, reluctant to intrude on the man's silent contemplation.

It took a moment, but the man finally looked up and asked, "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Oleksandr Rodchenko."

"Are you related to the Rodchenko that Colonel Kuznetsov was talking

to?"

"Yeah. Sort of. That's kind of a lot to explain. I need to ask you a few questions right now and I can tell you about me later." Oleksandr said frankly, then asked, "What was your name?"

"I'm Ron Cooper. What did you need to ask me?"

"I guess the first, biggest thing that I need to know is if you're planning on staying in Kettle Falls or not."

"That really depends."

"On what?"

"A lot of different things. I suppose that instead of sitting here, basking in the feeling of being safe, I should find someone to talk to so that I can find out what the possibilities are."

"Actually, that's what I'm here for. I can probably answer most of your questions, and if I can't, I know who to ask to get the answers."

"Let me tell you upfront that my cousin, Darin, has been badly hurt. From the extent of his injuries, he's probably going to need to stay in the hospital for quite a while. So, from a personal perspective, I'd like to stay here at least for as long as Darin needs me."

"Okay. Hang on for just a second." Oleksandr said, then keyed the subvocal on his throat and said, "Dizzy? Will you monitor Darin Cooper's medical condition for me? Let me know how he's doing and when they're expecting him to be released."

"I currently have only admission information on Sergeant Cooper. I will notify you as soon as his file has been updated." Dizzy responded professionally.

"Thank's Dizzy." Oleksandr said before tapping the button on his throat.

"Who were you talking to?" Ron asked cautiously.

"Dizzy. He's the AI computer... well, one of them. Dizzy helps us keep things organized." Oleksandr explained, then continued, "As soon as I

know anything about your cousin, I'll tell you about it. While we're waiting for that, we can try and figure out some of the rest."

"Okay. I don't know if you know about this, but I'm in charge of a children's home in Tallahassee..." Ron began to say, but was interrupted.

"I know everything that Colonel Kuznetsov reported on the radio."

"He was speaking Russian, so I don't know exactly what he told you... it was you that he was talking to, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. That's right." Oleksandr confirmed, then said, "By the way, some of your friends from Tallahassee asked that we keep a look out for you, in case you decided to come to Kettle Falls. I've already called Ben and let him know that you're here. Right now they're probably waiting for word from the hospital that you can have visitors."

"Ben? He made it here safely? How are JD and Jody?"

"They're fine. I don't know too much about what all they went through to get here, but it's best if they tell you about that anyway. Let's see how much we can get decided before everyone else gets here."

"I need to go to the bathroom." The boy beside Ron said quietly.

"It's right there. Go on. I'll be right here."

"Will you go with me?"

"No. But I promise that I won't leave you, Danny. You go and do what you need to do and I'll be right here when you get back."

It seemed to take a moment, but the boy, Danny, finally reluctantly began to walk away.

Oleksandr noticed that Danny stopped twice and looked anxiously back at Mr. Cooper before finally entering the bathroom.

At Oleksandr's concerned look, Ron quietly volunteered, "All the kids have been traumatized to varying degrees by our experience."

"What happened to you?"

"We fell for probably the most obvious trick in the book. We stopped to

help some stranded motorists." Ron said distantly, then added, "It was an ambush."

"Yes. We're doing our best to stop people like that. In fact, that's a big part of what Colonel Kuznetsov and his people are doing."

"When we realized that it was a trap, Darin tried to stop them so that we could get away, but they shot him. One of the others started randomly shooting the kids. The only reason that we're not all dead right now is because they were more worried about saving their bullets than killing us. They took all our food and water and our vehicles and left us in the middle of nowhere to die." Ron said gravely.

Oleksandr turned at a movement and saw Danny hurrying back from the bathroom.

The boy took the seat beside Ron and tucked himself securely under Ron's arm.

Oleksandr watched for a moment, then said, "Let me tell you about the arrangements that I've made so far and you can let me know if there's anything that won't work."

Ron silently nodded his agreement as he cuddled the terrified boy close to him.

"There are kids here, in Kettle Falls, who've been orphaned or abandoned. So far, we've been doing our best to find places for them to stay but that's really the only help they're getting. A lot of them have been traumatized like your kids and some have been through even worse things. We were hoping that once you get everything worked out, that maybe you'd choose to stay here in Kettle Falls and help us to help them."

"Help them how?"

"Right now there are some people working on building a children's home. That's the easy part. There are a lot of kids who've either seen their families die all around them or who've just been abandoned. We're seeing to it that they're getting food and shelter and I guess that some of them are being accepted into new families. But there are

some who are just getting passed around from family to family and aren't really getting any help dealing with everything that they've been through."

"I understand what you're saying. I've been fighting that battle in Tallahassee for all of my professional life."

"We probably should have done something before this, but the hard part is finding good people to staff the home who are used to working with kids and know what kinds of help they really need."

"Considering that two of the kids in my care have been shot, I don't know why anyone would trust me to care for children ever again."

"I'll make you a deal. If you'll say that you'll help us with this, I'll promise that we won't ask you to take any kids on field trips across the desolate hellscape to the east of us."

"We've been without food or clean water for almost a week. I don't think I'm in a state of mind to be making important decisions right now."

"That's fair enough. Like I said, we've already got people building the new children's home. It'll take some time for them to finish that, so you've got plenty of time to think about things and make your decision. I just wanted to let you know about this before you started making other plans."

"Thank you for that. I promise that I'll seriously consider what you're offering."

"Mr. Cooper, I can watch things here if you're ready to go to the cafeteria and get something to eat. Everyone's worried about you." A young man said as he approached.

"Thank you, Junior. But Danny and I are going to wait here for when the next free doctor is ready to see him."

"I can wait here with Danny. You really need to go and eat something before you pass out."

"No!" Danny said in panic as he clutched closer to Ron's side.

Oleksandr could tell that Junior was firm in his resolve but also that Ron wasn't likely to back down.

"Excuse me, but do you think that it would be possible to get something from the cafeteria and bring it back here for them?" Oleksandr hesitantly suggested.

"Who the hell are you?" Junior asked as he turned his angry gaze on Oleksandr.

"I'm Oleksandr Rodchenko. And I'm guessing that you're Michael Galindo-Ortiz, or do you expect me to call you *doctor*?"

Junior was shocked by the young boy's words but was finally able to say, "Why don't you just call me Junior."

"Alright, Junior." Oleksandr said with a smile, then added, "I don't think anyone will mind if you bring some food back here, but if they do, let me know and I'll get you special permission."

"Why would they listen to what a little kid says?"

"Because I've helped a lot of people, I guess." Oleksandr said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "Or maybe because they know that I work in Carson's Command Center and that with one word from me they'll get sandpaper instead of toilet paper every time they order supplies, from now on."

"I'll just go get that food... now..." Junior said in a diminishing voice, then hurried away.

"Ron?" A voice said from behind Oleksandr, surprising him.

"Cliff? What are you doing here?!" Ron asked with surprise as he quickly stood.

"I work here. Actually, they've put me in charge of pediatrics."

"Have you seen Darin? Do you know how he's doing?"

"Darin? Oh yes. I saw him when he was admitted, but when I saw his full name, I didn't make the association and realize that he was related to you. I'm sorry, but I don't know anything about his condition. I've

been working on a young lady named Dianne."

"How is she?"

"Well, there's good news and some not quite as good news."

Before Ron could ask, Cliff continued, "The good news is that although Dianne is weak from dehydration and starvation, her blood loss wasn't so severe as to endanger her life and there aren't any signs of infection. The less good news is that the jury's still out on whether or not we'll be able to save the arm."

"We couldn't control her bleeding with anything less than a tourniquet. I knew when we first administered the treatment that it might lead to amputation." Ron regretfully admitted, then weakly added, "It was all we could think to do to try and save her life."

"From what I understand of the situation that you were in, I can't think of what more you could have done." Dr. Grant said frankly, then continued, "And thanks to you regularly releasing the tourniquet, there was at least *some* blood flow. I can't make any promises on that account, but under the circumstances, *inconclusive* is actually the very best that we could possibly hope for at this stage."

"Do you have any idea of how long Dianne is going to need to stay in the hospital?"

"There are too many things still up in the air for us to make any decisions about that. My best guess is that in three to five days I'll know enough to be able to give you some sort of an estimate."

"Thanks Cliff. I understand." Ron said quietly, then thought to ask, "Have you heard anything about a boy named Brian Grant?"

"Yes. I'm listed as his attending physician. I evaluated him when he first arrived and asked one of the resident doctors to treat him. As soon as I'm done here with you, I'll go and see how he's doing."

"What about my cousin Darin? Is there any way you can find out about him, too?"

"Yes. I'll see what I can find out for you." Cliff promised, then thought

to add, "By the way, Ben called and asked me to tell you that you need to call him at Allen Thompson's house as soon as those who won't be staying in the hospital are ready to leave. From what I hear, they're planning a rather spectacular Thanksgiving dinner."

"Oleksandr, the medical status of Sergeant Darin Cooper has just been updated in the hospital's computer. His condition has been listed as stable." Dizzy said in Oleksandr's subvocal.

After a tap on the button on his throat, Oleksandr said, "Thanks Dizzy."

When he noticed that everyone was looking at him, he continued, "Dizzy just told me that Sergeant Cooper is in stable condition."

"That's the AI computer you were telling me about, right?" Ron asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. If you need to know something or if you need to get in touch with anyone, you can get on any computer or you can call 'information' on any phone and Dizzy will do his best to help you. And if you don't know someone's phone number, Dizzy can help you with that, too."

"That's right." Cliff agreed, then added, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go and check on the condition of the other child that you brought in."

"Thanks Cliff. I'll be right here." Ron said with a smile of relief.

Oleksandr felt that it was a perfect time for him to leave, but then noticed the terrified boy clutched to Ron's side.

"Danny?" Oleksandr asked cautiously, not knowing if the boy was even aware of his presence.

"What?" The boy whispered, although Oleksandr could tell that Danny's attention span was a tenuous thread, at best.

"Before I came here, some really bad stuff happened to me. I was scared of everything and everyone and I didn't want to be a part of this world anymore. But I found someone to hold on to and trust and let him make things better. It looks like you did that too. I just wanted you

to know that what you're doing right now is the right thing. It helps. It makes things better. Hold on to Mr. Cooper and be safe and let him handle things for a while. It's okay."

The vacant look in Danny's eyes didn't give any indication if he had heard or not.

Oleksandr turned his attention to Ron and said, "If he needs to talk to someone, I think I might be able to help."

"It may be a while before he's ready, but when he is, I'll be sure to remind him that there's someone here who understands." Ron said as he slightly increased his hug around Danny's shoulders.

"If you or any of the kids need anything at all, be sure to call me." Oleksandr said firmly, then added more gently, "I'll be in the cafeteria for a little while if you think of anything. After that, you can call me any time with Dizzy."

"If anything comes up, I'll call you. I promise."

* * * * *

Assured that Ty and Ryan were dealing with their situation, Madelyn turned and saw Lucas, Jamiah and Jay sitting silently and watching.

"How are you holding up?" Madelyn asked gently as she walked across the room.

"Have you heard anything about Carson?" Jay asked hopefully.

"No. I just arrived and wanted to stop in to see how everyone is doing."

"I wish that there was something that we could do."

