

## X to the Highest Power, Part 1 by B. Nickerson {Rated PG}

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### Chapter 26

Storm caught Andi in the hallway as she was coming from checking on Elliot. "Can I talk to you?" she whispered.

"Sure," Andi agreed, noting as she did that Storm seemed oddly intense. Of course, she knew she'd just come back from California that day from her visit with Alex and Andi immediately feared she was about to get engagement news.

Storm followed Andi downstairs to the small TV room. Andi switched on the overhead light, then perched on the sofa. Storm sat facing her, though she seemed--nervous.

"So, how was your visit?" Andi asked casually, just to help break the ice.

Storm's eyes darted up to meet Andi's then down again, focused on the fringe of her leather vest she was twiddling distractedly with. "Ah, good...mostly," she answered, paused, then said in a rush, "Alex took me to meet Jana. I thought it would be nice to meet her, but I didn't expect her to be so...so..."

"Mean and rude?"

Storm looked at her with surprise. "You know?"

Andi nodded, greatly relieved this wasn't about an engagement, but was immediately pained by bitter memories any mention of her daughter brought up. Jana's unpleasant attitude toward them all had been a constant battle even before their Dad's death and afterwards, it'd escalated into her completely disowning her and Jack. Jana only allowed Alex to relate closely with her, because he was her 'real' brother, though Andi considered Alex's tolerantly conciliating attitude played a big part in her willingness to that much. "Alex didn't warn you, I take it," Andi replied.

"Well, sort of. He did say she could be 'difficult'. But I didn't know what he really meant until we got there and she treated me like I wasn't there. I don't think she liked me much."

"I'm sure she didn't," Andi replied bluntly, which surprised Storm enough to drop her fringe and look at her. "Jana doesn't like anything having to do with me," Andi continued, "and, if Alex even mentioned that you and I work together, well, that'd be enough for her to despise you. Either that, or she's afraid of you coming between her and Alex." Andi shrugged. "It's hard to say."

"Oh. I thought maybe it was because I'm foreign."

Andi regarded Storm thoughtfully. She had a rather unusual beauty and her shapely figure alone would be enough to inspire Jana's angst, since Jana deeply resented her own short, plump physique. "Whatever her reasons, it really has nothing to do with you," Andi assured her, and though she thought that should end the discussion, she could tell Storm still had something on her mind. "Is there something else?" she asked.

Storm heaved a breath. "It's Alex. When I complained about how Jana was acting toward me, he just told me to overlook it. I felt like he was more interested in protecting her than me. I tried talking to him about it a couple times, but it was starting to turn into an argument and I didn't want to lose my temper. I didn't want things to, you know, get out of hand."

Andi knew she meant thunder and lightning. "Well, certainly a show of mutant powers wouldn't help," she easily agreed, "but you have to realize this situation will only keep happening until you and Alex come to some kind of understanding about being completely for each other in all circumstances. Alex's long been in the habit of pacifying and protecting Jana and I don't suppose anyone's ever challenged him to draw a line in the sand, but because a house divided cannot stand, it sounds like that's going to be necessary."

A gleam of resolution shone in Storm's eyes. "You're right. Alex and I must be one house together or we cannot be and he cannot be on his sister's side and *my* side at the same time. He must choose. I'll talk to him." She rose. "And I won't back down this time," she added firmly. "Thank you," she said, then hurried away.

Andi looked after her uncertainly and, in her mind, ran over what she'd just advised Storm to do,

double-checking her motives, since her advice might easily break them up. In the end, she decided her advice was sound. If her son was serious about Storm, then his loyalty needed to be fully hers and she had every right to ask for it. If a break-up resulted, then it'd be really for the best and not just because she wished it, though Andi didn't expect either would tell her the outcome. Only time would tell.

It was a muggy July night when Scott Summers pulled around the mansion's east-wing to deliver a stranger to Professor Xavier's private entrance. A tall, middle-aged man with a gaunt and sad face got out and followed Scott inside. He directed him to the sitting room where the Professor was, then retreated down the hall.

Xavier extended his hand to his visitor as he entered. "Welcome, Admiral. I'm Professor Charles Xavier."

The Admiral gripped his hand. "Professor."

"Won't you sit down." Xavier gestured at a chair and Admiral Arthur Boland sank into it with a deep sigh while Xavier poured from a neat, China tea service on the coffee table. "May I offer you some tea?"

Boland shook his head. "I'm not entirely convinced you can offer me anything, Professor. I've reached the end of my rope, but an anonymous note I received suggested I should see you before giving up." He sighed again.

Xavier's brows rose with interest. "Tell me your situation and we shall see."

"My son is, frankly, a mutant. Of course, we didn't know that until the traits showed up during adolescence."

Xavier nodded. That was the usual story.

Boland sighed. "Trent has amphibious traits that let him breath underwater. He has a secondary gill system attached to his lungs and gill-slits on his back along the ribs as well as secondary eyelids. Even so, he's an ordinary kid with dreams. He wanted a Navy career," he laughed weakly, "like me. I naively believed I could protect him through my rank and position in the Pentagon and assure he was put to honest use by the Navy. That was ten months ago. Six weeks ago I got this." He handed Xavier a letter.

Xavier glanced over it. It was a death notice that Seaman Trent D. Boland had died in an accident in the line of duty, then a brief summary of details. He passed it back. "Did you see a body?"

"One that was too charred to identify, except by dental records and DNA, which they claimed matched."

"You don't believe that?"

"No. My heart tells me he's alive. His voice, last time I talked to him, gave me a sense something was going on." He shook the letter. "But this ties my hands. As far as the Navy or anyone else is concerned, my son no longer legally exists."

"That would certainly leave them free to take advantage of the boy," Xavier agreed. "What would the Navy most likely do with him?"

"Send him to the Experimental Diving School in northern Florida." Boland sighed again. "I've pulled in every favor, pulled every string I could, even inspected the facility myself--but nothing. And I've been recently advised that I either stop or face a stay in mental health and possible mandatory retirement." He made a helpless gesture and fell silent studying the bald, wheelchair bound man before him, sipping from a fragile teacup safely surrounded by his wood-paneled walls and antique furniture. Hardly the picture of a likely rescuer. Deciding he was only fooling himself, Boland slapped the chair-arms decisively and stood, "Well, I've done my duty. I've told you."

