

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

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Chapter 31

When his doorbell rang, Weir was just laying sprawled on his bed staring at the waning summer sunlight through the blinds. Heaving himself up, he switched on the lights and padded lightly downstairs. Putting his eye to the peephole, he jerked back as soon as he saw it was Logan. He didn't want to let him in, but visions of those claws splintering his beautiful antique door persuaded him. So, taking a deep breath, Weir put on a smile and opened the door, ushering him into to his foyer with a graceful wave of his arm. "Ah, Mr Logan. What brings you here?"

Logan paced in, his eyes darting swiftly around, giving the darkened sitting-room a quick glance before facing Weir. "Alright, where is she?" he demanded, his nose already itching from Weir's odious cologne.

"Gone. I took her to the airport today."

"Where'd she go?"

Weir shrugged. "She didn't say and I respected her enough not to ask."

"What's he after anyways? And don't bother telling me ya don't know."

"Well, if *she* didn't tell you, then I don't see why *I* should. There's still such a thing as lawyer-client confidentiality."

Infuriated, Logan snapped his claws out, slashed the antique console in half, then grabbed Weir by the collar, and slammed him against the wall with three deadly adamantium points pressed tightly against the skin under his jaw.

Weir rolled his eyes to look at the shattered antique on the floor beside him. "That was a nineteenth century console," he grumbled.

"Just firewood now, " Logan snarled. "Skip the B.S and tel me what ya know!"

Shifting his gaze from the floor, Weir glared at Logan, first furious he dared rough him up over Andi, then with jealous suspicion. Ignoring the prick of those claws, he thrust his chin forward defiantly. "You love her?"

Logan felt that question like a knife. Did he love her? If he didn't, then why was he here, running after her like a madman unable to bear not knowing where she was?

Weir saw his hesitation. "Do you love her?" he repeated, then sneered, "*Or don't you know?*"

"What's it to ya, bub?" Logan snarled defensively.

Weir, skilled attorney that he was, had already seen the flash of truth in his eyes. "I should have known, " he snorted. "What with you being there all the time, right where she was with all the means, motive and opportunity in the world." He laughed at the irony. Here he'd been, running around like a dupe, really believing he had a chance with her. Well, he'd always been better at law than love.

Logan just pressed his claw tips harder against Weir's skin. Drops of blood trickled down them. "What's so darn funny?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

Weir winced, then smiled coolly. "It just so happens I love her, too. I even asked her to marry me."

"And?"

"She turned me down."

It was Logan's turn to sneer. "Smart girl."

Glaring into those savage eyes, Weir very much wanted to continue resisting, but he wasn't entirely sure Logan *wouldn't* kill him, so, reluctantly, he gave in. "Alright, let up. I'll tell you."

Logan let go then and warily backed up a step, the claws on his right hand snapping back out of sight.

Weir swiped his tender under-jaw and glanced at the blood on his fingers. "I don't suppose you've ever considered taking an anger-management course?" he muttered as he crouched down among the scraps of paper mixed among the consoles wreckage and sorted through them until he found the one he wanted. Straightening, he

handed it to Logan. "Here. Pick her up at the Washington-Dulles Airport on Saturday."

Logan stared at the slip of flight information. Weir lifted her car keys from the hook and tossed them to him "She got an anonymous letter day before yesterday saying her late husband was murdered in order to maneuver her availability for this position at Xavier's school." Weir shrugged. "I don't know how true that is or even if it could be without a crystal ball., but, in any case, Andi went to see someone she thought could help her find out. I don't know who it is or exactly where she went. I just dropped her at the airport." He then opened and held the door open for Logan, who stepped out, still just staring at the note. "That's all she wanted, that's all I did. End of story. So---good-bye and good luck."

As soon as Logan was out, Weir slammed and locked the door, then gave the broken furniture a savage kick as he passed. He was, he admitted, a sore loser and worse, destined to be tortured with his loss, since his job required routine contact with her. Stomping into the sitting room, he grabbed the ring case, stormed upstairs to the third floor, pulled down the attic stair and pitched it carelessly into the darkness.

Outside, Logan eyed Andi's car, but decided he'd leave it where it was for the time being and just pensively rode back to his motel on his bike, still pondering Weir's question. The thing was, he couldn't say he didn't love her and if he was going to say he did, then he had to make some sorta decision. He was either gonna hafta be all in or all out. It was pass or play. She didn't fool around, so just living together wasn't going to happen, but he found her integrity that way kind of appealing. It'd given them a chance to really get to be friends and he respected her, which was something he couldn't say about many. In fact, being friends wasn't usually his goal with girls and, until now, he'd never been in one place long enough to even bother trying, but things were different now. Andi was different and circumstances were different. Pulling into his motel, he stopped in the office to extend his stay through Friday night, then went to his room where he flopped on the bed with the TV remote until he was ready to sleep, though sleep eluded him and he found himself just staring restlessly at the dark ceiling.

The next morning, he was up early, having tossed and turned all night. He grabbed breakfast, then drove to the Washington-Dulles International Airport, parked in the short-term lot and generally acquainted himself with the terminal. He inquired about Andi's flight and learned her flight would be arriving from Hawaii via L.A. on Saturday. After that, he spent the next couple days puttering around local tourist sites in D.C. and spent quiet nights in the motel. No night spots or bars---and no trouble, so he'd be sure to be at Dulles on time.

Saturday morning, Andi popped fresh gum in her mouth as the plane taxied to a stop, then waited for the crowd of de-boarding passengers to thin out before she shouldered her pack and stepping into the aisle. Tired from the long flight, she walked slowly through the de-boarding area, then headed down the concourse towards the security check where the concourse junctioned with the main terminal. Having rejected Weir's marriage proposal down, she wasn't expecting him to pick her up. She wasn't expecting anyone to pick up and anticipated she would take the Metro to Ronald Reagan National Airport, then catch a commuter to New York.

Meanwhile, just outside the security check, Logan was pacing restlessly back and forth, casting frequent glances up the concourse as he anxiously searched the faces flowing toward him for Andi's. Finally, he saw her, but her eyes were on the floor and she was walking slowly worrying him slightly that her news might not be good.

Lifting her gaze, Andi was quite astonished to see Logan standing in the corridor just beyond the check point waiting for her. Seeing him made her heart pound and she picked up her pace, walking toward him quickly, her eyes beginning to brim with tears from all the anger, strain and frustration of the past few days. Reaching him, she just walked into his arms and hugged herself against him tightly, her face buried against his shoulder, finally letting the held back flow of sorrow ebb out in soft sobs.

Surprised at first, Logan returned her tight embrace. "I'm sorry, " he murmured. The sound of her crying tore him apart. "I'm so sorry," he repeated. He gently removed her baseball cap, because it was in the way and passed it to his other hand behind her back, then ran his hand over her head, holding it gently against him. Intoxicated by her natural fragrance and her physical proximity, he impulsively brushed his lips along her ear, then her cheek.

Andi abruptly drew back to look at him. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

Her face was tipped upwards allowing him to gaze down on her damp freckled cheeks and reddened lips. He

knew she was attracted to him. He smelled it. He lowered his face closer to hers, his lips hovering just above hers when he answered. "What I should have done a long time ago."