"Regardless of how things go with Carson's surgery, I feel safe in saying that there is going to be more than enough for you to do in the coming days. Stay strong and prepare yourself for what's to come."

"Thank you. I feel so helpless right now. It's good to know that there's going to be something that I can do to help."

Madelyn smiled at the declaration, then turned her attention to Lucas

and asked, "Do you still think that you're up to the challenge of taking on so many children? Although Carson's situation is a bit extreme, you need to be aware that other situations are likely to emerge, sometimes many of them at once."

"Gordon and I were discussing that just last night. Taking care of the kids through the good times is something that anyone can do. Being a parent means helping to guide the children through the hard times so that they can develop the skills to someday deal with the ordeals of life on their own."

Madelyn smiled at the words, then looked to Jamiah and asked, "How do *you* feel about that?"

"I'm here without Loquicia. I think that proves that both of us are stronger than we used to be."

"Yes. You've come a long way from where you were when I first met you." Madelyn said with a smile, then turned to Lucas and said, "Once Carson is on the mend and other matters have settled down, I'll schedule a hearing to finalize the adoption. I've seen all that I need to."

"Just let us know when you're ready and we'll be there." Lucas said with a smile at Jamiah at his side.

"Is that okay with you, Jamiah?" Madelyn asked knowingly.

"Yeah. Even if Loquicia didn't need a dad, I'd still want to do this." Jamiah confirmed.

Lucas smiled, then said, "Thank you, Jamiah. And as soon as things have stabilized a bit more in Kettle Falls, I think that we'll start looking for a house of our own. As nice as it's been to stay with Ryan and Deb, I think that it's only right that our new family should start off with a clean slate."

Madelyn smiled warmly at the family, then said, "Yes. That sounds like a very good idea."

* * * * *

"Am I too early?"

"Not at all. You're always welcome here, Keil. Please come in and sit down." Oma Shoupe said warmly.

"How are things going, Dad?" Brother Jacques asked with concern.

"I'm sorry that I haven't been very good about keeping in touch. I've been so busy with my job that it's been hard to do much of anything else."

"Try not to worry about it. That's part of what Thanksgiving is all about, remembering why we do what we do." Zane said quietly.

"Thank you, Zane. Is your father going to be joining us for Thanksgiving dinner?"

"No. They're having a large Thanksgiving dinner for the whole community over at Reverend Wallace's church. I was invited, but I had to decline. It's all I can do to come downstairs. My dad said that he'll try to stop by here and visit later this afternoon."

"It's good to see that you're out of the bedroom. How are you feeling?"

"I'm tired, but good otherwise."

Keil nodded, then turned to his son and asked, "How are you, Jake?"

"I'm doing fine. We've had a lot of work to keep us occupied, so it hasn't been nearly as bad as it could have been."

"And now that Carson's going to be out of action for a little while, all of us are probably going to have more than enough to do to keep us busy." Zane interjected.

"I'm done." Bug announced as he closed the lid of his laptop.

There was a long moment of silence as all in attendance looked at him disbelievingly.

"What?" Bug asked defensively.

"I didn't think you ever *completely* finished working." Kev said honestly.

"Well, I'm still on call if something big comes up. But I've talked to everyone and it looks like things are under control for a while. All I'm planning on doing for the next few hours is spending time with all of you."

"Me first!" Bax crowed, then hurried to claim a seat on Bug's lap.

Bug was obviously surprised by the action, but made no complaint. Instead, he held Bax close and said, "I'm sorry if I haven't been around enough when you needed me."

"Don't beat yourself up about it, Bug. I work too. I know that if I needed you for something important that you'd be there. I just don't want to miss out on a chance like this."

"Okay, Bax. I get what you're saying. And to tell you the truth, I probably need this just as much as you do."

"Did you know that Max is a girl?"

"Yeah. I knew that."

"Since when?"

"Since always."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Does it matter?"

Bax thought about it for a moment before answering, "No, I guess not."

"Is anyone teasing Max or causing her any trouble since you found out?"

"No. We're too busy for stuff like that."

"Good." Bug said sincerely, then added, "You need to remember that Max is still the same person she was before."

"I just don't know why she didn't tell us."

"Maybe it's because she didn't want to be treated like she was different."

"Yeah. I guess I can understand that. But it just feels like she was lying to us the whole time that she knew us."

"I think she was being herself and letting you know who she was so you wouldn't think that you had to treat her special. Maybe she was proving herself to you."

"Yeah. Well, she did that. Working with her all this time, I know that I can trust her to do her job."

"You didn't say anything too stupid when you found out, did you?"

"Yeah. When I found out, I thought it was a joke or a mistake or something so I asked her if she was really sure she was a girl."

"What did she say?"

"She said that she double-checked that morning."

"Do you think that she's mad at you?"

"I didn't notice how she was acting when it was happening, but I guess now, looking back at it, she was a little bit scared. I'm glad I didn't make a bigger deal of it. We had lots of jobs to do right then so I just kinda said 'okay' and went back to work."

"Good for you." Bug said with a smile, then asked, "How's Ro handling it?"

"I think he's disappointed. I get the feeling that he thought that me and him and Max was gonna end up being boyfriends like you and the twins."

"So, now that he knows that Max is a girl he's not interested in her anymore?"

"I don't know. It's hard to know what Ro really thinks about things sometimes. He tells you what he thinks you want to hear instead of what he's really feeling."

"Some people are like that. Don't hold it against him. I doubt that he even knows that he's doing it."

"Yeah. That's what I think, too. He's just like his dads, that way. I

guess that I'm more like you. I say what I'm feeling so no one has to try and figure out what I mean that I'm not saying."

"Being honest and letting people know what you're feeling will make some people uncomfortable around you. They'll try to make you be 'polite' or even worse 'politically correct'. I can't tell you how to handle it, but I want you to know that some people will work very hard to make you fit into their little box of what's 'proper'."

"Well, I don't usually do it when I'm with the tutor doing my school work. She can give me failing grades for being honest with her. But most of the rest of the time I try to be like you."

"Being like me isn't always an easy thing to be. But if you have any problems, let me know and I'll do my best to help you."

"You wouldn't ask for help, would you?"

"Maybe not as much now, but when I was your age, if I got stuck on something I'd talk to Oma Shoupe about it. Everyone needs help sometimes."

"Okay. If I start having a problem, I'll ask you or Oma Shoupe for help."

"Where are Max and Ro?"

"They went over to Ro's dad's house. I think Reginald is making some special stuffing to bring to Thanksgiving dinner and Ro said that it's really good, so they're going to try and get a taste."

"Well, I'm glad that you stayed here for a little bit. It's nice to be able to spend some time with you."

"Yeah. I think so too. Besides, I can just wait on them to bring the special stuffing over here."

Bug laughed and hugged Bax a little tighter.

* * * * *

As Oleksandr walked into the cafeteria, it was easy for him to locate the group from Tallahassee.

Not only did they look haggard and dirty but it was obvious that they were all ravenously hungry.

Although Oleksandr was reluctant to intrude on their meal, he was determined to introduce himself to his chosen people and find out if there were anything that they needed beyond the obvious.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"You don't have any food." A blond boy said cautiously.

"I'm not here for the food, I just wanted to talk to you guys for a minute."

"Knock yourself out." The boy said before digging back into his mounded plate of food.

"My name is Oleksandr Rodchenko. I just wanted to be sure that you guys have everything that you're going to need when you leave the hospital."

A man in his early to mid forties quietly said, "I'm Andy and this young man is Hendrix. You should probably talk to Mr. Cooper about that. He's the one making most of the decisions for us."

"I just talked to him but I don't know if he's decided anything yet. Some friends of his are making arrangements so you'll have food and somewhere to sleep for the next few days, so you won't have to worry about that. What I'm really wanting to know is if you need anything besides food and shelter."

"Like what?" A husky girl asked from beside an elderly woman.

"I don't know; music, games... knitting supplies. Everyone's different, so I don't know what kind of things you might need so that you'll be able to relax and recover from everything that you've been through."

"Right now I think we're all more focused on feeling full for the first time in a very long time." Andy said before taking another bite.

"Fair enough." Oleksandr said with a smile, then added, "But just remember my name and call me if you think of anything that you need. There's a computer program called Dizzy that's coordinating pretty

much everything that's going on in Kettle Falls. If you get on any computer and open Dizzy's program or call information on any phone, Dizzy will be able to answer whatever questions you might have. He can also call me, no matter where I am."

"Who are you?" Hendrix asked curiously.

"Oleksandr Rodchenko."

"No. I mean, why are you here offering to help us? It's nice that you're willing to help us, but I don't know why some random kid would just walk up to our table and start talking to us."

"Back when everything blew up at the start of the war, there was a group of us who started working together to try and help people. It started out small, but now we're in charge of the biggest refugee center in the country. Every now and then, one of us decides that we're going to pay special attention to help out one group and see that they have everything that they need." Oleksandr said frankly, then smiled slightly before adding, "I chose you."

"Are you telling us that a child of your age is helping to coordinate the refugee effort?" The elderly woman asked dubiously.

"I'm part of the team that's doing that. There are adults and teenagers, too. I'm the youngest, but I still want to help you if I can. Instead of you having to go to the stadium in town and get things set up that way, I can get you help from the top, so you won't have to bother with it."

"Well, thank you, young man. I was just understandably surprised at your young age." The woman explained.

"I get that a lot." Oleksandr said with a smile, then asked, "Are you Mrs. Usher?"

"Yes. How did you know that?"

"I'm the one that the Russian soldier was talking to on the radio. He told me all about all of you."

"You're the one who called the Army with the helicopters and stuff to come and get us?" Hendrix asked with surprise.

"It was the Air Force, but yeah. That was me."

"You really *are* one of the people in charge here, aren't you?" Andy asked in amazement.

"I do a job. Once you guys get settled in, maybe you'll be able to do a job, too."

"I have to use the bathroom. Come on, Princess." The husky girl said firmly.

"I don't need to go." The younger girl slightly whined.

"Yes you do. Come on."

Oleksandr watched as the two girls got up from the table and hurried away.

"Have all of you seen the doctors already?" Oleksandr asked as he looked around the group.

"They looked us over when we first arrived, but then they said that the best thing for us would be to get something to eat and drink." Mrs. Usher said simply, then added, "We're supposed to go back to the waiting room with Mr. Cooper when we're done here."

"I think this food is going to go a long way to make all of us feel better." Andy added.

"Remember to call me if you find out that you need any help at all." Oleksandr said as he stood to leave.

"Count on it." Andy responded earnestly.

* * * * *

"Do you have a minute?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Sure. What do you need?" Ben asked in return.

"You've been running around like a headless chicken since you got that call. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know. I want to go to the hospital and see how everyone is doing, but I was told that the whole group needs to be checked out by

the doctors before anyone can leave."

"Well, it sounds like there's not much that you can do until they're ready. So what are you freaking out about?"

"I'm trying to find places for all of them. There's five adults and eight kids, although, from the sound of it, one adult and at least one of the kids will probably be staying in the hospital."

"So, how are the preparations going?"

"Not as well as I had hoped. What I really wanted was to have all of them stay at our house, but there just isn't enough room. Marc and Galen already said that they'd help, but we're still likely to end up with more people than beds."