"And it's well you did. I think I can help you find and save your son."

He paused, scrutinizing Xavier's confident gaze. "How?"

"Leave that to me." Xavier mentally re-called Scott, who promptly appeared in the doorway. "Mr. Summers will take you back to the rendezvous point now. It will take a little time, but I'll contact you when I know more."

With uncertainty, Boland replied, "Thank you, Professor," and silently followed Scott back to the SUV.

## Chapter 27

The day Logan had been dreading finally arrived. Andi told him the "test" date was set for midnight in two days, which put him into such a foul and unsociable mood, he skipped his classes, ate off-campus and generally avoided everyone, even Andi, those entire two days. At the appointed time, though, he was waiting for her in the garage

and got in her car sullenly, glaring at her X-team vest and gloves with displeasure. It was a long, silent drive to the roller-rink in Middleburg.

When they arrived, he immediately noticed the light hum of a generator coming from somewhere and, inside, saw that it powered five portable tri-pod flood lights that ringed the inner-circumference of the old cement rink. Their lights reflected wildly off the old disco-ball, which sent spots of light dancing throughout the cavernous room. He eyed the puzzling clutter of short, narrow PVC pipe pieces laying around the rink, but forgot all about them as soon as he laid eyes on Weir, waiting for them in the shadows of the old snack bar. Weir was wearing an ear-mike, which made him glance warily about, his neck hair on end as he sniffed the air suspiciously, but he could detect no one aside from Andi, Weir, a young woman loitering on the far end of the rink and a third party he could smell, though not see. He figured they were part of the test. What he didn't notice were the tiny red eyes of several mini-cams covertly mounted along the ceiling and aimed at the rink-arena.

Weir acknowledged them with a nod, while Andi became immediately focused on the rink, already mentally 'feeling' her opponents. Abruptly, she grabbed Logan's arm and jerked him around to face her. "Stay," she ordered, then nimbly side-vaulted the guard wall and began prowling along the rinks perimeter.

Logan scowled uneasily after her, then because Weir's cologne made his eyes itch, he irritably moved further down the wall. He nervously watched as Andi quickly located and engaged her first opponent. He could see her dodging unseen blows like a shadow-boxer and his fingers tightened on the wall. He winced each time he heard and saw her take a blow as she was being driven relentlessly backwards, directly toward one of the tripod flood lights. He caught his breath as she was sent reeling into it and both she and the light crashed to the floor. The light shattered and sputtered out, but she rolled promptly to her feet, and he heaved a sigh of relief. Then it became her turn to batter her invisible opponent as she drove him backwards towards another one of the flood lights. Suddenly, she fainted left, rolled across the floor, seized a short length of inch-wide PVC pipe, then came to her feet again and swiped it hard across the air. Logan heard a resounding 'smack' as it struck flesh, followed by a pained grunt, then a thud. A puff of old cement dust rose into the air where the body fell, the dust rendering a huge, naked black man visible. Andi quickly spun around and whacked the floodlight with her pipe, knocking it out as well.

That's when Logan suddenly realized what she was *trying* to do. She was trying to put her opponents in the dark. They needed light to see her, but she didn't. She could *feel* them even in the dark. "Good girl," he whispered.

Behind her, the dust-outlined mutant was starting to move and trying to get to his feet, but Andi swiftly cancelled him with a swift blow across the back of the neck, which returned him to the floor, unconscious.

Suddenly the pipe flew out of Andi's hand and she was sent flying through the air, headed directly for the high curved wall that once housed the rink's DJ. Twisting around quick as a cat, she impacted it feet first, flipped over and landed neatly on the floor in a crouch, surveying her new telekinetic opponent on the other end of the rink.

Logan looked, too. It was a girl he'd seen loitering there when they first came in. She was stocky and twenty-ish looking with bleached-blonde hair bound into a pony-tail and black eye-makeup that gave her dark, mean look.

Andi decided to try sending a mental-pain pulse into the girl's mind. If she succeeded, it would incapacitate the girl temporarily, at least long enough for her to get to that end of the rink unhampered, otherwise it was game over. Entering the appropriate place in her mind, she aimed a pain-pulse at the girl and sent it with as much force as she could directly into her mind. She immediately seized her head with both hands and doubled-over, allowing Andi time to run to the next closest light and kick it over. This left only two, both on the other side of her telekinetic opponent, who was at that very moment re-cooperating. Andi quickly shot her another pain-pulse, then dashed to her side, shot a knee into her mid-riff, shoved her to the floor, then headed for the next light. She was nearly upon it when she suddenly heard Logan's howling protests. Whirling around, Andi saw the girl was already on her feet and had snatched Logan into the rink. Caught in her telekinetic grasp, he suspended just above the floor, kicking and struggling, a blockade meant to keep her from reaching the last light, which was behind her young opponent. Then, to Andi's great dismay, she forced his blades out.

Logan bellowed with rage, more from the realization they were about to be used against Andi than anything else. He could picture them ripping through her like butter and struggled frantically to retract them, but succeeded

only in making them saw in and out painfully as the girl resisted his effort.

Andi spun, kicked over the light nearest her, then crouched to assess the situation and catch her breath. The girl had recovered too quickly from the last pain-pulse, so that tactic was obviously out.

Logan watched her, saw her darkened eyes and knew she was about to do something he'd most likely regret. He tried catching her eye and shaking his head, urging her not to do whatever it was she was planning and desperately willing her to obey him.

Andi saw this, but her attention was on the girl, who's face showed the strain of holding a frantically struggling Logan in place. It was something she could use, so Andi sought Logan's eyes and, with barely moving lips, whispered what she wanted him to do, a whisper so faint no one but he or a dog could've heard.

"Keep fighting her," came to Logan's ears, much to his displeasure. Cussing under his breath, he began fighting even harder to retract his blades, so hard he could feel the stickiness of blood running down his fingers.