She drew back a bit more. He could also smell her fear, though he didn't know whether it was fear of him or of a relationship with him.

"How'd... you know where I was?" she stammered.

He backed off a little, but continued to gaze deeply into her green eyes. "Weir. I made him tell me everything. What did you find out...about your husband, I mean." He saw her expression droop and wasn't sure he could stand it if she cried anymore.

"I saw my old friend, Mr. Lei," she explained, "because I thought, if anyone could find out the truth, he could. He doesn't think Danny was murdered and, though he's still looking into things, he believes the letter was just a ruse to make me look him up."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "He doesn't know yet." Then her brow furrowed. "You didn't hurt poor ol' Ben, did you?"

"What? The wimp pees his pants if I just look at him crooked."

She burst into a fit of giggling at this absurd, but nearly true picture of Ben Weir, letting her forehead rest against Logan's chest. He laughed, too, as all the troubles of life suddenly seemed far away. Then, as his laughter ebbed away, he gripped her pony-tail and gently pulled it, tilting her face up and bending his face very close to hers. "Who cares about that guy," he murmured, his lips once more just above hers. "You didn't want him anyway."

"No," Andi breathed in agreement.

She didn't pull back this time, even though he could feel her trembling.

"Just me," he whispered.

"Yes," she answered, closing her eyes, her lips softly pursed, waiting.

He hesitated. It was the moment of truth. If he kissed this one, he'd be going down a road he'd never gone before--one of commitment. There'd be no going back and no running away. If he didn't, then someone else would and there was no way he was putting up with that. So...

Their lips touched, lightly at first, then more passionately as they surrendered to a mutual attraction that had been far too long held in check.

Later, Andi would admit she'd forgotten how wonderful a kiss of true love was.

Chapter 32

It was a long moment before either finally remembered they were in the middle of an *airport*.

Logan loosened his hold on her and glanced around. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Ya hungry?"

She nodded, though still a little dazed.

He handed her back her cap and indicated the pack on her shoulder. "Are we waiting for anythin' else?"

She settled the cap back on her head, pulling her pony-tail through the back and shook her head. "Nope. This is it."

Taking her hand, they walked out the Firebird. He located a restaurant and spent several hours there talking, reviewing the past few months and exploring all the little moments that had brought them to this point, then their future.

Andi contemplated the man across from her. He was holding her hand, focused on her as if nothing on earth were more important. Being with Logan felt right to her, though she knew it wouldn't be easy. She recognized, of course, that he was stubborn and quick-tempered man of action, who liked playing by his own rules. He would never be the mushy-sort bringing her flowers and smothering her with "I love you's." In fact, she was fairly certain him expressing such words would probably be far and few between. He was a man more comfortable speaking them by his actions. She realized living with him was going to be tough as sailing a stormy sea and it was going to take all experience of her past three marriages to get through smoothly and one point she emphasized was the need for them to accept one another at face value. She actually learned that from John Smith, Jack's father who was a

good 23 years older than her when they married and it worked, though she knew it was a challenging principle to lay hold of.

Logan held her hand during this conversation, kissing it from time to time and studying its smallness with his own. It was a tanned hand, unafraid of work with plain, clean, neatly trimmed nails devoid of any rings or fancy manicures. It was also a kind and delicate hand that was strong and willing to fight. Her hand well summed-up who Andi was as a whole. She was a woman of principle and commitment who cared deeply about people, particularly those she held dear, like her family, and--him. She cared about him. She apparently was willing to take him just as he was, blank past and all and, as a bonus, she also had youthful longevity equal to his own, shared his nightmares and conveniently had no qualms about the "living-on-the-road" life, since he knew she'd lived that kind of life with Jack's bio-father. The bump in the road he could see might be her loyalty to Xavier's cause, but he figured he could work around that.

Interestingly, by the time they'd ended their conversation, he found himself engaged without either of fuss of a ring or a fancy proposal, much to his relief. It came about mostly because they just agreed they wanted to live a life together. There was also the point he wasn't going to get to sleep with her any other way, so it was a practical agreement to come to. At least, for him. They also agreed they'd wait until after Scott and Jean's wedding for tying their own knot sometime later in October, which was a mere seven weeks away.

Somehow, it seemed to him both too soon and not soon enough.

After that, they returned to Weir's house pick-up his bike, then convoyed back to Westchester. The sky was purple with sunset by the time they arrived at the estate. He pulled into the garage and parked, while she immediately drove around to Professor Xavier's wing, knowing he'd be anxious to hear the results of her trip. She waited for Logan to rejoin her, then they went in hand-in-hand, both still feeling giddy and awkward in their new relationship.

"Good evening," Xavier greeted as they came in. He set his book aside and gestured to the sofa, smiling with satisfaction at the obvious change in their relationship for both its own merit and because it'd most likely guarantee Logan's staying on the team as long as Andi did and she had a five-year contract. "So, did you find what you were looking for?" he asked.

"I took the letter to old friend, Hezekiah Lei, in Hawaii, and he looked it over, but didn't think it was true."

Xavier nodded, relieved. He'd been afraid she'd find staying on too painful if it had been. "Is that settled then?" She nodded. "Then, we can press on to matters at hand. There's a rain system moving into the Florida Panhandle, which gives us a window to visit Trent again."

"I'll talk to Jack and we'll make a flight plan," Andi said, then they traded good-nights and she and Logan left Xavier to his book.

Outside, they lingered in each other's arms by her car, enjoying the starry summer night. "What about Jack?" he asked.

Andi's eyes left the glittering sky to look at him in surprise. "What about him?"

He could tell she didn't know why that mattered, but he thought it mattered big time. "You think he should find out about you and me just by surprise?"

"Oh, that," she smiled. "Are you thinking I should tell him?"

"I think it'd be better if it came from you first."

"Alright, I'll have him come over early tomorrow and tell him, then we can all have a nice brunch together. You can come by about ten. How's that?" For reply, he just kissed her sweetly smiling lips.

The next morning, Logan arrived at Andi's house at the appointed time, nervously observing Jack's truck as he pulled his bike into her drive. If he cared about anyone's reaction to his new status with Andi, it was Jack's, but Jack seemed cool with it and brunch came off like any other meal they'd ever eaten together. Jack seemed to take it all cheerfully in stride, even making a couple annoying "Dad" jokes and Logan relaxed, thinking everything was okay.

The next day, when he sauntered into the gym, Logan found Jack unrolling the large mat he already knew was

intended for wrestling. "Whatcha doing?" he inquired.

"I thought I should go ahead and start teaching you the rules and the holds," Jack explained as he finished rolling it out. "Each bout takes two refs, one per wrestler, so you need to understand it."

"Sure," Logan shrugged, setting his half-empty mug on a bleacher seat.

Jack explained the mat's markings and the general rules, then had Logan remove his shoes and join him on it. He demonstrated a variety of moves to him, trying to give him a feel for the sport and encouraging him to resist, while, really, he was getting to know his opponent. He had something special planned for his budding, seeing as he did actually have an opinion or two about this new more personal relationship with his Mom. Aside from his claws, Jack knew Logan had no real advantage over him, since they were both fairly evenly matched in physical size and weight and he felt reasonably confident Logan would never pull claws on a pal. So, all things considered, he figured now, while Logan was still inexperienced with wrestling, was his best chance to teach him a lesson he'd never forget.