"Why don't you have some of them stay here? I have three spare bedrooms that aren't being used."

"I don't know any of the kids or what relationships they have with the adults. But if you're really serious about accepting house guests, I'll see if Junior and Mrs. Usher would like to stay with you. I don't know how many, if any, of the kids will be with them."

"However it turns out, we'll make it work. If I run out of beds, I have couches and sleeping bags. We'll make do."

"Okay. As soon as I get the call, Collin, Christian and I are going to the hospital to pick them up. I anticipate needing several drivers."

"I had the feeling that JD and Jody would be going."

"Under other circumstances, they would. But JD takes his cooking very seriously."

"I never would have imagined hosting a Thanksgiving dinner and not having anything to do, but whenever I set foot in the kitchen I get the feeling that I'm just in the way."

"You're our host. Please allow JD to do this for you so that you can spend time with your guests." Ben said sincerely, then added, "As far as Jody is concerned, he's over at Big Bubba's Auto Shop helping them with a project."

"Why would an auto mechanic need a child to help him?"

"It's because Jody is one of the few people in Kettle Falls who has a working knowledge of biodiesel engines. Apparently, there must have been an issue and they needed his help."

"All by himself?"

"No. Jorry and Nick went with him. Don't worry. They'll be back before dinner's ready. Usually Jody would be in the kitchen with JD, helping him to cook."

"You should have seen the look on JD's face when I told him that I was planning to serve instant stuffing with Thanksgiving dinner. I think that that's what made him volunteer to take over cooking."

"It also might be the reason that he hasn't tried to conscript you as a sous chef."

"No. He has Marc for that." Allen said with a grin, then thought to ask, "Do you think we should go into the kitchen and offer to help?"

"Have you got everything lined up for when your friends can leave the hospital?"

"I think everything's done that can be done at this stage of things."

"Then let's go see if our masterchef needs some help. It's usually at about this stage of things that JD realizes that reality doesn't always move as quickly and smoothly as the meal he plans out in his head."

* * * * *

As Oleksandr walked out of the cafeteria, he was surprised to see Lee approaching him.

"Were you in my head watching what I was doing?"

"I was aware of when you decided that you were done, but I wasn't watching what you were thinking." Lee said simply, then added, "But I was on my way to get you, anyway. There's someone that I think you should meet while you're here."

"Oh, okay." Oleksandr said with surprise as he followed Lee down the

hallway.

"I heard this guy trying to get the doctor to understand what was wrong with him. He has trouble with English when he gets excited. Anyway, I helped him communicate with the doctor, but I got the sense that he would appreciate meeting another person who speaks his native language."

"I just barely remember coming to this country. My new parents only spoke English and it took me a long time to learn it. I think I can understand how someone would feel who was here and didn't speak the language well."

"He's in here." Lee said as he turned the corner and walked into a treatment room.

Oleksandr followed and was filled with concern when he saw the young man who was obviously in pain with a wounded shoulder.

"Mark, this is the guy that I was telling you about." Lee said in Russian as he approached.

The soldier looked at Oleksandr with surprise, then said to Lee, "He is younger than I expected."

"Even though he's young, Oleksandr is responsible for an incredible number of things. I thought you should meet him, in case you're ever needing help of some kind."

"Are you saying that he has more influence than you?"

"If I knew that you needed help, I'd do as much as I could. But Oleksandr is a civilian who works in the command center in Kettle Falls. He has access to resources that I do not."

"If you can tell me what you need, I'll know the people to call to help you." Oleksandr said confidently.

"And these people are not cautious of you because you are Russian?"

"No one cares about that. The only thing they care about is if I can do the job that needs to be done." Oleksandr said seriously, then asked, "What happened to you?"

"As I was performing my duty, protecting someone, I was knifed." Mark said cautiously, obviously unwilling to divulge too much.

"Whoever did this to you, did he get away?"

"No. He is quite dead now."

"Good." Oleksandr said, then noticed a doctor entering the room.

"You can't be in here." The doctor said firmly.

"Should I pretend that I don't speak English?" Oleksandr asked with an impish grin.

Mark gave a pained smile, then said, "No need. If I understood correctly, they have just examined the scans, so now they will know the proper treatment for my injury."

"Good. Remember that if you need anything at all while you're in Kettle Falls, ask for Oleksandr Rodchenko."

"I will remember."

The doctor looked from Mark to Oleksandr, obviously not understanding a word that they were saying.

"Yeah. We're going." Oleksandr said to the doctor when he noticed.

"Take good care of him." Lee added as he followed Oleksandr out of the room.

* * * * *

"Grammy Oma!" A young voice called, announcing a little boy, barely more than a toddler, as he raced into the room.

Bug and Bax turned as one to watch the boy hurry to Oma Shoupe and scramble onto her lap.

"Is this a friend of yours?" Bug asked with a grin.

"This young man is Roman. And unless I miss my guess, his mother should be arriving sometime soon." Oma Shoupe said as she hugged Roman close to her.

"I hope we're not interrupting anything." A young man said in a

surprisingly deep voice.

Bug stared for a moment at the stranger. Saying that he was attractive was an understatement. If the young man weren't already a model, it was a serious waste of his potential.

"Thank you for inviting us, Mrs. Shoupe. Roman's been excited about coming to visit you since he found out about it this morning." A lovely brown haired woman said as she walked into the room, carrying a large bag of supplies.

"Actually, it was Mrs. Brown who invited you. Although I will admit that while in her presence I might have mentioned that you didn't have any other Thanksgiving plans." Oma Shoupe said as she continued to cuddle the boy on her lap.

A young woman walked into the room and Bug immediately noticed that she had the same blond hair and blue eyes as the young man.

"I've heard such wonderful things about the Brown family since we've been here that I can hardly believe that we're really here." The blond girl said enthusiastically.

"Introductions?" Bug asked his grandmother hopefully, then noticed that the twins had moved to stand on either side of his chair and were watching carefully for his reactions.

"I work with Hope and Erika at the school. I'm assuming that this young man with them is Erika's twin brother, Erik. And, of course, I think you've already met Hope's son, Roman." Oma Shoupe said before leaning down to give the boy a kiss on the top of his head.

Everyone watched the tender scene with matching smiles.

"Bug, would you continue the introductions? I think Roman needs my full attention for a moment." Oma Shoupe asked hopefully.

"Um, yeah. This guy sitting here with me is Bax. The twins are Ken and Kev, they're my boyfriends. The guy in the chair is Zane. His boyfriend, Brother Jacques, is on this end of the couch and Brother Jacques' father, Keil, is on the other end." Bug said easily.

"Don't forget Mindy and Mandy." Oma Shoupe reminded him.

"Oh yeah. More twins... Hey, did anyone else notice how many twins there seem to be running around this place?" Bug asked rhetorically.

"Are you complaining?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Not at all." Bug said with a grin at *his* twins, then glanced over to the new arrivals and said, "Come on in and have a seat. Dinner won't be for a little while."

"Good. That will give us a chance to visit." Oma Shoupe said happily.

Bug seemed to be about to say something, but then got a distracted look on his face.

"I know that look. Don't answer it. You're off duty." Kev said firmly.

"They don't need for me to do anything. It was just an update."

"You're really the one who's coordinating everything with the refugee effort, aren't you?" Erik asked cautiously.

"I'm part of the team. But since I handle so much of the operations stuff, my name comes up more often than most of the others. I guess that because of that, people kind of think that I'm the only one doing anything. Ken, Kev, Zane and Brother Jacques are all part of the team, too."

"Everyone at the camp talks about how amazing it is that you've been able to help so many people." Erik said frankly.

"Yeah? Well I'm just as impressed with you guys at Camp Trebier. When someone comes into Kettle Falls with an RV or camping equipment, we know that we don't have to worry, you guys will take good care of them."

"The others will be glad to hear that. We've all been working as hard as we can, but we couldn't tell if it was really helping or not."

"Karl Francer kind of keeps us up to date with what's going on over there. But if you notice your people needing anything to help keep their spirits up, let me know."

"I think that, right now, everyone is feeling a little bit better because of Thanksgiving. Having a reason to celebrate something is helping to give a lot of people hope."

"From the way your sister has spoken about the bonds that you've formed with the people you work with, I'm surprised that you've chosen to have Thanksgiving dinner with us." Oma Shoupe said honestly.

"To me, Thanksgiving is about family. That means that I'm going to spend it with Erika."

"The two of you don't have any other family?"

"We might have a brother, if he's still alive. We haven't seen or heard from him in almost ten years. Besides that, there's our parents, but we've kind of fallen out of touch with them." Erika quietly explained.

"When we decided to move away from Tallahassee, our parents had a fit. Every time we talk to them they harp on us and nag us about what a big mistake we're making and how we should move back there with them." Erik regretfully added.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Kev asked when he noticed Bug opening his laptop.

"Don't worry. This isn't business." Bug assured him, then turned to Erik and asked, "What are your last names?"

"Howard."

Bug slowly nodded as he typed on his keyboard.

"What's he doing?" Erik asked Kev curiously.

"I think that when you mentioned that you were from Tallahassee, Bug must have remembered something." Kev said speculatively, then added more assuringly, "He's going to help you."

"Help us, how?" Erika asked cautiously.

"I can't even begin to guess."

"No fucking way." Bug muttered as his fingers moved across the

keyboard at lightning speed.

"What's wrong?" Ken asked with sudden concern.

Bug stopped typing and looked at Erik before asking, "Did you say that Erika was your only family?"

"Yes. It's just been the two of us for the past three years."

"Okay. Let me see if I've got this right. Do you know if you have some cousins named JD and Jody in Tallahassee?"

"Yeah. They used to come to our parents' house for holidays. We haven't seen them in years."

"What about Jorry and Nick from Orlando? Are they related to you too?"

"Yes. But I haven't seen or heard from them since we were all kids."

"What about your Uncles Ben and Cliff?"

"Yes. I remember them."

"Marc and Galen?"

"Yeah."

"Collin and Christian?"

"Yes. I remember all of them. Why are you asking?"

"Because they're all here in Kettle Falls."

Erik and Erika looked at each other with matching looks of surprise.

"You said it yourself, Thanksgiving is about family. I can't think of anything better than letting your family know that you're here so that you can reconnect with them."

"All of them are here?" Erika asked in a small voice.

"Yeah. And once you talk to them, you might find out that there's even more. That's all I was able to come up with doing a simple search with Dizzy."

"Do you want to?" Erik asked his sister uncertainly.

"I think we should."

"Phone's right over there." Bug said with a smile as he pointed.

* * * * *

"Did you get everything done that you wanted to?" Lee asked as he walked with Oleksandr to the hospital's main entrance.

"I didn't get as much done as I wanted to, but I introduced myself and let them know to call me if they need anything. I hope that's enough."

"I think that's what's most important. You probably can't do much more until they realize that they need something."

"Yeah." Oleksandr reluctantly agreed, then quickly added, "I need to check in with Dizzy to see if I missed anything while I was here."

"Are we going back to the Brown's house?"

"Yeah. As far as I know." Oleksandr said before keying his subvocal and saying, "Dizzy? What's happened since I've been at the hospital?"

Lee had taken two steps before he noticed that Oleksandr had stopped to listen.

When it was obvious that Oleksandr was finished, Lee cautiously asked, "Is there a problem?"