Andi straightened and stepped closer, though not so close as to be in easy-swiping range then, with a bit of psychological warfare in mind, addressed the girl. "How long do you think you can hold him?" she demanded. "You know, don't you, that the second you let him go, he'll turn those claws on *you*." She saw fear cross the girl's eyes. "In fact, we'll both be on you," Andi added. Then, just to test the girl's control, Andi suddenly fainted forward very close and to the right, but got only a broad awkward swipe from Logan's partially extended blades, which she easily dodged. It proved the girl's dexterity at maneuvering Logan was slow, perhaps slow enough she might even get past.

Logan roared and gave her his fiercest *'are-you-crazy'* glare.

Andi saw tremors in the girl's hands and arms. "Look at your hands," she leered as she deliberately paced back and forth, trying to keep the girl off-guard as well as forcing her to have track her to and fro with Logan to further the strain. "You're not going to hold out much longer," Andi challenged. "Is this really worth dying for?" Doubt crossed the girl's eyes and Logan's mid-air movement quivered as she hesitated. That's when Andi suddenly fainted left. Then as the girl hurriedly tried to maneuver Logan that way, Andi lunged in the opposite direction, dive-rolled past him, came to her feet and planted a high-kick right in the girl's chest. She slammed to the floor and Andi raced to the last light.

Logan landed feet first on the cement and had barely retracted his claws when he heard the last light hit the floor behind him, then everything went dark.

He stood where he was. "Andi?" he called.

"Yes."

He heard her approach, felt her hands grip his arms, heard her hard breathing and inhaled sweetness mixed with sweat. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yeah." Suddenly, a dim crack of street light flashed as someone fled the building and they both looked that direction.

"Let's get out of here," he said, catching her elbow. He led the way out, picking their way through the darkness by following Weir's distinct cologne trail. Outside, he glared angrily around for him, then quickly circled the building, but found nothing. Not even another vehicle.

Andi, feeling drained and head-throbbing, just went to her car. She felt thick wetness on her lip and tasted it with her tongue. Blood. Flopping into the passenger seat, she just leaned her head back and pinched her nose closed.

Frustrated, Logan returned, got in and drove them directly back to the school, but his night was far from over.

They found Professor Xavier anxiously waiting for them as they came in from the garage. He was surprised by Logan's sweaty, disheveled appearance and blood-stained fingers. "I see things didn't go as expected," he said to Andi.

"Not quite," she replied.

Logan snorted as he veered off to the john to wash his hands.

"*What happened?*" Xavier thought to her. In seconds, from her mind, he knew every detail of the match.

"It was a set-up," she observed out-loud. "Weir and his two mutants were wired like secret service men. Someone was calling the shots from somewhere else---maybe the same guy Logan saw last time."

Logan rejoined them in time to hear her last remark. "Whoever it was definitely knew about my claws," he said. "I could hear 'em yelling in that girl's ear-piece, telling her what to do while she was swingin' me around."

Xavier nodded. "And our Mr. Weir?"

"Flew the coop," Andi replied. "No one was there when we left, but the two mutants. Both were unconscious and one or both might be injured."

Xavier mentally woke Jean and Scott. "I'll send Jean and Scott to check. And you? How are you?"

She was pulling off her gloves and he could see bruising on her forearms, a bloody abrasion on her elbow and bruising along her right cheek bone.

"Fine," Andi replied. "Just tired. It was better this time."

Logan snorted again and gave her a chastening look. She averted her eyes.

Scott and Jean, medical bag in her hand, rushed breathlessly into the room. "What's up?" Scott demanded taking in Andi and Logan's disheveled state in a glance.

Xavier replied, "We may have two injured mutants in an old roller rink in Middleburg. I want you to check on that and, Logan, since you know where it is, I want you to go with them."

Logan scowled as he stalked back to the garage again and Scott gave Andi a disapproving look as he passed having already guessed she'd been in one of those fights again.

"Why don't you take a room upstairs," Xavier suggested to her. "So we can keep an eye on you."

Andi nodded, patted his shoulder as she passed and retired to an upstairs room, where she changed into some spare sleep-ware and dropped gratefully into bed.

Logan silently drove back to Middleburg again and Scott quickly gave up trying to pump him for what happened after a couple of ill-humored glares. At the rink, Scott's flashlight glinted off a shiny new chain locked with a shiny new padlock on the boarded-up front doors of the otherwise windowless old skating rink.

"You don't think they'd just leave them?" Jean asked.

"Probably not," Logan grumbled, then left them to stalk around the building, stopping to examine the empty spot where he'd last seen the generator.

"Should we break in and check?" she whispered to Scott.

He clicked off his flashlight. "No. They're gone. We're not dealing with a sloppy outfit that would leave evidence like that behind. It'd raise too many questions."

Headed for the car, they saw Logan coming around the corner. "Let's go," Scott ordered.

## Chapter 28

Professor Xavier's eyes snapped open in the darkness of his room. He had a sense of...*something*, something he couldn't penetrate with his telepathy. Alarmed, he pulled himself into a sitting position and leveraged into his wheelchair. Humming into the main concourse of the school, he paused, mentally searching for it. Locating it, he suddenly sucked in his breath and hummed hurriedly to the south veranda, where he saw her, standing outside barefoot in cotton pajama pants and dark t-shirt, motionless and staring into the pre-dawn distance like someone hearing faraway music. He pushed his way outside and called Andi's name, but she didn't respond. Nor could he reach her mind---she was in that place he couldn't go. Pondering what to do, he finally decided to call Logan, since he'd be least vulnerable to any unpredictable responses.

Logan, his head under his pillow, heard Xavier in his mind and grumbled drowsily, "Huh? What now?"

"*It's Andi. Get down here to the south veranda. Now.*"

Logan snapped awake then and quickly pulled on a t-shirt over the jeans he was still wearing as he hurried

downstairs. Outside, he stared at Andi beside Xavier. "What's she doing?"

"Sleep walking, I believe."

Logan stared at him, annoyed. "So what'd ya need me for? Just talk to her in her head--wake her up."

Xavier laced his fingers together in his lap. "I wish I could. She's in a place in her mind beyond my reach."

Logan scowled incredulously at him. "You're kidding, right?"

"Her mental abilities are unique, Logan," Xavier explained softly. "I've never experienced anything like them. All her ability to feel other mutants and anticipate their actions comes from that place. When her eyes darken---she's there. Accessing it has been what all these fighting tests have been about." He shook his head. "I was afraid of something like this."