So, on their next "practice" bout, Jack slammed Logan to the mat for real.

Logan suddenly found himself pinned down hard and Jack coiled around him like a python. He couldn't move. He tried squirming and struggling, but to no avail. Jack had him good.

"Okay, that's enough," Logan grunted, but Jack didn't let up. Logan suddenly had a very bad feeling.

"If Mom wants to put up with you," Jack snarled into his ear, "that's her business, but, buddy, I've seen you with women and you'd better tote the line with Mom and do everything you promise, because if you don't, if you cheat or hurt her in any way, I swear, I'll hunt you down like a dog. And, believe me, there's no place you can run I can't find that adamantium carcass of yours with Airwolf and I don't think you'll be able to come back from a missile blowing you to bits. Do we understand each other?"

"Uh-huh" Logan grunted.

Jack released him. "I think that's enough for today. Don't you?"

Logan rolled away and snapped to his feet, trembling with contained rage. His word was the only thing he still had to call his own and he took everything he promised seriously. "You could've just asked, bub," he growled, "When I give my word, I keep it."

Jack just smirked. "I seem to remember you thought a demonstration pretty important to *your* point when you practically shoved those knives of yours up *my* nose."

Logan glared at him, remembering that. Jack, who was still sitting on the mat, put out his hand for a hand-up and after only a moments hesitation, Logan grasped it and pulled him to his feet.

He tapped Logan's chest with his forefinger. "Just remember, what goes around, comes around, pal." Then walked past him, off the mat toward the office.

Logan whistled and when Jack turned back to see what he wanted, he showed him what he thought of him with a hand gesture. Jack just grinned, then walked on. Logan kicked himself for underestimating the young man and vowed not to do so again as he stalked outside to cool-off.

As soon as it was dark, Airwolf whispered out of the hanger taking Jack, Andi and Professor Xavier back to Panama City. Xavier had a lengthy conversation with Trent, then ordered them back to home-base, announcing the good news that an open water test was scheduled for the next week. The following evening, everyone was in the briefing room. "According to Trent," Xavier explained, "the Navy is ready to test some experimental suits on him. Next Monday he'll be flown by military transport to Brunswick Naval Air Station in Maine. Then at eight a.m. the following morning, he'll be flown to his test location where they'll commence full cold water trials. Apparently they've only been allotted two days, so he's been told the test schedule will start as soon as he arrives. He'll have a com-link and the suit has a built-in tracking signal."

Jack took the floor then. "We plan to track the chopper to the drop," he explained, "monitor the communications, jam their links to Trent, then pick the kid up during the first test. We'll take Storm for weather cover."

During the briefing, Scott had his eye on Logan and Andi. That their relationship had become close was obvious to everyone and he irritably watched Logan toy with her fingers and distract her with witty whispers.

That night, Jean was in their bathroom carefully brushing her hair and spritzing on perfume. Then she smoothed the straps of her favorite pink nightgown and surveyed the results in the bathroom mirror with satisfaction. Coming out, she found Scott, in his bathrobe, pacing restlessly back and forth, his hands thrust deep in its pockets, obviously worked-up about something as he frequently was. Disappointed he was obviously in one of his "moods," she just slipped under the bed-covers with a sigh and pulled one of her bridal magazines into her lap well aware that Scott being worked-up meant romance was out of the question. "What's bothering you, love?" she asked.

"Of all people, I can't believe Andi would pick Logan! He's so, so---neanderthal!" He said it like something vile in his mouth. It was ridiculous. It was repulsive. The whole idea of her and sex was as foreign to him as it might be to any boy's thoughts of a parent and even just considering...well, it made him shudder with ick. Logan might as well be defacing a Van Gogh.

"I think they're good for each other," Jean replied. "Andi seems to bring out his better side and I think he might balance her. Besides, maybe she likes neanderthal." She peered up at Scott to check the effect of her sarcasm. He'd stopped pacing and was staring at her incredulously.

"I can't believe you approve," he snorted. She shrugged. "Aren't you even a little afraid he's just taking advantage of her?"

It was her turn to be incredulous. Logan, despite appearances, was a genuinely honorable guy and even if he weren't, Andi was a formidable woman, but she knew better than to defend Logan to Scott. It tended to stir up unpleasant recollections. Better to defend Andi. "Him take advantage of Andi?" she scoffed. "Are you kidding? She'd kick his butt in a heartbeat."

"What about that animal magnetism or charisma or whatever you called it? You don't think it'd get to her the same way it got to you?"

Jean sighed. There is was, that same old unpleasant recollection. Using such words to try and explain to Scott the seeming attraction between herself and Logan back when he first arrived had proved a huge mistake. She'd meant to rebuild an understanding between them, but only managed to send Scott through the roof with jealousy and he obviously still hadn't let it go. "I really don't know, honey," she prudently replied. "You'll have to ask her."

He just scowled and resumed pacing while she continued looking through her magazine, idly pondering why he was so worried about it. Shouldn't Andi's happiness be the prime consideration? Then she realized maybe it wasn't Andi's happiness Scott was really worried about, maybe it was his own. He didn't let many people close to him and, when he did, he demanded high standards of loyalty. She raised her eyes to watch him pacing back and forth. "Are you afraid of losing your connection to Andi and she won't have time for you any more?"

He stopped pacing and peered broodingly down at his bare toes. Maybe that was exactly why he felt so uneasy, almost jealous of Logan horn-in yet again on a relationship he valued and carefully guarded, just as he'd tried to horn-in on Jean. The man had neither respect nor morals.

Jean replied to his silence, "Well, if it's bothering you that much, maybe you should talk to Andi." Then, feeling rather grumpy about it all, she put her magazine away, turned off her lamp and curled onto her left side for sleep.

A few minutes later, Scott's lamp flicked out and she felt him slide in behind her, put his arm over her and kiss and stroke the back of her head. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "You're right. I'll do that tomorrow."

The next afternoon, during his free hour, he made a special point of inviting Andi to walk and talk with him. They strolled out to the old band-gazebo, nestled amidst ancient oaks and rhododendron bushes east of the main buildings. It had been his refuge since his first arrival here, his place of solace for thinking and where he'd asked Jean to marry him. According to the Professor, it had been the site of many a party in its hey-day back in the Roaring Twenties, but now its roof was pocked with rotten holes, outer side-boards were missing and old bird nests dangled from the beams. Hopping up its two steps, he selected a spot on the bench still ringing the gazebo's

interior and Andi sat nearby. The sky was gray and stormy and, stretching her legs out, Andi idly watched it's blustery wind skittering leaves around her feet on the floorboards. She knew Scott had something to say. He had that certain manner, that particular tenseness about his mouth that told her so. "What's up?" she asked.

Scott took a deep breath and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped between them while he sought a good way to poke his nose into her business, but finding none, just launched into it. "Are you *sure* about what you're getting into with Logan?"

"I appreciate your concern, Scott, but I don't discuss my love-life with *any* of my children. Even you."

Scott blushed, but didn't retreat. "Don't tell me you've succumbed to that magical animal magnetism or whatever he's supposed to have, too."