"Yeah. Well, not with my stuff. But there's a big fire in Colville. Dizzy says that they'll have it contained soon, but the fire chief is treating it as arson. The task force has already been called and they're on their way to investigate."

"So, you think this is another case of released prisoners or foreign covert ops causing havoc to make our lives more difficult?"

"Yeah. Just as soon as people start feeling safe, they do things to make everyone afraid again."

"That's why we're on Bryce's side. He tries to make things so that everyone can feel secure and live their lives to their fullest. Ashwood wants to rule everyone by fear, taking away their rights and civil liberties with a promise that he'll keep them safe from all the scary

things that *he* created."

"We'd better get back to the house. Even though nothing big has happened, I need to get back to work so that Ben won't have a ton of stuff to catch up on when he gets back." Oleksandr said frankly as he started walking again.

"Aren't you going to have Thanksgiving dinner with the Brown family?"

"I'll probably stop to eat when I reach a good stopping point."

"How bad do you think it would be if we went to 'Little Chicago' right now and you spent Thanksgiving with Dax and Ben? Do you think that it would cause anyone any trouble? Do you think that anyone would be mad at you for not working while everyone else is spending time with their families?"

"I don't really feel like it."

"What do you think Ben feels?"

"I don't know."

"Ben and Dax are your family. If they're too busy to realize that, then it's your job to remind them. Thanksgiving is about family and if you let them do nothing but work to help others, then all of you are going to regret this missed opportunity." Lee said as he stopped beside the gator.

"But Ben is counting on me to take care of things while he's gone."

"Bullshit. You know as well as I do that the UNIT and Monarch Command can watch things for a little while. All of you have been working like crazy. You need this. They need this. And if they don't realize it, then you need to pull them aside and make them see what's really important. This is your first Thanksgiving together as a family. That's special."

"What are you going to do for Thanksgiving?"

"I'm going to spend it with my family, the UNIT."

"Okay. I guess you're right."

"Then should I drive you over to Little Chicago?"

"Yeah."

"Hop in." Lee said with a smile as he climbed into the Gator.

"Thanks." Oleksandr said quietly as he got into the passenger seat.

"When we get there, I'm going to drop you off. Ben's escort will know to watch over you, too."

"So then you'll go and have Thanksgiving with your family?"

"Maybe not right away. I might have other duties to perform first. But I will eventually."

"Good."

* * * * *

"Mr. Bug, you have visitors." A dignified voice said from the hallway leading to the main house.

"Mr. Crante, my name is just Bug, not *Mr.* Bug."

"As you say, Sir. May I present Mr. and Mrs. Farmer and Miss Clawson."

"Who?"

"Geoduck. You invited us here, didn't you?" The older man asked reluctantly as he walked into the room.

"Yeah. I'm just not used to your last names. If he would have called you Harold, I would have known who he was talking about. Is this your family?"

"Yes. This is my wife Rose and her sister Anabelle."

"It's nice to meet you. There's still a few seats. Grab 'em. Dinner won't be ready for a little while, so we can hang out here until it's ready."

"Aren't you going to introduce them around?" Oma Shoupe asked disapprovingly.

"Sure, I guess. But I don't think it'll do any good." Bug said as he stood. He looked around the gathering then pointed to each person as

he said, "Bax, Ken, Kev, Zane, Brother Jacques, Keil, Hope, Roman, Mindy, Mandy and Oma Shoupe. You just missed Erik and Erika, but they said that they might stop back later. They just found out that a lot of their family are here in Kettle Falls and they never knew about it."

"It's nice to meet all of you." Harold said timidly.

"Please excuse my grandson's method of introductions. I promise, I taught him better than this. He's just impatient." Oma Shoupe said graciously.

"That's quite alright. From what Harold's told us about your grandson, he sounds like a remarkable young man. With all the good that he's done, I think we can forgive a little social impropriety." Rose said warmly.

"If you guys will just sit down, I'm pretty sure that everyone will let you know who they are and what they're doing here." Bug said as he took his seat again.

"Mr. Bug, you have another guest. May I present Ms. Peete." Mr. Crante said from the entrance to the hallway.

"Now you're just doing it out of spite." Bug said under his breath, then smiled when he saw who it was and said, "Lonnie, I'm glad that you could make it. Harold just got here, so at least there's going to be somebody else here that you know."

"That wouldn't have been a problem. I brought someone with me." Lonnie said as she held up a small tablet computer.

Bug laughed before saying, "It's good to see you, Steven. I'm glad you could make it."

"That's thanks to Lonnie. She's the one who talked me into it."

"Thank you, Lonnie. I really wanted to do something special for my team today. Even though Steven isn't going to get to have any of the turkey with us, having him here seems right."

"I'm probably going to be having a turkey dinner, too." Steven quickly interjected.

"Probably?"

"Arlan is going to try and cook it and he's a little... well, you'd just have to see the algorithm that he came up with to figure out how long to cook the turkey and at what temperature. I think he has it timed down to the millisecond. It might turn out to be wonderful... or more likely we'll all be munching on instant stuffing and canned yams while Arlan tries to figure out what went wrong."

"Well, if it turns out too bad, you can let us know and one of us will bring some food over to you."

"Actually, I'm interested to see how this experiment of his turns out."

Bug turned to the others in the room and loudly said, "Everyone. This is Lonnie and Steven. They work with me."

Several greetings and waves came from the assembly of people.

"Lonnie and Steven, this is everyone."

* * * * *

When the door swung open, everyone went silent.

The nurse looked around and when she spotted Ryan, she took a few steps toward him, then quietly asked, "Mr. Brown, could I talk to you for a moment?"

"Nurse Nakahara, right?" Ryan strained to remember.

"Yes. That's right. I'm surprised that you remember me."

"It's not every day that someone goes to my lab to have an explosive device surgically removed from his chest. It was a memorable day." Ryan said honestly, then hopefully asked, "Do you have any news about Carson?"

"Yes. Although, *technically*, Carson's still in surgery, I've been sent to give you an update. Doctor Hayes has completed the attachment of the limbs and has left Dr. Murten to finish closing."

"Where's Dr. Hayes?" Ryan asked cautiously, suspecting that something wasn't quite right.

"She's been called away. Dr. Murten told me to tell you that everything is proceeding normally, and that Carson will likely be moved into recovery within the next two hours. Carson won't be conscious, but you'll be allowed to go in for a brief time and see for yourselves that he's alive and well."

"Were you in there, in the surgery?"

"Yes. I only just left when Dr. Murten asked me to bring you this message."

"Do you think everything's really alright?" Ryan asked cautiously, obviously afraid of the answer.

"Dr. Hayes used surgical techniques that are beyond my ability to comprehend or describe. All I can tell you is that I have no doubt whatsoever that Dr. Hayes was confident, competent and comfortable with the surgery she was doing. I've seen a lot of surgeries over the years and I can tell you that that woman *knew* what she was doing. I'm not qualified to give a medical prognosis, but in my personal opinion, I think your son got the absolute best help available for his condition."

"Thank you."

"I think he's going to be alright. Really."

"I hope you're right."

Chapter 4

(zero)

I was conflicted as we travelled further from town. It felt as though I was being 'set up' by my newfound companions.

I hadn't known any of them for more than a day or two. Although they seemed to be decent enough people, I can't say that I *trusted* them to any measurable degree.

That being said, if I'm being honest, I can't say that I trust much of anyone anymore. The experiences of my life thus far have proven to me that trusting people only leads to eventual pain and heartache... and sometimes incarceration.

The few times that my cynical good sense was overridden and I've given into the emotional urge to indulge in trust, I've lived to regret it.

Wait.

No.

Not regret.

I can honestly say that I walked into each unfortunate situation with my eyes wide open and made what seemed to be the most reasonable and favorable choice for myself at that time.

Some things worked and others turned out badly. But looking back, I can honestly say that I made the best decision that I could at the time with the information available to me.

There *is* such a thing as a 'no win' situation. When faced with a choice, I chose the path that took me to prison instead of the one that would have led to my death.

Do I like the way things turned out?

No.

In hindsight, would it have been better for me to have made other choices?

Certainly.

But given what I *did* know at that time and the situation that I was in, I think I did as well as anyone could have.

No regrets.

Well... maybe one.

* * * * *

I broke out of my mental wandering and the late autumn scenery caught my attention. It was then that I realized that we weren't travelling out of town but rather to a different part of town... a seemingly more affluent part.

The dispersion of homes indicated that each was located on a larger than average plot of land compared to those we had passed earlier. They weren't exactly 'mansions' in the true sense of the word, but the homes were a bit bigger and nicer than the ones back in town.

Again, I didn't really know my companions that well. The woman on the lead motorcycle had invited some of us to her son's house for Thanksgiving dinner, but I'd only just met her and her invitation was the first I knew of her even having a son. By all indications, she was a biker, like the rest of us. She appeared to be a strong, yet very likable, woman.

However, the farther we went, the less likely it seemed that the beer drinking, Harley riding woman would have a relative who could afford to even *set foot* in this part of Kettle Falls.

Regardless, I had committed myself to this course of action. I could feel my adrenaline rising and was preparing myself to cut and run at the first indication of trouble.

* * * * *

When we finally turned into a driveway, I was surprised to find that the house was rather plain in its appearance. It wasn't ugly, but it wasn't a 'showplace', like so many of the others that we had passed.

As houses go, it was certainly big, I'll give it that much. But there

weren't any fancy ornamental flowerbeds or spectacular 'features' on display as we arrived. It was a standard looking house with a standard looking lawn, reasonably kept, but unremarkable in every way.

* * * * *

I reluctantly got off my motorcycle and followed the others up to the front door. I felt the anxiety welling within me, threatening to overwhelm me.

Mona knocked firmly, which was somewhat comforting. It at least indicated to me that she expected to be welcomed into the home. At the first sign that she was 'sneaking' in, I would've jumped on my hog and tore ass outta there.

But then, much to my surprise, rather than wait for someone to answer, she opened the door and led the way inside.

I felt in that moment that it might be my last chance to cut and run.

If I followed her in, then I would be complicit in whatever happened next. Everything that I had gained in the years since I had been paroled could be endangered. Then again, I lost nearly everything when I fled President Ashwood's military thugs, gathering up the 'undesirables'. Everything I owned, all that was left of my 'worldly possessions' were with me on my motorcycle.

As I pondered my situation, my legs seemed to carry me forward without my conscious mind finding a satisfactory resolution.

"Are you sure that nobody's going to have a problem with us being here?" One of my companions asked Mona anxiously.

That question brought more relief to me than I can say. I wasn't the only one feeling incredibly out of place in this fancy neighborhood. I wasn't the only one to think that it was odd that Mona's son would turn out to be rich.

"I'd be very disappointed if my son was so selfish that he wouldn't share his good fortune with the people around him. I'd like to think that I raised him better than that." Mona said firmly.

As we walked in, I noticed that the entry hall was filled with family photos, dozens of them. All the pictures depicted the same two men and one young boy.

"Mona! I'm so glad you're here. I wasn't sure that you'd be coming." A reasonably handsome man said joyfully as he pulled Mona into a hug. I glanced from the man to the pictures and sure enough, it was him.

Although he had aged gracefully and could perhaps be described as appearing to be a bit more 'distinguished', it was certain that a number of years had passed since the most recent of the photographs were taken.