Logan eyed her grumpily, wondering why nothing was ever simple with this woman. "So, what do ya want me to do?"

"Get her back to her room---and be careful---she could be quite unpredictable in this state."

"Unpredictable in any state," Logan groused to himself. He edged near her slowly. "Andi," he called. She didn't respond. It was like she was listening to something he couldn't hear. "Andi," he called again, but still she didn't respond. He gently grasped her arm. That's when she turned her gaze on him, her pupils like black marbles in a white sky, staring sightlessly at him, a ripplet of blood trickling from her nose down her lip. It gave him a chill. Softly, he said, "Time to go back to bed," and carefully scooped her into his arms. She didn't resist or protest, just stared unwaveringly into his face. Xavier followed him in and they took the elevator to the second floor, where Logan carefully tucked her back into bed. She passively let him, her strange gaze never leaving him.

"Now what?" he asked Xavier, dismayed by the blood and her empty stare.

Xavier gently laid a hand over her eyes, closing them, then speaking soothing words of sleep to the part of her mind he could reach. He left his hand there several minutes and when he lifted it, her eyes remained closed. He took a tissue and wiped away the blood from her lip.

"No one hit her," Logan remarked. "Why the blood?"

"I'm not entirely certain, but I think it's a symptom of the strain that occurs when she connects to that place in her mind."

"If it's hurting her, why let her do it?"

Xavier fixed his eyes on Logan's. "Your blades hurt you. Does that stop you from using them?"

He couldn't deny it did. He stubbornly returned Xavier's piercing gaze. "What if she gets stuck in this *place* you're talking about?"

"I pray that doesn't happen." Xavier looked pensively upon the sleeping woman. "She might get up again."

"Not tonight she won't," Logan promised, opening the door to usher Xavier out. "Not unless she goes through me."

Then, closing the door after him, Logan locked it, shoved an over-stuffed chair against it, switched off the light and settled in for the night. Though the whole deal troubled him, it didn't stop sleep from quickly overtaking him again.

Logan had his hands around Ben Weir's throat and was happily beating his head against a wall, when he gradually realized someone was actually knocking on the door behind him. Disappointed it was only a dream, Logan rubbed his eyes and stretched until joints and bones popped. The knock came again. Glancing at Andi to assure she was still sound asleep, he groaned out of his chair, pushed it aside, unlocked the door and cracked it open. Jack's grinning goatee greeted him. "Oh, it's you," Logan muttered, stepping aside to let him in, as he stretched again. "Your Mom was up doing some nocturnal strolling last night."

"So, the Professor said," Jack replied as he lay a wrapped sandwich on the bed-stand. Then he sat beside her and stroked stray hairs away from her face and kissed her forehead, wondering how long she'd sleep this time. Xavier had told him the rough details and he was relieved to see she looked better this time. Maybe not so long. Standing again, he clapped Logan on the shoulder. "Thanks for going with her." Then, Jack held the door open and

ushered Logan out into the hallway. "I'll stay with her tonight---you guys don't need to worry about it," he assured. He threw an arm loosely over Logan's shoulders, "How about some lunch, buddy?"

Logan shrugged the arm off, annoyed and not altogether sure he didn't want to be the one worrying about her night-time security.

Later that afternoon Scott stopped by, sat beside her and gently held her hand between his. "We're really going to have to talk about this, you know," he murmured. "I can't have my people running around getting beat up. We're a team, remember?" He smiled faintly at his own weak sarcasm, then kept silent vigil awhile before finally leaving as quietly as he'd come.

In the evening, Jack arranged a cot in her room, then passed a couple hours playing cards with Logan on the bed-stand he'd put between them. When he went to the john later, Logan set his cards aside, stood, stretched and surveyed Andi, her chestnut hair spread out on the pillow like a halo. She reminded him of wild fence roses he used to see growing all tangled and free on pasture pastures along highways. This rose, however, drew him like a bee to pollen even though he knew perfectly well she wasn't a blossom open to just *any* bee, but only one willing to hum her sweet songs of never seeking any other blossom.

The noise of the toilet flushing suddenly broke his revelry and when Jack came out, Logan said his 'good-nights' and went outside. There, he lit a cigar, sending curls of smoke to the stars as he strolled meditatively along the endurance course, debating his options. Leaving was certainly one. His contract with Xavier would be up in three months and leaving was usually what he did when he felt emotional entanglements coming on. This one was different, though. All those other times, with all the tears and pleading, had been like leaving a leech, which usually made him glad to go. He was used to women throwing themselves at him, but not Andi. He could just picture her pleasantly waving goodbye, wishing him well and it pricked him in a bothersome way. More than that, it was darn alluring.

Meanwhile, in a Westchester motel room where he'd fled the night before, Ben Weir was pacing, anxiously waiting to hear from Andi, having already left her numerous messages to call him. Guilt haunted him for having blindly fled the rink without finding out if she was okay and the fear of Logan that made him flee, shamed him.

Jack woke when he felt weight sit on his cot and a hand brush his face. "You're awake," he mumbled, opening his eyes to gray light filtering past the blinds that softly illuminated his Mom's smiling face.

"And hungry," she whispered.

Jack cheerfully threw his legs off the cot and sat up. "Well, let's get some breakfast then."

They headed for the garage, each taking their own vehicle so they could go to their own homes afterwards. They spent breakfast discussing Airwolf's upcoming re-con mission for Boland's son.

It was five-thirty a.m. when Andi got back home and found all Ben Weir's messages on her answering machine. Irritated, she called him back immediately, not caring whether she woke him or not.

His chirping cell did wake him and he eagerly grabbed it, the ID telling him it was Andi. "Hello? Andi?"

"Yes, Ben. What is it?"

"I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm alright."

"I swear what happened was as much a surprise to me as it was to you."

Suddenly, angry that he was more worried about expunging himself of any responsibility than anything else, Andi slammed the phone back into its cradle.

Ben Weir stared at the phone in frustration, feeling driven to prove his case and win an innocent verdict.

The next day, Weir felt safe enough arriving at Xavier's School around ten, since he knew summer PE ran from nine to eleven and could be confident Logan would be busy with students. He went directly to Xavier's

classroom-office.