Andi gaped at him, then burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" he demanded, straightening and reddening more.

She wiped tears from her eyes. Of course, she knew all about the famous "magnetism" argument from Jean, and maybe Logan had a certain charisma, but that wasn't his business.

"Com' on. I'm serious," he complained.

"You're always serious," she laughed, "but my relationship with Logan is *my* relationship."

"And he's not taking advantage of you?"

She laughed again. "Okay, quit beating around bush now and tell me what's really bothering you, Scott."

He eyed her suspiciously. "You've been talking to Jean?"

"Not about this." Thunder rolled in the distance.

He leaned back with a sigh and stretched his arms out along the seat back. Jean had been mostly right. He *was* afraid of losing his connection to Andi. "So, are you going to explain you and me to Logan?"

"I hadn't really thought about it." She studied the abandoned nests above, thinking it over. Everything was still so new. "I don't think so," she finally answered. "Not right now, anyway. It's probably a little delicate for him to understand and he'd probably just treat it like a big joke."

Scott sighed with relief. The joking part was exactly his concern. Being a laughing stock as a child was one thing, but being a laughing stock in his own home where he was the leader, intolerable. "What about you?" he said. "Is it something you'll still have time for? Or even want?"

Andi slid next to him and lay a consoling arm across his shoulders. "Of course. Things aren't going to change that much," she promised. "Logan's not an early riser. He won't care if you, me and Jack will still run or swim in the mornings and we'll be able to do some things as couples now---it'll be fun, you'll see." She patted his arm.

He snorted. "I don't know about that. Logan hates me."

"Do you hate Logan?"

Her question caught him off guard. "Uh...no. Not really."

"Then what makes you think he hates you?"

"Well...maybe hate is the wrong word. Maybe I should say he tolerates me."

"Isn't that what you do with him?"

His lips twisted into a half-smile. "Okay. I suppose we both mostly tolerate each other." Then, suddenly conscious he was speaking negatively of someone she loved, added, "Do you think that's bad?"

"It's what works for you two, since you're both about equally pig-headed."

Scott snorted. Just then, thunder cracked directly above them making Scott give the gazebo roof a dubious glance. "This won't keep us dry long," he said, glad to change subject.

Andi peered at the encroaching darkness and leaves dancing wildly in the wind. "It's not raining yet. Let's stay a little longer---I've always enjoyed thunderstorms."

They stayed until fat raindrops started pelting down, then she suddenly leapt up, announced, "Last one back!" and sprang from the gazebo, sprinting like a gazelle for the main building.

"Hey!" Scott called, leaping after her in a pell-mell race to see who reached the door first. He lurched ahead of her, beating her to it, then held it open. Soaked, panting and laughing, they'd just started down the hall when, after

another resounding crack of thunder, the lights flickered-off and scattered emergency lights came on. Scott immediately hunted up a flashlight and dashed off to check on the surface generators, while Andi lit candles and students spilled into the halls headed for the rec-room to wait it out. The power was out till after dinner.

Chapter 33

It was still drizzling the next morning when Scott drove Professor Xavier to meet Admiral Boland in Rathway River Park south of Newark and west of Linden in New Jersey. By phone, Xavier had told him nothing, just requested this meeting. They found him at the designated spot, huddled alone in a dark raincoat and fedora under a black umbrella. Boland snapped it shut as they pulled up and hopped in the back seat next to Xavier. "Have you found my son?" he demanded eagerly.

Xavier nodded, weighing what he had to say carefully. "Trent is well and asked me to tell you he misses you." Tears welled up in the other man's eyes. "Right now the Navy may feel safe enough to ignore you, Admiral, but once we rescue Trent, that will change. Since he's legally dead, watching you will become their first recourse."

Boland held his hand up. "Say no more, Professor. I understand. Zero communication, zero contact."

Xavier nodded. "For all our sakes. I'm sorry, Admiral. I wish I knew another way."

Opening the door, Boland swung his legs out and, without even looking back, replied, "I don't know you, Professor. Tell Trent I love him." Then got out.

Scott gave a low whistle after the door slammed. "I don't know if I could do that."

Xavier looked after the military man with compassion. "He's a man used to making difficult decisions, Scott."

Scott put the car in drive and pulled away. "What are we going to do with this kid after we rescue him anyway? Keep him at the school? Make him part of the team? I don't even know what we'd do with an amphibious mutant."

Xavier chuckled, "Yes, well...I'm certain a solution will present itself in due time."

Early Monday evening, Jean, Scott and Logan helped Jack and Andi prep Airwolf for her early morning rescue mission. They unloaded all her missiles and her missile rack from the rear-bay, then readied the winch system for hoisting Trent up through its doors. Unwilling to go completely unarmed, Jack had Jean levitate a pair of Falcon missiles into the stationary side-launchers on Airwolf's ADF pod. "Ever thought of a career as a bomb-loader," he cracked. She just gave him a tolerant smile.

After that, Jack and Andi went home to get some sleep, then, later, met Logan, Scott and Storm in the hanger just before dawn. Jack settled into his seat and helmet, while Logan and Scott escorted Andi and Storm around to the copters port-side.

"Make it snappy people," Jack ordered briskly, "We've got places to go and people to rescue."

Opening her door, Logan quickly pulled Andi against him, inhaled her sweet smell, kissed her soundly, then with a playful tug on the pony-tail at the back of her cap, reluctantly sent her inside. Storm hopped in excitedly after her and settled into the co-pilot seat, slipped on her helmet and fastened in.

"Be careful," Logan warned Jack.

"And try not to take on the whole Navy," Scott added.

Jack winked and gave them both a thumbs-up as Logan closed the door. The blades began to turn slowly as he and Scott ducked away. Jack ordered the silent off as soon as they were away from Westchester.

A short time later, Airwolf arrived over Brunswick Naval Air Station, hovering in clear, cotton-cloud dotted skies, while Andi monitored air traffic control communications on the field below. Shortly after eight, their target chopper was cleared and took off northeast toward the Grand Banks while they trailed along high above, hiding in the sun's glare.

Their prey led them beyond Canadian territorial waters, northeast of Newfoundland. "Approaching target," Andi announced as Airwolf's matrix scanner identified the sub idling on the surface long before they could see it. "It's a Los Angeles Class Attack Sub. Standard armament. Torpedoes, cruise missiles, probably snoopies."

"Snoopies?" Storm said, "I don't believe I've heard of them."

"It's a nickname," Jack explained, "for a remote-visual-recon-target-acquisition missile. It's a small, fast, remotely operatable missile with a digital feedback eye that allows the operator to fly it safely from any stationary platform, like that sub, to recon specific targets and blow 'em up. It works kinda like a video game. They developed them after the Afghani war specifically for caves and other hidy-holes." Then with arched brow, added, "They're ideal for low visibility situations--like fog."

Her fine brow furrowed. "Are you saying they might use one on us?"

"If we do our job and do it right, no." He grinned through the face opening of his helmet at her. "But even if they do, you're in good hands. The Lady will keep us safe."

She took a deep breath to relax her nervousness while they watched the military chopper lower Trent on a line into the foaming water, then the sub crew efficiently recovered him while it flew away.