"From the way things were sounding the last time I talked to you, I thought you were going to have a houseful today. What happened?" Mona asked as she hugged him in return.

"I'm still expecting to. In fact, over a dozen more people have been invited since yesterday. This is just the calm before the storm." The man said as he finally released her.

"Guys, this is my son, Allen." Mona said simply. Although I had known that we would be visiting Mona's son, I didn't automatically assume that this was him because he and Mona appeared to be of a similar age, siblings *perhaps*, but I would certainly never assume that they were mother and son.

"Allen, these are the guys from the barbeque restaurant that I've been telling you about, Floyd and Monster." Mona said cheerfully, then looked toward me and continued, "And this young man trying to blend into the background is our newest friend, Lachlan."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. I'm glad that Mona invited you. Just so you know, there are a lot of things going on right now. Due to the likelihood of people arriving at different times and the probability of some being called away unexpectedly, we've decided to have more of a buffet than a sit-down dinner." Allen said frankly, then stood aside and gestured toward the next room as he continued, "The dining room's through here. I think everything's set up and ready to go if you're ready to get started."

At Allen's motion, we left the entry hall and stepped into the living room. What I was seeing seemed to be at odds with what I had deduced upon arrival. This wasn't the living space of a rich person.

This was a home.

The furniture was comfortable and obviously 'broken in'. Things like the crocheted afghan draped over the back of the couch and other innocuous touches made the intimidatingly large room feel almost cozy.

"You can go back as often as you want, we're going to be restocking the food until we're sure that everyone's had a chance to eat their fill." Allen said, drawing my attention back to him.

I noticed that my companions were nodding their acknowledgement and I joined them.

"The bathroom's over there..." Allen began to say, but was interrupted by a knock on the door behind us.

He glanced in that direction, then looked back to us and quickly said, "If you need anything else, I plan to be running around here all afternoon. Just catch me as I pass through and let me know what I can do for you."

Before any of us could respond, Allen hurried past us to answer the door.

"He seems... nice..." Monster said uncertainly.

"He could have turned out worse." Mona said offhandedly, then casually continued, "Let's hit the chow line before all the best stuff is gone."

* * * * *

"What's wrong? Don't you see anything you like?" Mona asked me when she noticed that I was frozen in place before the massive collection of prepared food.

"No. Just the opposite. When I was invited to share in a family Thanksgiving dinner, I was kind of expecting a generic turkey with the

obligatory green bean casserole; maybe some jellied cranberry sauce served in the shape of the can. I never expected it to be so extravagant. This incredible presentation would be appropriate for a five star restaurant."

"I hope it tastes as good as it looks." Monster said as he stepped forward to serve himself.

"I can't wait to find out." I said eagerly. I couldn't imagine that food presented so beautifully would be anything less than 'perfect'.

* * * * *

As I returned with my filled plate and a drink, I surveyed the layout of the living room before choosing a wingback chair near the fireplace. Not only was it out of the way, somewhat separate from the main seating area, but it also had a conveniently placed side table where I could set my drink.

Once I was settled into place, I noticed that Mona had taken the chair that matched mine and shared the side table.

After tasting a little of each of the offerings, I turned and quietly said, "Mona, if your son is a project manager, he might have missed his true calling. This food is not only beautifully presented, but also perfectly prepared. The balance of flavors is inspired."

Mona looked at me strangely, then slowly said, "My son? Allen? That boy screwed up Macaroni & Cheese because the directions didn't tell him to open the cheese packet."

"Really? Then did he hire someone to prepare this meal? Because if he did, I might talk to his catering company about getting a job with them. I would *love* to work in a kitchen that produces food like this."

"Sorry to burst your bubble, Kitten, but as far as I know, the person overseeing the cooking is JD. He doesn't have a catering company. In fact, he hasn't even graduated high school yet."

"Are you saying that a high schooler cooked this incredible meal?" I asked dubiously.

"Yes. I'm sure that he has a few people helping him, but everything that comes out of the kitchen is just the way that JD envisioned it." Mona said frankly, then grinned as she leaned in and conspiratorially whispered, "I've heard that he's something of a slavedriver."

"I can't wait to meet him."

"I'm guessing that he's probably busy at the moment. Why don't you stop and enjoy this meal and you can meet JD afterward and tell him how much you appreciate his cooking. Maybe, if you're really nice to him, he'll let you wash some dishes." Mona finished with a chuckle.

I took another bite and savored it for a moment before responding, "I would be honored."

* * * * *

"Boys, before you go in to get your food, let me introduce you to Mona's friends, Floyd, Monster and Lachlan. Guys, this is Jody, Jorry and Nick." Allen said as he led three teenagers into the living room.

My attention was drawn to the youngest of the teens since, unlike his companions, he looked as though he had been working. Not only were his hands noticeably dirty, but he even had a smudge of grease on his cheek.

It was then that I noticed him looking at me strangely. Given that I have facial tattoos, that's not too unusual. But there was something about *the way* that he was looking at me. It wasn't with recognition, but it also wasn't with the typical curiosity that I had become accustomed to.

Before I could decipher the meaning behind that look, the boy looked toward his older teenage companions and said, "I gotta go get cleaned up before I eat. Save me some of JD's turkey."

"You'd better hurry." The oldest of the teens said as he started walking toward the dining room.

The young teen started across the room in the opposite direction, toward the stairs.

"I know what he means about the turkey." Monster said into the silence that followed. "It melts in my mouth. I didn't even know that you could make turkey do that."

While I had tasted the turkey earlier, the other food selections had drawn most of my attention. I took another bite and critically analyzed both the taste and texture.

Monster was right. The turkey was exquisite. It was prepared perfectly in every detail.

* * * * *

"How is everyone enjoying the food? Did we miss anything?" A man asked as he walked into the room.

Since I had been told that JD was a high schooler, I knew that this wasn't him. The man was older than I was.

"Everything is wonderful, Ben. Be sure to tell JD that we're all enjoying the food very much." Mona said warmly.

"He'll be glad to hear that." Ben responded with a smile at her, then added, "But if you realize that anything's missing, just poke your head in the kitchen and let one of us know."

Just then I heard the front door open and a voice call out, "We didn't miss the food, did we?"

Ben laughed delightedly, then said, "No, Wil. We just got everything set out and we've decided to have an all-day-buffet instead of a sit-down dinner."

"Is Marc here?" Wil asked suddenly.

"Yeah, he's in the kitchen helping JD." Ben cautiously answered, obviously surprised by the question.

I noticed that the other three guys who had entered with Wil had most of their attention focused behind them and that they seemed to be excited about something.

"I'll go get him. Stay here. You need to see this too." Wil said quickly

before dashing away.

"Floyd, Monster and Lauchlan, I'd like for you to meet Todd, Collin and Christian. That hyperactive little shit who just tore through here was Wil." Mona finished with a tender smile in the direction that he had gone.

"I've seen you guys in town. You make some awesome barbeque." One of the young men said appreciatively.

"Thanks. We thought that with all the Thanksgiving dinners being put on by everyone else today that we'd take a day off." Floyd said pleasantly.

"I'm sure that you've earned it."

"It's been a lot of hard work, but not only do we get to help people, but we get to look them right in the eyes while we're doing it. I swear, it changes you."

I hadn't been with the barbeque crew long enough to say that I'd been 'changed', but they were doing good, honest work and I was honored to be invited to join them. Of course, part of that had to do with a batch of baked beans that I had prepared for them at my 'audition'. It's entirely possible that they only invited me to join them to gain access to my secret recipe.

"We don't have time..." A man said as Wil led him into the room.

"If you'll hang on for *one minute* then you can get back to your gravy and I won't bother you anymore." Wil said firmly.

"It was icing."

"Whatever." Wil said dismissively, then asked, "Where's JD?"

"I thought he was right behind me... but to be honest, I doubt that he'll come out here willingly."

"Guys, who wants to help me go and kidnap him?" Wil asked as he looked around.

"I'll do it!" Todd immediately volunteered.

"Do you need Jody in here too? He's upstairs showering." The teenage boy, whom I deduced was Nick, asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Go get him. Tell him it's important." Wil said firmly.

Nick set his plate on the coffee table, then hurried up the stairs.

"What was so important that you *needed* me in here?" A teenage boy asked impatiently as he walked into the room drying his hands on a dishtowel.

"Hold on for a second. Nick just went to get Jody." Wil informed him.

I looked at the boy curiously... he somehow looked familiar, although I was fairly certain that I hadn't met him before.

As he glanced around the room, his gaze fixed on me and I saw him go visibly pale.

"What's wrong?" Wil asked with immediate concern at JD's drastic reaction.

"Lock?" JD gasped as tears welled in his eyes.

"Yeah." I answered cautiously, not able to think of any way that this boy could know who I was.

As the teenage boy walked slowly across the room toward me I stood to meet him. It was only then that I got a good look at his intense steel blue eyes.

The color was so distinctive that it immediately drew to mind the only two people I'd ever met with eyes like that before. One was my ex-girlfriend... by the way, don't ever stick your dick in crazy. It never ends well... Anyway, as I was saying, the only people I had ever met with eyes like that were Megara and her son...

"Spider?" I asked hesitantly, not able to believe that this could possibly be the fragile little boy from so many years before.

Rather than answer verbally, the teenage boy rolled up the left sleeve of his turtleneck shirt to expose the tattoos covering his arm. He turned his arm to expose his inner forearm, then traced one particular

tattoo with his index finger.

I stared at the tattoos for a moment frozen in time. I didn't recognize some of them, they must have been done during my stay at Club Fed. But the others... The memories that I'd been suppressing for a decade flooded back to me. Memories of what had been done in my presence and what I had allowed to happen, filled my mind. The tattoo that Spider was showing me was the same as the tattoo on my forehead, a sword piercing a crescent moon.

"Do you know if I ever had a real name?" JD asked me cautiously.

"What?" I asked as I was jarred out of my stupefied state.

"When we talked to my mom, she said that she'd always called me Spider. I just wondered if maybe, since you were there, you might know if I ever had another name." JD carefully explained.

"No. Not that I know of." I said weakly, wishing that I had a better answer for this grown up version of the little boy that I had worried about so many years before.

"What did you need me for?" Jody asked as he hurried down the stairs while simultaneously pulling on his shirt.

"What? Oh, yeah. We brought you some visitors." One of the young men, either Collin or Christian said weakly.

"We thought we'd surprise you." The other one said in a matching tone of voice, then offhandedly added, "But JD beat us to the punch."

"Yeah. He's like that." Jody said as he walked to stand at JD's other side.

Collin, Christian and Todd moved aside to reveal two more people who had been standing behind them in the entry hall.

"Erika?!" JD said happily just as Jody exclaimed, "Erik!"

Jody left JD's side and ran to pull the astonishingly handsome young man into a firm hug.

The equally beautiful woman, presumably 'Erika', slowly walked

toward where I was standing beside JD.

When she was a few feet away, she raised one hand and held out her index finger in JD's direction.

JD smiled and responded in kind.

Once they were close enough, they touched fingertips as they maintained their distance from each other.

"Erika, this is Lock. He's..." JD paused, then looked at me uncertainly before cautiously asking, "Are you my dad?"

"No." I said immediately, then quickly explained, "I was only with your mom for a few months when you were about four or five years old. I don't have any idea who your father was."