Xavier looked up at the unusually haggard man, surprised to see him. "Mr Weir?"

"Professor." Weir paced nervously across the room, his hands clasped behind him, glanced out a window, then at Xavier. "I didn't have anything to do with what happened the other night."

"Oh? What do you mean?" Not so sure he believed that, Xavier had no intention of being easy on him.

"I mean I had nothing to do with your friend Logan getting dragged into things."

"Are you sure?"

"I assure you, it was all my employers handiwork."

Xavier arched a brow. "Ah, that would be the gentleman Logan saw leaving after the first test."

"In a manner of speaking."

Xavier's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but he refused to be lured into reading Weir's mind. "Yes or no, Mr. Weir."

"Professor, you know perfectly well I don't know the people I work for," Weir countered smoothly.

"And I know perfectly well you know something, Mr. Weir."

"Alright, I'll tell you what I know, but it won't help. That gentleman, as you call him, never let me see his face and went by the code name of Mirage. Tomorrow he'll be someone else."

"Was this Mirage the one directing last night's fight?" Weir nodded. "And you said nothing?"

"Of course, I said something!" Weir said. "But those mutants didn't answer to me. They were under contract to Mirage."

Xavier drummed his fingers impatiently on his desk. "What exactly is it you're here for, Mr. Weir?"

Weir put himself in front of Xavier's desk, met his eyes, but said nothing.

Xavier just dropped his gaze and shuffled through paperwork in front of him. "If you're hoping I'll just read your mind Mr. Weir, you're wrong," and peering sharply at him, added, "I *am* quite busy, you know."

With a sigh, Weir sat. "I need a chance to talk to Andi in person---to apologize and explain everything and I don't dare try approach her out there." He gestured outside, certain Logan would kill him on sight. "So I'm appealing to you, Professor, to give me that chance by telepathically calling her here."

Xavier studied Weir speculatively, like a man with a bluff-hand. "Oh, I don't know. You've made yourself quite the pest around here, Mr. Weir."

Weir sensed he needed to raise his bid. "Help me talk to her and I'll ask nothing of you again."

Xavier just kept reading the papers in front of him.

"Okay---I won't come on school grounds to see her anymore."

Xavier looked up then. "And no more tests." Weir nodded. "Very well." He called to Andi's mind. "You have a visitor anxious to see you in my office."

"Who?" she thought back.

"Guess." He felt her disgruntlement and to Weir, he said, "She'll be here momentarily," then hummed out the door, leaving him to pace fretfully.

Outside, Andi ran over to Logan and Jack on the other side of the baseball field, "The Professor wants me. I'll see you guys at lunch." Logan nodded, noting her preoccupied look, and watched her hurry toward the main building a moment before returning his attention to the game.

She stormed into Xavier's office, cheeks aflame and daggers shooting from her eyes. "I thought you promised not to show up here!" she demanded of a bedraggled looking Ben Weir as he turned to face her.

Her heated looks made his heart beat wildly. "I know, but I felt apologizing to you in person worth breaking my promise."

Andi scowled at him and folded her arms on her chest. "Okay, so you're sorry. I'm sorry. We're all sorry. Feel better?"

"You have every right to be angry," he answered, softening his tone to diplomatic levels. "Logan getting pulled

into that match was a terrible thing, but I swear I didn't know it was going to happen."

Annoyed, Andi snapped, "So what? The match was still your baby---your responsibility."

"Well---yes and no."

At that, she about-faced and marched down the hallway. "Fine. You didn't know. Go home."

Weir doggedly followed her. "I quit working for that guy! I'm not going to do anymore jobs for him!"

"Good for you."

He surged forward, grabbing her upper-arm and jerking her angrily her around to face him. "You could have been killed and I care for you too much to let that happen!"

Andi locked her eyes on the hand gripping her arm. "Well, you certainly have a funny way of showing it."

He abruptly let go, the fire in her eyes tantalizing his sense of risk and giving him a shiver of desire. He had a thing for a woman with a dangerous edge.

"Why, Mr. Weir," an icy voice suddenly said. "What a surprise finding *you* here."

It was Scott. He walked around from behind Ben, taking his place beside Andi, his hands clasped behind his back. He'd seen that little 'grabbing' scene and now surveyed Weir haughtily. Weir averted his eyes. Then, suddenly holding-up his wristwatch, Scott tapped it's face. "Whoa, look at the time! You know, if I were you, Bennie---I wouldn't be hanging around. Logan should be showing up any minute now and if he sees you... well...let's just say, he won't be as polite as I am."

Weir blanched and his lips compressed in anger. After a furtive glance at Andi, he stalked for the nearest door, embarrassed at his cowardice and knowing he'd lost his case---at least for the moment.

As soon as Weir was out of sight, Scott smiled and seeing that Andi was still quite perturbed, offered her his elbow "Let's go for a walk," he suggested and she slid her arm through his. "I saw what happened," he said. "You okay?"

She nodded and, frustrated over Ben, replied, "I just don't know what drives that man. He's like a chameleon that keeps changing color." She shuddered. "I'm glad you came along when you did."

"Actually, that was the Professor's idea. He thought I should check on you."

She made a mental note to thank Xavier later. "Using Logan to scare him off---that was priceless!" She laughed lightly, her tension easing.

"I guess Logan's good for something," he chuckled. They strolled quietly along the pleasant shady paths for a time before he finally took a deep breath and said quietly, but firmly. "I'd rather you didn't see Weir alone anymore. If he *absolutely* has to see you for some reason, please take one of us with you."

Andi felt the gentle pressure of his hand and his gaze urging her agreement. Somehow, she sensed it would never be that simple. "I'll do my best," she conceded.

He hesitated over this response, but finally nodded. "And no more tests."

At least *that* she could guarantee. "Absolutely not."

"Good." He patted her hand. "Now, tell me about the other night."

Andi retold Scott the events of the match at the rink. He gasped at the part about the telekinetic mutant using Logan against her. He knew the damage those adamantium blades could do and suddenly understood Logan's dark attitude that night.

In the cafeteria Logan was getting impatient waiting for Andi to show up as promised. It was after twelve and he was already nursing his third post-lunch coffee. All the other staff and students had already cleared out. That's when then she trailed in, laughing with Scott.