"I wonder how long before our fishy takes a swim?" Jack mused.

"The schedule is supposed to be tight," Andi answered, monitoring the subs com channels, "Shouldn't be long."

Jack studied his fuel read-out. They'd been conservative, flying mostly low standard speed with the engine noise silencer not on. Fuel looked good. Plenty of time. Fortunately, they only had to wait forty minutes.

"I hear them testing his suit com-link," Andi announced, "and they're briefing him. They want him to swim north a few hundred yards, then return. They'll be monitoring his body temperature and sounds like they'll be sending him out a forward torpedo tube." She tapped keys rapidly, activating a frequency search program for assuming control of Trent's com-link and jamming the Navy's tracking beacon. "Stand-by" she told Jack, her eye on one corner of her screen where red digits rolled like a slot-machine until a full set locked-in and flashed green, signaling readiness.

Jack looked over at Storm, her face nervous with anticipation. "Get ready. I need a bank of fog, pea-soup thick."

"I'm ready."

Andi watched a heat signature swim out of the sub on her screen, calculated its increasing distance and when he was out far enough, put the jamming frequency on stand-by. "Get ready," she said.

Storm gracefully raised her hands and her eyes faded white. Curls of fog built-up fast over the water.

"Switch to silent," Jack ordered, and swept down, leveling off low over the water like a black ghost in the fog, then Andi tapped the "send" key, simultaneously jamming the Navy's com-link and Trent's tracking signal.

"Trent," Andi said into his com-link, "We're Professor Xavier's friends. I know you can't answer. Just stop where you are and we'll drop a line to reel you in." The heat signature on her screen paused.

Jack hovered as close above him as he could. Andi tapped the switch opening the rear bay doors and started the winch, lowering the harness.

"Trent, we're lowering a harness for you--look for it," she said. "Wave your arm in a big motion when you see it." Snapping his link off, she monitored the subs com chatter, in chaos ever since she jammed them. Frowning, she started rapidly tapping keys. "I think we have a problem," she murmured, "they have a secondary fail-safe tracking signal I missed."

Jack exchanged looks with Storm. "Keep working on it," he encouraged and to Storm said, "Keep up the pea-soup---we may need it."

She nodded and her eyes went white again as she concentrated. Andi watched Trent's heat signature motion and switched on his com-link. "Okay. As soon as you get the harness around you, wave big again." She clicked off, focusing again on searching for the right jamming frequency for this new signal. It was more elusive--possibly being manually oscillated to evade jamming and forcing her to have to make manual adjustments to compensate. Sweat beaded her lip as she worked and listened to the sub chatter.

"They're launching a snoopie," she announced. Jack groaned. Trent's heat signature was motioning again and Andi switched on his link. "We're winching you in." She tapped the winch, cut Trent's link and returned to her frequency search. "Stay low and slow," she told Jack, "just a little longer. We want them to think Trent was kidnapped by sea."

"If I get any lower or slower, we'll fall in." Jack retorted tensely, sweat beading on his upper-lip as well. "Is he secure yet?"

"Almost," Andi said, checking the winch. It suddenly stopped and she turned and opened the rear panel behind her to take a peek. Seeing a dark wet-suited figure in back, she hit the rear bay switch closing the doors and switched on Trent's com-link. "Make yourself at home back there," she told him, then switched off and to Jack said, "Okay, he's secure."

Jack accelerated, weaving a low, zig-zag course through the fog. Andi called range and bearing on the snoopie radar shadow following and gaining on them as she kept trying to jam Trent's secondary tracking signal. The program wasn't locking-in on the last, fluctuating digit.

"Haven't you got it yet?" Jack demanded. "I'd rather they *didn't* see us."

"I know, I know," Andi muttered, then suddenly it clicked in. "Got it," she called as she hit the "send" key. "Go!"

"Hoo-rah!" Jack chortled as he accelerated to full speed, then hit turbo making Airwolf leap like a stung racehorse as she shot skyward like a jet, the G-forces throwing Trent Boland sprawling across the rear bay with a yelp of protest.

Andi relaxed back in her seat, watching the stymied snoopie signature on her screen aimlessly searching and listening to the subs communications. "They're really yelling now," she remarked, cutting it off.

"Will they fire again?" Storm asked apprehensively.

"Can't shoot what they can't see and won't waste ammo trying." Jack replied tersely. He leveled off at forty-five thousand feet, vectoring southwest, homeward bound.

Chapter 34

Professor Xavier, Scott, Jean and Logan ran into the hanger as soon as they settled in again, Scott ducking the blades to chock her, while Logan pulled open the helicopter door allowing Storm and Andi out, walked with them to Airwolf's rear. Though he and Andi never even touched, the way he stood next to her conveyed a definite air of possessive protectiveness.

Xavier hummed forward to greet his new guest as Airwolf's rear bay doors opened. "Welcome Trent," Xavier said to the young man sliding out of Airwolf's confines. His wet suit hung un-zipped to the waist behind him, his bare upper torso shaved hairless, including his eyebrows. Xavier offered him his hand. "I'm Professor Xavier."

Trent Boland stared at the wheelchair bound man, bald as himself, then grasped his hand. "I owe you Professor. Thanks for rescuing me."

Xavier made introductions, first gesturing to Jack as he came around re-adjusting a black baseball-style cap onto his head. "Your pilot, Jack Smith."

Trent grasped his hand. "This is some kick-butt helicopter you have, sir."

"What helicopter?" Jack replied with a significant look.

Trent paused a second before comprehending. "Yes, sir. I see no helicopter, sir."

Nodding in satisfaction, Jack released his hand. Xavier next indicated Storm. "Ororo Munroe."

"Welcome," she said, shaking his hand.

Trent swept her with his eyes, nodded politely, then offered his hand to a guy with mutton-chops. "And this is Logan," Xavier said. Trent extended his hand, but Logan just folded his arms on his chest instead, leaving Trent to have to drop his hand in some puzzlement.

"Don't take it personally," Storm remarked. "He's like that with everyone."

"And," Xavier proceeded, "Your co-pilot and engineer, Andi."

"Thanks," Trent said, give Andi's hand a light shake. Then he turned to a tall guy in shades beside a statuesque, auburn-haired woman. "And Scott Summers and Dr. Jean Gray," Xavier finished. Scott shook his hand, while Jean politely inclined her head with a smile.

"What now, sir?" Trent asked. "Can I see my Dad?"

"First, we need to get you settled in. You'll be safe here. We'll talk about everything else later. I'm sure you realize the Navy will be watching your father from now on."

Disappointment passed over his face, but Trent drew himself up militarily. "Yes sir, you're right. Security risk. Thank you for reminding me."

"Scott and Jean will show you where you'll be staying--and give you something more suitable to wear for the time being."

Trent thanked him profusely again, then followed Scott and Jean, walking hand in hand, out of the hanger, first to pickup some X-team sweats, then upstairs. Xavier trailed thoughtfully behind the rest, unsure just how to fit Trent Boland in and not certain Trent wasn't simply exchanging one sort of prison for another. He knew he'd be a logistical problem, just not how much of one.