"Okay. I guess since we don't look anything alike... You're just the only person who I remember from before I was in the hospital."

"I'm sorry, Spider. If there was any way I could've been your dad, I would have been proud to do it. Unfortunately, things didn't work out so that it could be possible." I said regretfully, then thought to ask, "Why were you in the hospital?"

"Why don't we save that story until everyone's had a chance to get some food?" Marc interjected.

"I'm sorry, but I have to get back into the kitchen right now. I've got about a thousand profiteroles that aren't going to wait for me." JD said regretfully.

"I can help you if you..." I began to volunteer, but JD shook his head as he interrupted, "Not this time, Lock. It would really mean a lot to me if I could show you what I've been able to do with what you taught me."

JD then gave me a firm hug before hurrying back to his kitchen.

What I taught him? The amazing chef that I couldn't wait to meet turned out to be that skinny little boy who I used to take to work with me and let help me in the kitchen... mostly to get him away from his nutjob of a mother?

As I was caught up in trying to process what had just happened, Mona looked up from her chair and asked, "Okay. What am I missing here? Because I'm totally lost."

"Lock? I'm one of JD's fathers, my name is Ben Stone."

"I'm pleased to meet you. I'm Lachlan Tierney." I said formally as I offered my hand to him.

As he shook my hand, I suddenly realized that I had seen him before. I recognized him from his photograph on the dust cover of one of my favorite books.

"*Benjamin Stone*? The author of '*In the Service of the Aethers*'?" I asked cautiously.

"Oh? You're the one who bought that?" Ben asked with a grin.

"It was an incredible book... wait, you didn't make that up, did you? That was from the stuff that Megara was always ranting about, wasn't it? When I read your book, I assumed that you must have stumbled onto the religion she was caught up in, but you heard about it from her, didn't you?" I asked as I put the pieces together.

"Sort of. Megara's worldview and beliefs were so disjointed and inconsistent that I took a few creative liberties so that I could construct an entire mythology based on her perception of the world. I prefer to think of it as a fictional account based on actual beliefs." Ben tried to explain.

"Excuse me! You know JD *and* Ben? Are you here meeting *my* family or am I here meeting yours?" Mona grouched.

"He read one of my books, Mona. We don't know each other beyond that." Ben assured her.

"It's incredible that I'm getting to meet you. I *really* loved your book... I guess maybe because it helped to explain what Megara believed in. It helped me to sort out something that had been bothering me for a long time."

"Since you're a reader, have you, by chance, ever read '*Anathema*'

Mythique' by JD Stone?" Ben asked in a leading tone.

"I read the first few pages of it, but it was way beyond me... JD Stone? Are you saying that Spider wrote that?" I asked disbelievingly.

"Yes. That and about six others since. Even though his books aren't top ten best sellers, he still has a loyal following."

"From what I heard in pri... the library I used to go to, JD Stone's books were fairly popular. People would read them as a way to escape from their reality. It sounded like they were exceptionally good at creating whole new worlds to get lost in."

"Yes. I suppose they are. Of course, if you take all of my book sales and JD's combined, they still don't come anywhere close to Jody's." Ben said as I followed his loving gaze toward the entry hall, where Jody was still hugging Erik and talking a mile a minute to him.

"He's a writer too?" I asked incredulously.

"He's Jody Grant, the author of the 'Benny Bear' series of children's books." Ben said proudly.

"Wait! I've heard of those!" I said as I looked at Jody again.

It seemed impossible that the barely teenage boy had been the author of one of the most beloved series of children's books in the past decade.

Then again, maybe they were so popular with kids because the person who wrote them spoke their language.

"Cliff and I have two 'official sons' and one that's unofficial. You've met JD and Jody. If all goes to plan, you'll also be able to meet Junior before very long. We just got word that he's in Kettle Falls and as soon as he's able, he's supposed to be coming here."

"Is he an author too?" I automatically asked.

"Strangely enough, no." Ben said thoughtfully, as though it had never occurred to him, then he continued, "But he *is* a doctor of psychology. There's a better than average chance that he'll publish at least a few articles about theories and findings related to his work."

The sound of a ringing phone interrupted us and it was only then that I realized that everyone in the room had been listening to our conversation.

"I've got it." Allen said as he raced into the room and picked up the handset of the phone before anyone could make a move toward it.

I listened along with everyone else as Allen said, "Thompson residence, this is Allen... Yes. He's right here."

Allen then passed the handset to Ben and said, "It's Ron Cooper."

* * * * *

(jewel)

For some reason I thought that the time I spent in college would be the hardest thing I'd ever have to do in my life. Starting out, when I chose to get a four-year degree in three years, I thought I was doing something remarkable.

Little did I know that one day I'd look back at those years as being virtually carefree. I had a clear objective. I had a plan on how to achieve it. What I didn't have was a clue of how precious that knowledge could be.

Although my job right out of college didn't pay well, I was grateful to get it. What I didn't expect was that the reality of the job turned out to be so different from my preconceived notions.

Fortunately, even though I had to work hard and keep myself motivated, I always knew that it was at least *possible* for me to succeed.

In the past weeks... I didn't know if it was even possible for me to *survive*.

Now, here I am in the hospital with eight sick and injured kids, and it's my job to help them deal with the incomprehensible nightmare that they've been through. I can barely deal with what *I've* been through.

For all my bookwork and training, I don't have any answers for them.

But I can't tell them that.

I doubt that they would understand that being shot, robbed and abandoned in the middle of nowhere for a week and nearly starving to death was never covered in my course studies.

I think the thing that amazes me most is that Mrs. Usher, who is over seventy years old, demonstrated more strength and calm in the face of adversity than the rest of us combined.

When the bullets started flying, Mrs. Usher automatically shielded Princess and Dog with her own body and defiantly looked our attackers right in the eyes as she did so. She was prepared to die, but not to give up her life frivolously. She was willing to sacrifice herself to protect the children.

If I had been as brave as her, I might have been able to protect Brian. Things happened so quickly that I can't be sure, but I still feel that there should have been something more that I could have done to prevent him from being shot.

Mr. Cooper also surprised me.

I've become used to him always being on top of things and totally in charge, but when push came to shove, he took the lead and did everything in his power to do what was best for us as individuals and as a group. I don't think I'll ever be that strong and self-assured. His strength and leadership in the face of so much violence and despair is what the rest of us depended on to get us through.

Andy is another one who surprised me. All my life, at least, ever since I was first brought to the children's home, I only ever saw him as being a meek librarian. I don't think it ever occurred to me to get to know him as a person.

I really don't know where Andy was or what he did during the shooting. The thing that I didn't expect was how he stepped up and took charge to administer first aid. Our vehicles were stolen and we only had the clothes on our backs, yet somehow Andy was able to improvise bandages, splints and a tourniquet out of almost nothing. If not for him, Darin, Diane and probably Brian would all be dead, having bled to death.

If that was all that Andy had done, I would be forever grateful to him. But after he had done everything that he could to stabilize the injured, he did his best to help calm and reassure the children.

Mr. Cooper, Mrs. Usher and I have the training and experience to help distressed children, but when the situation called for it, Andy got in there and helped just the same as the rest of us. To top it off, he seems to have formed a relationship with Hendrix, who none of the rest of us could reach.

* * * * *

Once we had all eaten, we went to the waiting room to wait for Mr. Cooper and Danny to finish their medical exams.

Brian hadn't rejoined us yet which, due to his injuries, wasn't that much of a surprise.

The kids were unusually quiet and some of them had fallen asleep, having their bellies full for the first time in a week.

I looked to Mrs. Usher, with Dog and Princess tucked under her arms on either side. Andy was sitting next to Hendrix who, while not being cuddled, had managed to use Andy's shoulder as a convenient pillow.

Kevin and Mike were sitting together, but *not* together. Both were looking anxiously down the hallway where Mr. Cooper had gone, but neither seemed to be inclined to do much more than sit and stare.

I, too, turned my attention down the hallway.

The hospital personnel were all rushing around, reminding me of a colony of ants, seemingly climbing over each other at times, but each dedicated to performing their own little task for the greater good.

I felt a rush of relief wash over me as Mr. Cooper walked into the hallway with his arm casually draped around Danny's shoulders.

Immediately following Mr. Cooper was Brian, being pushed in a wheelchair.

I watched them approach and suddenly realized that the man pushing Brian's wheelchair was JD's father, Cliff.

Without thought, I jumped up from my chair and ran to him.

"How are you doing, Michael?" Cliff asked warmly as he stopped the wheelchair and opened his arms to me.

Rather than answer, I fell into his arms as I broke into tears.

* * * * *

I don't know how long we stood there like that, with Cliff holding me while I sobbed into his shoulder.

It felt so good. It felt like, in that moment, I had everything that had been ripped away from me. I had safety and security and a home where people loved me.

As I finally pulled back so that I could look him in the eyes, I quietly said, "Thank you."

"I was worried about you. I'm glad that you're alright." Cliff said warmly.

If it were anyone else, I would have assumed the words to be obligatory. But I knew as soon as Cliff said them that he was sincere. He was worried about me.

"How are JD and Jody... and Ben?" I asked with concern.

"They're just fine." Cliff assured me, then continued, "In fact, Ron called Ben right before we came out here. If we can get everyone ready, we can go and see them right now."

"How are you doing, Brian?" I heard someone ask and turned to see that it was Kevin.

I had heard the boy speak so infrequently that I didn't immediately recognize his voice.

"The doctor said that it should be okay. I won't be up, walking around for a while. But he said that the worst that I'm going to end up with is a scar... which I'll be able to show off when I tell people about what happened to me." Brian said honestly.

I was astonished at how upbeat and optimistic Brian sounded. He had

been in such a deep depression ever since I'd first met him that seeing him like this, he didn't seem like the same person at all.

"I can push him, Doctor." Kevin said as he more or less wedged himself between Cliff and the wheelchair.

"Sure, if you want to." Cliff said with surprise, then added, "But as soon as you're all ready to go, I'm going to be leaving with you."

"You said that I was going to be okay. Why do you have to go with me?" Brian asked cautiously.

Cliff laughed, then said, "Because I'm going to be having Thanksgiving dinner at the house where you're going."

"Oh." Brian said simply, then slowly asked, "Where are we going?"

I turned my attention to Cliff, since I was interested to know that as well.

"To my husband's cousin's ex-boss's house." Cliff said with a teasing grin.

After a moment to think about that, I slowly said, "Ben's cousin is Marc. I remember you introducing us. But I don't think I ever met his boss... or ex-boss."

"You already know the doctor?" Kevin asked me suspiciously.

"No. I go up and hug and cry all over every doctor that I meet. It's just something that I do." I said to him sarcastically. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted saying them. I was a *doctor*. It was important for me to maintain a professional demeanor so that my patients would know that I could be trusted and depended upon.

"I always thought you were probably a snarky prick, deep down inside." Kevin said with a grin at me.

His response surprised me. It occurred to me in that moment that maybe my 'professional' strategy wasn't as one-size-fits-all as I had been led to believe.

Even so, it was an opening. Thinking that I might not get a better

chance to establish a dialogue with Kevin, I went for it.

"Yeah. But I have to keep it hidden or no one will take me seriously. I mean, I'm a young Latino man who works with kids. That's more than enough reasons for people to make assumptions about me before they've even met me. Having an attitude isn't likely to make them react to me any better." I said honestly.