"Where've you been?" he demanded as they both settled across from him, Andi with a lunch tray.

"Weir was here," Scott explained, "but I got rid of him."

Logan scowled at Andi suspiciously. "For what?"

"Absolution for sins, I think," she replied.

"I caught him playing a little rough," Scott added. "He grabbed her."

Andi felt herself blush. "I'm perfectly capable of handling him."

Scott just arched his brows at Logan and Logan just frowned at her as he took another swig of coffee.

## Chapter 29

That evening, the team gathered in the mission room for briefing on the anticipated search for Admiral Boland's son. Jack, who'd been working on preliminary logistics with Scott, used the map table to explain the tactical situation they were facing. Everyone looked at the northern panhandle of Florida as Jack pointed between Pensacola and Panama City. "This hundred miles is home to five military bases, ranging from flight training and testing bases to two with two strike-fighter wings. One here---at Eglin," he said, then moved his finger southeast of Panama City, "and here---at Tyndall." Then he waved his hand over the Florida panhandle and the Gulf of Mexico. "This is all just one big, honkin' strip of military air space."

"So, Airwolf can't be picked up on radar---what's the problem?" Logan asked.

Scott answered. "She can still be seen and any passing jet on a night sortie could spot her."

"And we want to avoid confrontations," Jack continued. "So, we've contacted all their public relations offices and have put together a schedule of free nights when no one's flying night sorties. We have several open days next week that also coincide with the waning phase of the moon. The less light we have to fly in, the better." Jack adjusted the map to a view of Panama City. "This is our target. The Naval Coastal Systems Station on St. Andrews Bay. We'll hover here and let Professor Xavier try to contact Seaman Boland. First to establish his status and if he wants help, then further contacts to coordinate a rescue--preferably on open water. Since he's legally dead, once we slip him away from them, there's nothing the Navy will be able to do."

"I hope the kid's okay," Logan murmured.

"As do we all," Xavier replied. "We will be relying heavily on the young man to guide us in our course of action."

So, on the scheduled night came, Logan and Scott helped Professor Xavier into Airwolf's co-pilot seat.

"Permission to come aboard," he asked Jack cheerily as he strapped in and put his helmet on.

"Permission granted," Jack replied, grinning. "Welcome aboard the Lady."

"Be careful," Logan admonished Andi, who was in back in the engineer's seat. She waved and he closed the door, then dashed away from the powerful blades already beginning to turn and Airwolf whispered out of the hanger into the night.

Exhilarated, Professor Xavier smiled in envy as he watched Jack fly her and listened to his and Andi's routine flight chatter. At turbo, they were over Panama City in no time, running silent and dark, hovering low like a shadow over the sleepy Station below. Xavier concentrated, touching young Trent Boland's mind, which startled him greatly.

*"Don't be alarmed,"* he thought to the young man, who'd leapt out of bed and switched on a light as if a snake bit him. *"We're here to help---if you wish it."*

"Who are you?" Trent demanded, staring bewilderedly around his room.

*"I'm a mutant---just as you are. My name is Charles Xavier."*

"What do you want?"

*"To let you know you're not alone. Your father sent me."*

Trent sat on his bed then, discouraged. "My Father. How is he?"

*"Worried about you."*

"I'm restricted from outside contact. No phone. No e-mail. No mail."

*"You're a prisoner then?"*

"They've tried to make it sound all noble and sacrificing for my country, which I bought at first, but now... well, I think maybe I am." Trent looked furtively at his door. "Can you get me out of here?"

*"Yes, but a lot will depend on you and what you can learn about their plans for you. We need an opportunity when you're outside this facility in open water. What are they doing with you?"*

"Right now, I'm limited to temperate water, so they're working on a thermal wet-suit design to accommodate my gills so I can swim in colder waters."

*"You're not being harmed then?"*

Trent held his hand up and spread his fingers, studying the webbing they'd surgically added the first week he'd been there. "No, I guess not really."

In Trent's mind, Xavier saw and felt a wave of anger at what had been done. *"Trent, we'll be in touch soon."*

*"It helps knowing I'm not alone,"* Trent thought back.

Xavier said to Jack. "That's enough. Let's go home."

He briefed his team on this first conversation, deciding they'd postpone their follow-up visit till after the weekend whitewater field-trip and give Trent a chance to collect some intelligence for them.

Early the next week, Xavier was again strapped in Airwolf for another night flight over the Naval Coastal Systems Station. Jack cut the turbo as they neared Panama City.

"Negative contact" Andi reported.

"Roger." Jack brought the Lady in low and hovered silently over the facility.

Xavier was glad he had Airwolf available for this. The jet, though a fine craft, had been designed strictly for high-speed, high-altitude re-con or team transport. Reaching out mentally, he touched Trent's mind again. The young man was less surprised this time and glad to have company for a short time, but he had no news yet.

"I know there's something in the works. They had me trying on stuff," he assured Xavier. "I just don't know when yet."

*"Well, we'll back to chat again soon."*

"Tell my Dad I miss him."

*"I will," Xavier promised, though he wasn't quite ready to tell the father anything as yet. He didn't want him tempted to interfere.*

To Jack and Andi, Xavier said, "He doesn't know anything yet. Let's go home."

They slipped in one more visit before the moon grew too bright, though they brought back nothing new. After that Jack vetoed anymore clear night flights south, but kept his eye on the Panhandle weather for overcast conditions. Unfortunately, Florida happened to be enjoying a bright and dry mid-August season, meaning it would be after the twenty-fifth before another flight. So, everyone bided their time concentrating on preparations for the new fall semester.

Scott, Jean and the Professor split up the various math and science courses, while Storm took history and literature. Scott also taught auto-shop and managed to convince a grudging Logan to assist him this time, mostly because he thought he didn't pull enough instructor duty.

Logan, aside from helping Jack coach, preferred sticking to the various construction projects, such as the boxing gym or the rappelling tower slated for construction next or handi-man chores the old mansion constantly needed, plus the upkeep their two aircraft constantly needed.

Andi wanted do more with music in the afternoons. Many of the students, like Rogue and Bobby, already had some musical training and just needed encouragement or additional instruction.