After a meal, Trent reported to Professor Xavier's office for orientation. Xavier studied the nineteen year-old, who, like so many before him, was arriving empty-handed. He looked nothing like his tall, pale Admiral father. Trent was only about five-eight with a huge barrel chest, dark olive skin, stormy-gray eyes and, judging by the five-o'clock shadow, very black hair and it didn't take much telepathy or conversation to conclude young Boland wasn't team material and at best, the school could only be a temporary refuge. Nevertheless, he needed to keep the boy busy until he found more permanent arrangements. Unfortunately, Trent's interests, aside from being a Navy diver, seemed restricted to girls, beer, video games and several vulgar pop bands. He wasn't mechanically inclined, but did have a high school sports background, so Xavier decided to assign him to assist Jack and Logan with PE in the mornings and whatever other projects they might be doing. He directed him to see Dr. Grey first thing in the morning, promised a clothes shopping trip in the near future, then, hoping for the best, dismissed the boy, though an uneasiness tugged at his mind.

Hardly a week had gone by before Logan, working with him daily, decided Boland was nothing but trouble, a wolf in sheep's clothing who could put on fine show of manners. Though he and Jack kept him busy all day and he ate at the staff table, it seemed impossible to isolate him from mischief among the girls. In the course of two weeks, he and Jack broke-up a verbal match between Trent and Bobby during PE, Scott and Xavier broke up a cat-fight in the girl's room over him Trent, that ended in broken window and Xavier caught Trent on a midnight stroll outside with Jubilee twice. Not to mention all the times Logan observed Trent's stealthy, leering glances after all the women, including Andi. It was Scott, though, who finally demanded a special meeting in Xavier's private quarter to discuss the problem. Everyone was seated, except Scott, who stood in front of the fireplace. "Show them what you've got, Storm," he said.

"I intercepted these two notes just yesterday," Storm softly replied, passing them around to be read. "One is from Trent and the other was an answer being composed." She looked disgusted. "I intercept notes all the time--but nothing like these."

Logan scanned the first page passed to him and his eyebrows shot-up. It was porn. Simple as that. He passed it to Andi on the sofa beside him, then looked over the second, only partially written note that wasn't near so bad, but bad enough. "Who was writing this other one?" he asked.

"Jubilee," Storm answered.

Xavier frowned in consternation as he looked over the first note.

Scott wagged Jubilee's note in the air. "This proves it. Boland is a bad influence. He doesn't fit here and we can't watch him *every* second."

"These girls are mostly under-age, too." Jean agreed. "We don't want statutory rape on our hands."

Xavier stirred his tea, grimly staring into it like a crystal ball, then set his spoon aside and rested his eyes on them. "We must consider both sides," he replied patiently. "Trent has been dislocated twice. He's lost car, income, friends, family and every privilege and freedom he's used to. And you're right, Scott," he assured his scowling leader, "he doesn't fit here. He's too old for high school, not interested in college and too immature for the team. However, since I have no other place to put him just yet, he'll have to remain our burden for the time being." Everyone groaned and Scott stared at the floor, his jaw flexing with frustration. Xavier held up his index finger for

their attention. "I will speak to Trent again--and discuss the notes and other social improprieties and you may, if you wish Scott, arrange a lights-out check on him. I'll also assign him some additional duties with Lawrence. But," he emphasized, wagging that same finger at them, "Trent is still our *guest* here. I'm neither ready to treat him like a prisoner nor lock him in his room with guards on the door."

"Yet," Logan murmured into Andi's ear.

"We'll just have to be as alert as we can." Xavier affirmed, then sipped his tea signifying the matter was settled. Everyone rose and after several "good-nights", flowed into the corridor.

"This really sucks," Scott muttered to no one in particular. Andi just patted his shoulder as she passed.

After Xavier's little talk, Trent Boland was somewhat better---for awhile. Certainly the notes stopped. Xavier pondered whether he dare burden one of his friends overseas with Trent, but hesitated to take away the boy's country as well. Trent, in the meantime, spent mornings before and after PE helping Lawrence care for the large garden that was still augmenting the school's table with onions, cabbage, broccoli, winter spinach and squashes as well as the vast grounds of Xavier's estate, then afternoons working with Logan and Jack on the new rappelling tower they were building south of the endurance course.

Several days later, after class hours and book under his arm, Scott headed for his beloved gazebo to read awhile in the still pleasant weather before dinner. Hopping up the steps, he suddenly froze in shock as he stared at Trent Boland and Jubilee sprawled on the deck before him, fervently making-out. Fortunately, still clothed. Seeing him, they flung themselves apart and Jubilee straightened her blouse. White with fury, Scott just pointed at the bench. Jubilee sprang to it, while Trent casually got to his feet and sat next to her with a smirk.

"Mr. Summers," Jubilee stammered, but Scott held his hand up for silence, his eyes on Trent's smirking face, wanting very much to beat that smirk out of him. Instead, he settled for whamming his book down on the bench behind him, then turning back and pointing toward the school. "Professor Xavier's Office!" he growled, "*Now!*"

They got up and silently marched ahead of him to the Professor's office where he turned them over to him, then went back for his book, still in the gazebo. Once there, he picked it up and peered around his defiled sanctuary in dismay, his pleasant day ruined. He didn't even know what Boland was doing lose at this time of day and, feeling a fresh surge of anger, lit out for the rappelling tower to blame Logan and Jack for letting Boland out of their sight.

He made his way around the stacks of pressure-treated lumber, then peered up the structure where Jack and Logan were working on a stairway between the upper and lower decks. "What do you guys think you're doing?" he shouted up at them.

The both jerked around and stared blankly down at Scott, who was clearly bristling with indignation.

"What's the problem?" Jack shouted back.

"I just caught Boland *on top* of Jubilee, making out."

Logan and Jack exchanged looks, stopped what they were doing and walked to the edge of the structure.

"He told us Lawrence needed him to help him this afternoon," Logan replied.

"And you didn't check?" Scott retorted.

"Even if he was helping Lawrence," Jack said, "you know he's no match for a devious kid like that. He'd just figure a way to skip out."

"Did he get to third base?" Logan asked.

"No," Scott grumbled. "Thank God." Then plopped himself on a pile of timber, stewing in frustration. It was impossible to watch Boland every minute and the Professor apparently wasn't going to do more than talk, so aside from simply killing the boy, he had no solutions.

Logan looked down on Scott, equally certain Xavier wasn't doing enough. Then he had an idea. Rapping Jack on the arm to follow him, they both clambered down to the ground and sat with Scott on the timber.

"Listen," Logan said, "the kid's got us over a barrel. What are we gonna do? Kick him out? He knows better. And since diplomacy isn't working, maybe it's time we handle it more personally---mutant to mutant."

Scott studied the fiendish glitter in Logan's eyes, then a sly smile spread on his lips. "What did you have in mind?"

Logan told him his plan.

That night, Trent Boland's overhead light abruptly snapped on, then two hands fiercely hauled him out of bed and shoved him against a wall, then another hand clamped him around the throat so tight Trent could do little more than blink and croak. He found himself staring at Logan, who brought his other fist up where he could see it. Trent's eyes widened with fear as he observed three long, shiny blades suddenly grew out from Logan's knuckles miraculously, then he watched with horror as Logan lowered them out of sight only to gasp as their sharp points pricked against his speedo.