"I get where you're coming from. Try being Filipino. People are always asking me where I'm *really* from... and how to make eggrolls... for some reason." Kevin finished uncertainly.

"Yeah, they talk to me in what they remember of their high school Spanish and overpronounce the words really super slowly, like I'm stupid or deaf or something." I said sympathetically.

"Yeah. They sometimes do that to me too. I guess I can pass for Mexican."

Brian was craning his neck, trying to follow along with our conversation. Knowing that it couldn't be a comfortable way to sit, I turned his chair so that he could be included.

"So what are we doing now?" Brian asked curiously.

"Waiting, I guess. Cliff said that he'd called for a ride for all of us." I said simply.

"So is Cliff his first name or his last? He asked me to call him Dr. Cliff."

"He's a pediatrician, so he's used to talking to younger kids. His real name is Dr. Clifton Grant."

"Hey! My last name's Grant. I wonder if we're related." Brian asked thoughtfully.

Despite the fact that Brian seemed to be in an uncharacteristically good mood, I knew that he had recently lost his immediate family in a car accident. Him speculating about the possibility of having a more distant relative could be seen as a very encouraging sign.

"From what I remember, Cliff has two married sisters. So I doubt that any of their kids would have the last name of Grant. But it's still

possible that you two are related more distantly."

"Just how well do you know Dr. Grant?" Kevin asked curiously.

"You guys probably know about me being a resident at the home when I was your age, right?"

Both boys nodded.

"We got in a new guy, a kid who had been in the hospital for almost a whole year. When he showed up at the home, he couldn't talk at all and he was so afraid of women that he'd have a panic attack and go catatonic for days at a time if a woman got anywhere near him." I said slowly as I remembered all those years ago.

"So was Dr. Grant the doctor who made him better?" Kevin guessed.

"In a way." I answered with a smile at him, then explained, "Dr. Grant and his husband, Ben, adopted JD and made him their son. Eventually they were able to get JD to talk and try new things and embrace life. It was really amazing to see."

"So how do you figure into all of that?" Brian asked curiously.

"A little while after Cliff and Ben got JD, they were asked to take in another kid, his name was Jody. Mr. Cooper had asked me to watch after Jody while he was having a meeting with some prospective foster parents. Of course those foster parents turned out to be Cliff and Ben. I was there when they first met Jody and it was the first time that I had seen JD since he had left the home. He was so much better and he would even talk a little bit by then." I said with a smile at the memory, then continued, "JD and Jody asked if I could come over and visit them for the weekend..."

"They asked us to take you in as a foster child too." Cliff said as he joined our conversation.

"Oh yeah. That's right. But if you did that, then I would have aged out of the system before I finished high school and it would have been a big mess." I confirmed.

"So we did the next best thing. We invited Michael over to our house

just about every weekend, so that he could spend time with the boys, and every now and then we'd hire him to babysit so that Ben and I could have a night out." Cliff said happily.

"So he's practically part of your family?" Brian asked to be sure.

"He *is* part of our family." Cliff said without hesitation.

It suddenly occurred to me that this was the perfect opening and I quickly said, "Speaking of that, Brian was curious to know if you two might be related, since you have the same last name."

Cliff looked at me, then down to Brian and said, "It's certainly possible. Later, when you're feeling up to it, we can have a long talk about our more distant relations."

"Are you ready to go?" A doctor asked Cliff as he approached our group.

"We're just waiting for a ride." Cliff said frankly.

"I know. That's what I mean. They're waiting for us in the lobby. Are you ready to go?"

"Everyone! This is Dr. Jerry Parish. He says that our rides are here, so let's start down to the lobby..."

"Hold on. Someone needs to go and get Mrs. Usher." Andy quickly interrupted.

"Where did she go?" Mr. Cooper asked as he looked around.

"She wanted to see how Diane was doing." Andy said frankly.

"Did she take Princess and Dog with her?"

"Yes." Andy answered simply.

"Do you want for me to go get her?" I cautiously asked.

"No. I'll do it. Why don't you go down with Cliff and help to keep our group together." Mr. Cooper said decisively.

I don't know how he does it. I have a question, he has an answer. He doesn't have to weigh the options, he just decides and considers it

settled. I really *seriously* need to learn how to do that.

* * * * *

It took a minute to get everyone up and moving, but soon we were on our way.

Andy and Hendrix led the way. Kevin was pushing Brian's wheelchair, as though it was his rightful place.

Mike was walking by himself, keeping a respectful distance from anyone else. I noticed that he kept looking back to where Mr. Cooper had gone.

Danny had gone with Mr. Cooper, so I wasn't sure which one of them he was looking for.

Cliff and Dr. Parish walked ahead of me, and seemed to be carrying on their own private hushed conversation.

* * * * *

When we walked into the lobby, all thoughts of worry and responsibility were forgotten for a moment. Wil and Todd were standing there with glorious matching smiles.

"How ya doin', Dr. Ortiz?" Todd asked playfully.

Before I could even think about answering, Wil had engulfed me in a hug that knocked the wind out of me.

Typically, we're not the type of friends that hug. I'm used to looking at Wil as someone older than me, a little bit out of my league; not part of my peer group or generation. Even so, it was unexpectedly nice to be held like that, knowing that it was because someone cared about me.

When Todd realized that I wasn't able or willing to answer his question, he looked to Cliff and asked, "Where's Ron?"

"He went to get Mrs. Usher and the girls. He should be right behind us." Cliff answered, then looked to the younger men with Todd and Wil and said, "Collin and Christian, it's good to see you."

"When Ben said that he needed drivers, we volunteered..." Collin

began to explain, but was cut off.

"Where *is* Ben? When I talked to him he said that he was going to come to pick us up." Cliff interrupted.

"He wanted to, but JD needed his help. I guess the Thanksgiving dinner kinda grew out of control. Wil and Todd were kind enough to volunteer to help us out."

"Well, it's good to see all of you. We're waiting on a few more people to join us, then we'll be ready to go."

"Before we do that, how many wheelchair lifts are we going to need?" Collin asked seriously.

"If you have one, Brian could use it. But if it's going to be a problem, I could get him some crutches."

"No. That's okay. We brought one. I just wasn't sure that that would be enough."

"Oh, good. While I don't think it would necessarily hurt Brian to use crutches, as his doctor I'd feel better if he had some time to heal before he starts stressing the injury."

"Don't worry Uncle Cliff. We've got it covered." Collin assured him.

Just then I saw Mrs. Usher walking toward us with Mr. Cooper, Danny and the girls.

After all that she had been through, it amazed me that Mrs Usher was up and walking around.

"How are you doing, Grandma?" I asked as she approached.

"I believe that I'm ready to settle in somewhere that I can get off my feet for a nice long while."

"From the sound of it, we're going to visit a friend of Cliff and Ben's and have dinner at his house. If that turns out to be too much for you, just let me know and I'll find a place where you can lay down for a little while." I told her gently.

"I don't know. All this excitement may end up being too much for me,

but spending Thanksgiving with a group of new friends sounds lovely. I believe that I'd like to give it a try."

"Okay Grandma. But just let me know."

"Is she really your grandma? She doesn't look like you." Kevin asked curiously.

I felt an irrational anger rise within me at the question, probably because I had so few people in my life that I thought of as family. To have our relationship disparaged so casually made me want to lash out.

Fortunately, I was able to think reasonably before I said something that I couldn't take back.

Kevin had been combative since I'd known him. He appeared to push people away with his attitude, as a defense mechanism.

If I were to respond to his tactless question with hostility, I might well force him back into his defensive, perpetually shielded state.

"Mrs. Usher was in charge of the home when I was placed there. She's been an important part of my life since I was younger than you are. My blood family were too caught up in drinking and drugs to think about what was best for me. It was so bad that the state took me away from them. Because my blood family was worthless, I formed a family out of the people that I had been placed with."

"So you can just make your own family?"

"We all do what we have to do to help us deal. For me, that means replacing the people who failed me with people that I can trust."

"What if you don't have anyone you can trust?"

"Trust doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes you have to take a chance on someone to discover if they're worth trusting or not. In fact, it may even be necessary to give out some second chances every now and then, just so that you can be sure. But once you've determined that someone is worth your trust, then you've got someone who can watch your back and take some of the pressure off of you."

"Why didn't you tell me this before, instead of trying to get me to *verbalizemy feelings?*"

"Getting you to put your feelings into words was the first step in trying to get you to the point where we could talk about something like this. Until you were ready to join in a conversation with me, all I could do was talk *at* you, knowing full well that you weren't interested in anything that I had to say."

"So you adopted them?"

"In my heart, yeah. Mrs. Usher is the only one that I ever called by my family name for her. Even though I thought of Mr. Cooper, Cliff and Ben as though they were my uncles, I never called them that."

"With you talking to me like this, I don't know where you're coming from... Do you hate me like everyone else does?"

"Kevin, I don't hate you. I don't *know* you. All I know about you is what's in your file. I don't know what your favorite movie is, what hobbies you might have or if you like to listen to music. I know that I'm sometimes frustrated by my inability to get through to you, but I don't see that as being your fault. If I come across as being angry at you, I'm sorry. I really don't mean it that way."

"You guys can stay here and chat if you want, but the rest of us are leaving." Cliff interrupted.

"I think we're ready." I told him with a quick smile and started walking.

"Dr. Ortiz, can I call you Junior?" Kevin asked seriously as he started pushing Brian's wheelchair.

For some reason I felt as though I should refuse, but considering how long I had been trying to get through to Kevin, I wasn't about to miss out on the opportunity to redefine our relationship to be a bit more familiar.

"Yeah Kevin, I think I'd like that."

"What about me?" Brian asked anxiously.

"What about you?" I automatically responded.

"Can I call you Junior too?" Brian asked hopefully.

After walking through the automatic doors and into the parking area, I looked at Brian and said, "Yeah. If you want to."

After a moment to consider, I continued, "All this time I believed that it was necessary for me to hold up my credentials and force people to acknowledge them so that I could feel like I was being taken seriously. I guess I didn't think about how intimidating that could be from your point of view."

Kevin brought Brian's wheelchair to a stop beside an ATV with a wheelchair lift mechanism built in.

As Collin and Christian went to work getting Brian's wheelchair lined up, Kevin moved closer to my side and quietly said, "Seeing you hugging your family makes me have to look at you like a real person instead of a psychologist. If you can be a real person with me... I don't know. Maybe we could talk about stuff... you know, when you want to."

"Once things have settled down, we'll find a quiet place to talk for a while." I assured him, then thought to add, "Don't worry. I'm not going to be pushing you to verbalize your feelings. We'll just talk about whatever's bothering you and maybe together we can come up with some answers for you."

Kevin nodded as we watched Brian's wheelchair being hoisted onto the ATV.

As soon as Brian's wheelchair had been secured, Wil cheerfully called out, "All aboard!"

Kevin automatically got onto the ATV and took the seat beside Brian, then looked at me expectantly.

It took a moment for me to realize that he wanted me to go with them. Of course he wouldn't come out and say it, but even so, a week ago I never would have expected him to want to include me in anything.

I looked around to see if anyone else needed me to be doing anything before I committed myself to an action.