Jack adding wrestling to his PE program and with the boxing gym available by September, planned to offer lessons Saturday's to any interested students. Scott had already eagerly signed on as both student and assistant.

It was in the middle of such routine matters that Andi got the strange letter. Xavier caught up with her one afternoon and passed her the plain white envelope that had no return address and only a New York postmark. It was to her personally, which was odd since she never got personal mail at school. She had a ghost-address in town where she received her personal mail. Curious, she opened it and read the single typed sentence on plain paper and frowned, thinking it a crude joke, then dismissed it, put it in her pocket and returned to the sheet music she was

sorting through in the conservatory. But it bothered her and the more it bothered her, the more she thought about the possibilities of it being true and the more true it seemed, the more it disturbed her. Finally she cast aside the sheet music and sought Professor Xavier.

Xavier was going over course schedules with a new student, Darla Bradshaw, a petite, pixieish looking girl with an ability to control wind. When Andi slipped into his office, one look at her face made him immediately dismiss the girl.

"What is it?" he asked with concern.

Andi solemnly handed him the letter and he read it. It said, *'Your husband was deliberately eliminated to manipulate you for this position at Xavier's school'*. Appalled, he handed it back. "Do you believe it?"

"I don't know. I don't think it's true, but I can't stop thinking about it and I can't hang around not knowing for sure. I have to find out."

"Where will you start?"

She already had ideas about that. "Ben---even if he doesn't know anything, he can get me to someone who might."

Xavier silently offered her his hand and when she took it, cupped it between his. "Take as much time as you need, my dear, and do whatever you need to do." She squeezed his hand in return, then walked to the door.

Her hand on the knob, she turned back and said to his mind, *"Thank you, Professor. If you need Airwolf, Scott can engineer her. He knows her controls well enough."*

"We'll be fine," he assured and with a nod she was gone.

Andi immediately went down to the computer lab underground to try to locate her old friend, Mr. Lei. He was the only one she really trusted find to out the truth for her, but she hadn't seen him since she'd been in Hong Kong a decade before it'd been reintegrated with China. She suspected he'd probably relocated, but, fortunately, he had an odd name. He'd adopted a biblical first name to please one of his former wives who'd been raised by missionaries. She pulled up a world-wide person search for Hezekiah L. Lei, finally finding a suitable candidate listed in Hawaii. She cross-checked immigration records to confirm his identity, scribbled down address and phone information and took the long way around the mansion to avoid running into anyone as she hurried to her car. She didn't even want to tell Jack anything---not right now, not without any real facts. She just left a note on his office desk that she'd be gone. Intent on her mission, she quickly packed and hit the road for Arlington completely forgetting Logan was expecting to meet her in the cafeteria for dinner.

Logan, his dinner long over, waited over several coffee's until he was alone in the cafeteria. Puzzled and perturbed, he finally checked the garage for her car and not seeing it, hopped on his Harley and rode to her house. It was dark. Out that far, he went a few blocks further to Jack's house and Jack ushered him in, surprised to see his friend.

In a glance, Logan knew she wasn't there. "Ya haven't seen your Mom around, have ya?" he asked.

"Not since lunch." Jack tried his pager, read the response and shook his head. She kept her cell-phone turned-off until paged for security reasons. "I don't think she's got her pager with her---I don't know what to tell you."

Logan distractedly followed him into the kitchen.

"Want a beer or a soda?" Jack asked, grabbing a soda for himself.

"No thanks. Ya don't think she's with Weir again do ya?" He hated to even ask it.

Jack wrinkled his nose and shrugged. "She's usually pretty faithful about saying good-night to Elliot on week-nights---even if she were out with Weir, she'll show up for that."

Logan remembered that's exactly how it went last time. Disgruntled, he gruffly told Jack good-night and rode back to the school to wait for the magic witching hour, but she never came. Unfortunately, neither knew that Elliot, being almost eleven now and sensitive to his friends opinions, had told her she didn't have to pay him nightly visits anymore.

## Chapter 30

Andi spent the night in an Arlington area motel, grabbed a quick breakfast and was at Benjamin Weir's office minutes after he walked in. Still standing behind his desk, he looked up when she came in, startled to see her, but her serious expression stopped him from smiling. "What's wrong?"

She mutely pulled out the letter and handed it to him. Weir scanned it, then looked at her again. "This is crazy." "Is it?"

The daggers in her eyes made him look at it again. He sat down, tapping the page. "It doesn't make sense. It's not the modus operandi of the people I work for to do that sort of thing."

Putting both hands on his desk, she leaned threateningly forward. "After that last match, how can you say for sure?" He frowned dubiously at the paper. "But," she asserted, "I may know someone who can be sure."

"Who?"

She waved that away. "All you have to do is get me there. I've booked a flight and all I need from you is the fare and a drop off and pick-up at Dulles."

"When's your flight?"

"Today, eleven-thirty a.m."

He glanced at the time, studied her with calculation, then rose. "Very well. We can stop by my house and leave your car there."

He held the door for her and locked it behind them. She followed his Jag home, parking her Firebird on the street. He cheerfully waved her inside and neatly hung the car keys she handed him on a key-hook in his foyer. She gazed around, uncomfortable, hesitating to leave the foyer.

"Look around," Weir told her as he padded upstairs on thick Berber. "I'll just be a minute."

She cautiously poked her head into a couple of the downstairs rooms. They were elegantly arranged with antique furniture and persian rugs, pristine and tasteful as a picture in a home decor magazine.

Weir came back in jeans and t-shirt, his hair more lightly arranged than it's previous slicked-back condition, which only added to her impression that he was chameleon.

"Would you like some coffee? Cappuccino?" he asked. "We have some time."

"Not really."

"Well, come sit down then." He directed her toward his elegant sitting-room. "I was wanting a chance to talk to you."

She perched gingerly on the white sofa as he sat in an equally white wing-chair across from her. "I know this isn't the best time," he said, "but I just want you to hear me out. You can give me an answer later."

She had a bad feeling. He pulled something from his pocket and held it concealed in his hands. Her mouth went dry and her heart pounded in her ears.