"I'm only going to say this once, " Logan snarled, "you'd better keep your pants zipped-up around here, bub, or you'll be singing with the girls."

The color drained out of Trent's face and as soon as he nodded.

Logan, still holding him by the throat, whirled him away from the wall and shoved him staggering backwards across the room. "Get dressed, " he ordered. "We're going some place." Then he snapped out the claws on his other hand, just for emphasis.

Boland dressed, watching Logan warily. He knew what this was about. "I think an increased sex drive comes with being mutant," he grumbled. "You guys shouldn't hold it against me."

Logan snorted. "That's B.S. You just want an excuse."

"Easy for you to say. You have a girl."

"Well, since I'm not sleeping with my girl, I guess I *can* say." Then, uncomfortable with this line of conversation, since he was hardly the right guy to be soap-boxing to anybody about self-control, he just gruffly snapped, "Hurry up."

As soon as he finished tying his shoes, Trent straightened and Logan quietly escorted him through the sleeping school to the endurance course. There, Jack Smith greeted them grinning like a cheshire cat with a cigar. He'd been elected to play M.C. for this event because, as an ex-military officer, he seemed the only one really able to command Boland's respect. So, dressed in his good military cammies replete with rank insignia, shiny combat boots and cammouflage cap set at a rakish angle, he was prepared to play the part to the nth-degree. "Mr. Boland, " he bellowed as soon as he saw Logan and Trent approaching. Trent looked over the night lit course, then stared at Jack.

"Drop and give me forty," Jack ordered. It was twice the usual number of preliminary push-ups required on the course.

After one last glance at Logan's blades, Trent dropped and started counting while Jack pulled another cigar from his pocket, handed it to Logan and lit it for him. Then Logan, with a cocky smile, sauntered off to his place further down the course, leaving a hazy trail of smoke behind him.

"You're probably wondering why you're here," Jack barked like a training instructor as he paced around Boland heaving up and down on the ground. Trent made no reply. "I didn't hear you, " he snapped.

"Yes sir!"

"Better. You're here for an education, Mr Boland. You won't leave here tonight without understanding two things. Number one, what your fellow mutants are capable of and, number two, how serious we are about protecting the integrity of our young ladies."

Finished, Boland jumped upright and stood stiffly at attention.

"Any questions, Seaman?"

"No, sir!"

"Then, when I say *go*, you run and you run every obstacle on this course until I say stop! Is that understood Seaman?"

"Yes sir!"

"Go!"

Trent took off at a run for the first obstacle with Jack on his heels, beleaguering him with verbal abuse like drill instructor. The low-crawl was about fifth in the line-up and as he approached it, he saw Scott Summers waiting

there, wearing a visor device he'd never seen before. He hesitated.

"Don't stand there like a goose!" Jack bellowed and Trent threw himself under the barbed-wire, scrambling along on his belly while Scott pelted the ground around him with optic blasts. As soon as he popped out the other end, Jack ordered him back through it giving Scott a chance to fire a second round, which he enjoyed immensely.

The weaver-obstacle was next and Storm waited there. Hanging by his hands and feet between the parallel beams, Trent struggled to hoist himself first up-over, then under-across each pair of beams while Storm rained and hailed on him. Then, when he was finished, lightning struck the ground on his heels as he ran to the next obstacle.

He saw both Coach Andi and Dr. Grey standing near the next set, but with Jack barking at his heels he had no time to wonder what perverse trick they meant to torment him with and just threw himself into the obstacles. He quickly found himself either invisibly restrained from moving or suspended or levitated backwards or dodging flying objects or anything else Andi and Jean could conspire to do with Jean's telekinesis. Finally they let him pass on to the next obstacle, which was another low-crawl with optic blasts once more provided by Mr. Summers, then after that, a high-wall obstacle. With a bound, Trent caught the top, scrambled over, then dropped to his feet on the far side and stood, bent over, panting, trying to catch his breath. When Jack didn't appear, he straightened suspiciously, but before he could do more, he was grabbed, slammed against the high-wall, then two sets of blades shot out of Logan's fist, criss-crossing in front of Trent's throat right into the wood behind him, pinning his head in place. Once more, he found himself staring into Logan's feral eyes, his teeth bared in a sneer around a cigar.

Jack appeared and sauntered around the wall and threw his arm casually across Logan's shoulders. Wide-eyed with fear, Trent just glanced furtively between them. "Mr. Boland," Jack said, "you should think of our friend, Logan, here as kinda like a big watchdog who's perfectly friendly until you touch one of his family---then he might take your head off."

"Yes sir," Trent gasped.

Logan jerked his blades from the wood then, but left them on display as he pulled the cigar from his lips and exhaled a blue cloud right into Boland's face. Coughing, Trent gave him wide berth as he dashed for the next obstacle. Jack slapped Logan on the back, then ran after him.

Sticking the cigar back in his teeth, Logan had just retracted his blades when Andi sauntered around the high-wall looking for him. He held an arm open for her and she came into it, throwing her own arm around his waist and letting him squeeze her close as they trailed down the path after Jack and Trent where they could hear Jack yelling, "Since you have *so much* surplus energy, Mr. Boland, from now on you'll meet me on this course at oh-seven-hundred every morning and you'll limit all socializing with the ladies to public areas. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir, Captain, sir!"

Logan and Andi both just chuckled. Meanwhile, Xavier lay awake in bed, smiling. He'd kept a mental eye on things since the Boland-Jubilee incident earlier and knew exactly what his people were doing. Certainly, the lesson might do young Trent some good, but more importantly his people were working together as a team, smoothly collaborating their ideas and abilities toward achieving a single goal completely on their own. Finally. He slept then, still troubled with what to ultimately do with Trent and ignorant of the yet larger problem about to arrive at his door.

Chapter 35

When the phone rang two days later and Charles Xavier heard Benjamin Weir's voice, he wondered why he should have even been surprised. "What can I do for you this time, Mr. Weir?" he asked. He listened intently for several minutes, then said, "Very well. I'll see him in my private quarters tomorrow at eight p.m. East wing." He hung up, staring pensively at the phone. Andi's friend, Mr. Lei, was coming to see him.

The next night, Xavier mentally directed Weir to his quarters. Oddly enough, it was only Weir's mind he could read, not Mr. Lei's. Then, a few minutes later, one of the oak double-doors of his sitting room opened and a slightly built, silver-haired Chinese gentleman entered followed by Weir, whose designer suit contrasted sharply against his

master's plain, blue polo-shirt and pleated pants. Weir nodded politely to Xavier, then retired, closing the door after him.

Lei came forward, his round face all smiles. "Professor Xavier," he said with hardly an accent. "I am Hezekiah Lei." He bowed, then offered his hand.

"Charles," Xavier replied, grasping it, still flabbergasted that he couldn't read Lei's mind. In fact, it had that same impenetrable feel as that particular spot in Andi's, but in Lei's mind, it was more than a mere spot, it was his *whole* mind. Though, he looked about his own age, Xavier had the oddest sensation of being the student rather than the teacher. "Would you care for some tea?" he offered quickly to cover his confusion and gestured at a chair.

Lei bowed, said, "Please," then sat primly.