Andy and Hendrix were taking seats in an ATV with Collin. Mr. Cooper, Danny and Mike were doing the same with Christian.

Todd was leading Mrs. Usher, Princess and Dog to the next ATV in the row and it seemed as though the doctors had commandeered an ATV all their own. So not only did no one need me, if I didn't hurry, they'd be waiting on me.

* * * * *

"Where are we going?" Brian asked as Wil drove us out of the hospital.

"I already told you." I reminded him.

"Yeah. I mean *where* is it? How long will it take us to get there?" Brian pressed.

"How should I know? I guess it doesn't matter because it's going to take as long as it takes. Nothing we say or do will make it go any faster."

"Guys, I'm sorry I don't have any coats for you, but there's blankets back there if you want to get wrapped up." Wil said from the driver's seat.

I hadn't thought about the temperature outside, but since he mentioned it, I noticed that it was somewhat chilly.

I looked around at the other ATVs and saw that the others were all wrapping themselves in blankets.

I was about to grab a blanket to help Brian, since being in the wheelchair would likely impede him, but Kevin beat me to the punch.

I took a blanket and wrapped it around me as I watched Kevin's careful ministrations.

Brian seemed to be oblivious to the fact that Kevin was showing such care for him, but that was probably for the best. Both of them would probably be uncomfortable if any attention were brought to it.

* * * * *

When we left the hospital, the foreign landscape caught my attention. We were in a whole new place that was completely unfamiliar. It bore no resemblance to Florida, but it seemed just as different from the desolate hellhole where we had been stranded. Being in the heavily wooded Pacific Northwest was completely alien. I didn't have any sense of knowing where we were or where we were going.

I'm used to having a certain measure of control over my circumstances and a plan for what is going to happen to me next. It's hard to describe the sense of disquiet that travelling into the unknown caused to awaken within me.

The further we got from the hospital, the more rural our surroundings became. Although there were some clusters of houses along the way, there was nothing resembling a town as our vehicles raced into a more wooded area.

It also occurred to me that the size of our group could be a problem to accommodate. While I know that Colonel Kuznetsov had said that arrangements were being made, I couldn't see a practical way that we could be kept together. Of course, being as powerless as I was in this situation, my only real option was to put my trust in Mr. Cooper's judgement.

* * * * *

We traveled through Kettle Falls proper and continued on into a residential area.

I expected for us to pull into one of the driveways at any moment, but we continued on and on until we had emerged into a more affluent community.

I looked around at the other members of our group, but everyone seemed to be as mesmerized as I was.

Finally the lead vehicle, being driven by Christian, pulled into a long driveway which led up to a large house.

Nothing about the appearance of the house gave me any clue about what to expect.

I had to hold onto the knowledge that Cliff and Ben thought that this was a good thing.

"Are we gonna live *here*?" Brian asked as he stared wide-eyed at the house.

"We're going to have Thanksgiving dinner here. Mr. Cooper is making arrangements for where we'll be staying." I carefully explained.

"So you don't know where we're going next?" Kevin asked anxiously.

"I know that we're going somewhere safe and warm. Mr. Cooper will make sure of that." I said as I tried to assure the boys.

"How can you trust him that much?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"Well, *I* trust him because I've known him for years and he's never done me wrong." I said honestly, then slowly added, "But if you're asking how *you* can trust him, try looking at what he's done in the time that *you've* known him.

"Like what?" Kevin reluctantly asked.

"When he found out that the residents at the home were in danger, he got all of you out of there. No one told him he had to. No one paid him. He could have gone underground or traveled across the country by himself or with his cousin Darin. So everything that he's done, everything that he's gone through, everything that he's doing right this minute is because he cares for us." I told him as Wil drove us around to the side of the house where there was an impromptu parking lot.

"So, he doesn't get anything out of it?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"Only to know that the people he cares about are safe. That includes both of you." I said frankly.

Before Kevin could ask any more questions, Wil moved around the ATV and released Brian's wheelchair.

"What about you?" Kevin asked as he got out of the ATV to stand beside me.

"Are you asking if I care about you?" I asked to confirm my

understanding.

"Yeah. Why are you here? Is it your job or is it something else?"

"I can't answer that." I said as I watched Wil lower Brian's wheelchair to the ground. "I did what I felt like I had to do. I never even considered doing anything else. I didn't examine my feelings to try and figure out *why*."

"But your job ended when you left Tallahassee, didn't it?" Kevin pressed.

"Yeah. I guess it did. I didn't think about it before, but I guess I'm unemployed now."

"I'm cold." Brian announced.

"Then let's go inside." Wil responded simply.

I moved behind Brian's wheelchair to push him, but Kevin once again wedged himself in. To take over the duty.

Although in some sense it was rude, I held my tongue and let Kevin make his contribution to the effort.

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"Let me take your coats... or blankets, as the case may be." Cliff offered once we were inside.

"Do you need any help with that?" I asked, since it seemed as though my two charges were content to keep each other entertained.

"No. Why don't you go into the dining room, right over there, and get yourself something to eat?" Cliff asked as he indicated the way.

"Okay, but I want to hear all about what's happened since the last time I saw you." I said seriously.

"That's quite a bit to cover. Go ahead and have some food and we'll find some time to trade stories later." Cliff said warmly.

"Okay." I reluctantly agreed before walking into the living room and on through to the dining room.

* * * * *

I was home. Even though I was in a stranger's house, the sight and the smell of the food transported me. Over the years I must have come to associate JD's cooking with the positive things in my life. Considering the timing... I'm not suggesting a causal relationship, but if one *weresuggested*, I could understand why.

"What do you want first?" Kevin asked, jarring me out of my introspection. I looked at him to find that he had been asking Brian.

"Actually, the first thing I need is the bathroom." Brian shyly admitted.

As I glanced around, I spotted Christian walking into the dining room.

"Christian, do you know where the bathroom is?" I quickly asked him.

"Right over there." Christian said as he pointed.

I glanced at Brian and Kevin to see that they had heard.

"Are you guys going to need any help?" I asked cautiously.

"We'll give it a try. If we have a problem, we'll come and get you." Kevin said confidently.

"Alright. Just let me know." I said as I watched Kevin push Brian away.

"JD did a great job. This food is amazing." Christian said as he started loading a plate.

"I can't believe with as bad as things are around the country that he was able to do all of this."

"He's been preparing for weeks, gathering supplies for today. Thanksgiving is a very special holiday for JD. It's like he's showing everyone in his life just how thankful he is to have them."

"It makes me wish that I had a talent that I could use to show people that I care about them." I said regretfully.

"You don't need to do anything extra. Everyone who knows you knows how you feel about them." Christian said as he leaned across the table to get some of JD's special sweet potatoes.

Knowing how good they were, I waited so that I could get some. As I waited, I said, "I'm sorry that I didn't take the opportunity to get to know you and Collin better."

"Don't worry about that. We could see that you were caught up in your own thing. It's like we were living in two different worlds. We would have been happy to include you if we'd had any indication that you'd be interested, but the few times we visited, you always seemed to be focused on JD and Jody." Christian said frankly.

"I guess that I never got good at relating to people my own age." I reluctantly admitted.

"You were fitting in and making a difference in the boys' lives. You were doing what you needed to do, both for them and for yourself. And if you think about it, that prepared you for the life you're leading today. You can relate to the kids and get into their heads."

I thought about that for a moment as I continued to fill my plate.

Finally, as we were walking toward the living room, I quietly said, "If you're right, then I've been doing the kids a disservice by always acting so professional with them."

"You're fine tuning your technique, finding what works best for you. Sometimes they'll need for you to be their friend, but other times they'll need you to be the professional. It's probably going to be a difficult balance at first, but if you can manage it, you'll probably be able to help a lot of kids who need it." Christian said as he led the way to one of the couches and took a seat beside Collin.

I took the seat next to him as I said, "Thank you, Christian. I think that's going to be a lot of help."

Christian flashed a quick grin in my direction, since his mouth was full, and I understood that my message had been received.

After taking a few bites of food, I looked around the room at the strange collection of people enjoying the meal. There were people like Ben and Cliff who were reasonably well-off professionals but there were also a few tattooed bikers. Everyone seemed to be comfortable

with each other and were getting along reasonably well.

It appeared that Todd and Wil were the catalyst. Due to their work as bartenders as well as their relationship with Ben and Cliff, they were able to form a bridge between the two groups.

"Can we sit with you?" Kevin asked as he pushed Brian to my side.

"Sure. If you can find a place." I said as I noticed that they had already been to the dining room and filled plates for themselves.

Brian was holding two plates of food as Kevin maneuvered him into place.

"Oh, good. I'm glad you three are together." Mr. Cooper said as he approached us.

I looked at him curiously, since I couldn't think of any reason for his statement.

"What's going on?" I asked cautiously, not sure that I really wanted to know.

"I've been working on arranging places for everyone to stay. Let me tell you what I've come up with and tell me what you think about it." Mr. Cooper asked hopefully.

I looked to see that the boys were both paying attention before nodding for Mr. Cooper to continue.

"First of all, keep in mind that eventually we'll all be moving to a new place together. What I'm talking about right now is just temporary."

I nodded again.

"Well, when I mentioned what was going on, Cliff and Ben asked if it would be possible for Junior to stay at their place."

I couldn't help but smile at the announcement. Since I was a teenager, I had held onto the secret hope that someday they'd invite me to live with them.

Mr. Cooper continued, "Since you three seem to have come to some sort of an understanding between you, I wondered if you'd be

interested in rooming together."

Although I didn't have a problem with the idea, I looked at the boys to see their reactions.

"Are you saying that we're going to be living with Dr. *Grant*?" Brian cautiously asked.

From the inflection that he used on Cliff's last name, there was no doubt in my mind that Brian was hoping that he'd have an opportunity to explore the possibility that he and Cliff were somehow related.

"You'll be staying with him for a short time, until other arrangements can be made." Mr. Cooper explained.

As much as I wanted to immediately agree, the more practical part of me forced me to ask, "Are they going to have enough room for all three of us?"

"They've said that they can make it work. Either you and JD can share his room and the boys can share Jody's, or the three of you can share one while JD and Jody share the other. Of course, if you remember, they have no problem with people camping out in their living room." Mr. Cooper finished with a smile at me.

"We used to do that just about every weekend." I explained to Brian and Kevin.

"What do you think?" Mr. Cooper asked me seriously.

I looked to the boys with question. Anyone who knew anything about me already knew what my answer would be if it were up to me alone.

"They *asked* if we could stay with them?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"As soon as I started talking about finding places for people to stay, Cliff made sure to request all three of you. He never even considered inviting any of the others." Mr. Cooper said seriously.

Kevin considered for a moment, then looked to Brian with question.

"He might be related to me." Brian said honestly, leaving no doubt as to his decision.

Kevin nodded at him, then looked to me uncertainly.

"I don't know what to say to you except that I *want* you to go with us. I don't know if we'll end up being refugees, roommates or maybe even possibly a family, but whatever happens next, I'd like for you to be a part of it."

"Is that Dr. Ortiz saying that this is what's best for me?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"No. This is Junior talking. It's personal." I answered honestly.

"Okay." Kevin quietly agreed, then added, "Besides, Brian needs someone to push him around and to help him in the bathroom."

"Fantastic! I'll let Cliff and Ben know." Mr. Cooper said happily before dashing away.