Taking a deep breath, he opened a velvet box and showed her what was probably the most beautiful wedding set she'd ever seen. Both bands were white-gold, the engagement ring bearing a huge solitaire and the wedding band was thickly encrusted with diamonds. She stared at it, aghast.

"I know we'd have a lot of details to work out---and I wouldn't expect you to leave Xavier's school." Then he gestured at the room. "And I'd gladly give this up in a heartbeat. But you and I share something unique---a long lifespan and we could have children, confident they'd inherit that trait. We wouldn't have to bear the pain of watching our children turn to dust--like your daughter probably will. Yet we're different enough, we'd challenge one another to grow. I love you, Andi and I've been in love with you ever since I first laid eyes on you. I'd like you to be my wife." He closed the box, set it aside on the coffee table and smiled gently.

Repulsed, Andi jumped to her feet, her eyes flashing, but her words tightly controlled. "Right *now* Ben, the only thing I care about is whether my last husband was murdered or not!" She marched into the foyer then and stood, arms folded sullenly against her chest.

After that, Weir just dismally held the door for her, put her in the Jag and drove to his bank. It was a silent

drive.

The same morning, at Xavier's School, having slept hardly at all, Logan surrendered to being awake and was downstairs for breakfast by seven-thirty.

"Well, what do you know?" Scott remarked to Jean, Storm and Jack as he nodded toward this unusual sight.

Jean hissed at him to be quiet, then as Logan sullenly joined them, gave him a cheery, "Good morning, Logan."

"You didn't see Andi this morning did you?" he asked Scott, knowing he and Jack often ran with her in the early mornings. They both shook their heads.

"Did she ever join you for dinner?" Storm gently inquired.

Logan shook his head.

"That's odd," Jean remarked.

Scott thought so too. It was all odd, but he wasn't certain it was enough to worry about yet. Andi was sometimes just very private.

After breakfast, Logan took his mug of coffee to the gymnasium. In the athletic office, he switched on the light and noticed a note on the desk. It was to Jack and just said, "*Take care of my class for a few days. Back soon! Love, Mom.*" He stared at it, frustrated, asking himself who would know where she might be. Only one other name came to mind. Xavier. He lit out of the gym and stormed into Xavier's still empty classroom.

"Good morning, Logan," Xavier said pleasantly without looking up, not even surprised. "How are you?"

"Where is she?" Logan demanded, marching right to his desk.

Xavier met his eyes, appraising him carefully before replying. "On a quest."

"A quest? What kinda quest?"

"A quest for answers to a problem."

"Is she in trouble?" Logan asked irritably, annoyed by this ambiguous word play.

"I don't know."

"Does she need help?"

"I expect that depends on the answers she finds."

Logan felt blood rush hotly to his neck and face. "I'm in no mood for games and riddles, Professor. If ya know where she is, say so!"

Xavier hunted around his desk top, then found it. "I only know where she began," he said as he tapped computer keys searched for something, scribbled something on a card, then offered it to Logan.

Logan took it cautiously and read it. It was Benjamin Weir's business card. He flipped it over. His home address was scribbled on back. "Weir? She went to see Weir?"

Xavier nodded. "As a starting place, yes."

With a resolute scowl, Logan tucked the card in his pocket and turned on his heel for the door.

Xavier watched him leave, a smile playing along his lips. Though, he didn't pry into his people's private lives and couldn't very well blurt Andi's real reasons, neither did he miss sensing the unspoken bond between her and Logan. It felt appropriate to send him after her and she might, indeed, need his assistance.

Logan quickly packed his backpack, avoided the hallway jumble of students by taking the long way to the garage, jumped on his bike and headed for Arlington.

Weir's electric Jag purred to a stop in the drop-off lane at the Washington-Dulles terminal. Andi handed him a scrap of motel stationery with her arrival time and flight number scribbled on it. Though still irked, she decided she couldn't just leave without settling things between them. So, taking a deep breath, she said, "Ben, you're a nice, interesting guy and we're business partners---but that's all." She picked up her small backpack from the floorboard and got out, slamming the door behind her.

Weir watched her swing it over her shoulder and pass through the automatic doors without a backward glance, devastated to be downgraded to "a nice, interesting guy" and drove glumly away.

At the staff lunch table, Andi's mysterious disappearance and now Logan's were hot topics of the day. When Professor Xavier hummed to the table, they all fell quiet until after Mrs. Carter finished setting his lunch tray in front of him before Scott asked the question burning on all their minds.

"Do you know where Andi is, Professor?"

He nodded, while pouring hot water on his tea bag. "Why, yes. I gave her a leave of absence for a personal matter."

Scott looked to Jack, who only returned brows arched in a 'I-haven't-got-a-clue' manner.

Xavier changed the topic then, giving them to know the matter was closed, but after lunch Scott and Jack conferred privately.

"I'll bet Logan's gone after her," Jack asserted. "Good thing the Professor leaked enough information for somebody to keep an eye on that woman."

That he called her 'that woman' made Scott smile, but didn't lessen his concern. He was afraid to even think what kind of trouble Logan's going after her might mean.

It was nearly one by the time Logan threaded his way through the lunch-hour Arlington traffic to Weir's office suite. He found it dark and locked. Back on the road, he grabbed some lunch and picked up a city map to find Weir's street. Riding loudly through the neatly manicured neighborhood, he recognized Weir's house by Andi's black Firebird parked on the street in front. It was a narrow, three-story brick townhouse with a windowless garage and an empty driveway. Parking his bike in the drive, Logan noted the security sign as he walked to the door and rang the doorbell. He heard it reverberate inside, but no one came to the door. Frustrated, he stared at Andi's car pondering alternatives and finally decided if he wanted answers, there was nothing to do but try again later and rode away to find a motel.

Benjamin Weir didn't go back to work after dropping Andi off. Instead, he went to his racquet club and played several hard games of racquet ball trying to work off his hurt and frustration, then wine and dined himself before going home again. As he came in, he dropped Andi's slip of flight information on top of other notes filling a blue porcelain plate on the mahogany console table in the foyer. In the Victorian mirror above it, he glimpsed the sitting room behind him, where he knew the ring still sat. With a sigh, he made himself go upstairs and collapsed on his bed to escape into sleep. He never seemed to have the right touch with the ones he really wanted.

*Continued in Chapters 31-35...*