Xavier busied himself pouring tea. "So, have you learned anything about who sent Andi that letter?"

"Yes and no," Lei replied as he accepted the cup and saucer. "The letter itself was meaningless. It's what it accomplished that matters." He sampled his tea, seemed to collect his thoughts, then went on. "You remember Mr. Weir telling you an agent by the name of Mirage contacted him?" Xavier nodded. "It is he who sent the letter, I think. He also hired those two mutants for the fights and manipulated Mr. Weir quite well, I'm sorry to say, but Mirage isn't our problem. He's just one of many who work for someone else, someone bigger who lies at the center a network of people he's put together as securely as a fat spider in a web, pulling strings and orchestrating people to carry out his business. It's a network, I think, so deep and so vast that the very people in it, who are doing his bidding, have no idea of each other or who they serve." Lei met Xavier's eyes with a troubled look. "And I'm afraid that network now includes you and me."

Xavier started. He was used to doing the manipulating, not the other way around. "Who is this spidery-person?"

"I don't know. I've been trying to find out, but Mirage's trail disappeared without a trace, the fight-mutants never saw his face and the communications sent to Mr. Weir all led to nothing."

Xavier frowned. "I don't quite see how this puts either of us in his web, as you call it. What exactly do you mean by 'it's what the letter accomplished that matter's?'"

"I mean the letter was a ruse. Nothing more than bait to make Andi run to me, because our Spider friend seemed to know I would immediately step-in to help both her and you with my resources."

"Resources? What sort of resources?"

"Financial or material---whatever it takes to support the Airwolf portion of your operation."

Xavier stirred his tea again, mulling this over like a poker player with a bad hand. Up to now, he'd believed his end worth any means and he asked himself now if he still believed that. He decided he did. "And is that what you intend to do?"

Lei smiled and bowed ever so slightly toward him. "That and more. It would be my honor to be of service to you."

"Alright," Xavier agreed, still wondering what sort of bed-fellow he was taking-up with. "So, you don't know who we're dealing with, but diverting resources like that suggests he needs them for something. Do you know what?"

"It has to do with what he's looking for," Lei said, then met Xavier's eyes with a significant gaze. "What I'm about to explain must remain between us."

Xavier nodded solemnly and set his tea aside, no longer interested in it.

"You know the mutant phenomenon relies on a particular recessive DNA mutation?" Lei asked.

"The X-factor," Xavier agreed.

"Something you tested Andi and Jack for and did not find?" Xavier nodded. "Well, that is because they aren't mutants. Neither am I. Nor is Mr. Weir---but neither are we common humans. The truth is, we don't know what we are. We're a lost race. All we know is we've been around a very long time and that this world's myths, legends and history are full of tales about we, who are demi-immortals, and our massive lifetimes."

Xavier started again. He knew the Old Testament was one such source, full of stories of mighty men with huge

lifespans who eventually faded away from mention. Greek mythology was perhaps another. "What happened to your race?"

Lei shrugged. "Probably many things. We mostly exist now as scattered individuals. Those who are cognizant of their peculiar lifespan have re-locate from time to time in order to blend in. Most tend to live relatively isolated lives, but various avenues of twentieth-century technology has opened a few doors of communication among those of us willing to communicate."

"I take it some are not willing."

"Correct. There are a great many probably too young to realize they're aging abnormally and those who do know, are so accustomed to isolation, they're unwilling to change."

Xavier smiled sardonically. "I know what you mean."

Lei set his empty teacup aside. "And I'm ashamed to admit I'm no better," he sighed. "Like so many, I've been complacent and content to believe the influence I have my own small corner of this world is enough and have assumed things would just work out over the passing of time. I was wrong and now disaster sits on our doorstep, both human and mutant alike." Lei leaned forward for emphasis. "I believe our one hope is to join forces---you and I and others like us, mutants and demi-immortals, working together. If we do not, then the spider and his network will surely swallow us all. He has already succeeded where I and the rest of my kind have failed. He's been locating and convincing many of my kind to join him in attaining his goal. How, I don't know. I only know two like myself, but we rarely contact each other, and if I hadn't been making inquiries for Andi's sake, I doubt we would've realized what the spider was doing until it was too late. I know one of my associates has already lost a number of their people to him."

Xavier's mind was racing, trying to take it all in. He couldn't see what it all meant. "What is it exactly you think he's up to?"

"My understanding is sketchy, at best," Lei cautioned. "There is much I don't know, but I have reason to believe his organization is something of a cult and they are searching for an illuminati among mutant-kind that has the combined traits of both our races; a demi-immortal with the X-gene. I think he has everyone following him convinced such a person will lead them into a some kind of golden age."

Xavier was thunder-struck. "You talking about a mutant-messiah," he snorted. "Surely not!"

"I agree," Lei replied, "but I'm afraid they may think there's only one to be found with that precise genetic combination, when in fact probably several will turn-up, maybe many. Then, being under pressure to produce this leader, the spider might seize every likely candidate in hopes of sorting out the correct one."

"Or he'll *make* his own," Xavier finished, quite aware of the lengths fanatics might go to. "What makes you sure there might be that many to find?"

"Just statistical probability, since my race is well inbred among humans and the X-factor is random." He shrugged. "The odds are good."

Xavier steeped his fingers together thoughtfully. "Let me get this straight. You're telling me that someone, whom we're calling 'the Spider,' who is, I take it, one of your race..." Lei nodded. "Who heads some widely networked organization, which is possibly a cult, whose primary goal is to search through the entire mutant population for some alleged illuminati and then, once he finds him or her, will then facilitate the launch of this so-called golden age." Lei nodded again. "That's a pretty hard pill to swallow, Hezekiah. Mutants aren't that easy to locate and many haven't even emerged yet."

Lei looked grave. "I think he's coping with that by doing exactly what you've done with Andi. Our people all tend to have a latent psi ability that, in some, under the right circumstances, can be awakened and trained. I have no doubt he has created a myriad of mutant-hunters just like her."

Xavier turned pale with horror. "So, that was my part in this? Turning Andi into a mutant-hunter? Why didn't he do it himself?"

"I can only think that he profiled her and realized she wasn't susceptible to either his cult or his money, but you have a noble cause, something she could believe in."

"And she fell right into the net."

"Yes, bringing her son and Airwolf with her."

"And I fixed up their helicopter," Xavier murmured, his eyes narrowing. "He wants them for something, doesn't he?" Then he looked hard at Lei. "What?"

Lei made a helpless gesture. "The fact that he intends to use them for some purpose is, right now, the only thin thread we have that might lead us to him."

Xavier snorted. "Still, finding every mutant on earth just so he can test them for some mythological genetic mix is a formidable task," he criticized. "What makes you even think anyone will sit still for it?"

"I doubt they will, but how he intends to manage that problem remains to be seen. I do know he already has a device for the testing. It about the size of a small flashlight and when pressed into the skin, takes a blood sample and provides an immediate reading on whether the special DNA combination he's looking for. I noticed it leaves a small ring-like scar. I saw it such a scar on the shoulders of both the fight-mutants and they said Mirage used such a device."

Xavier frowned in consternation, unconsciously rapping his fingers on his chair arm. Events were moving to an entirely different playing field now, one he never anticipated. This was no longer a simple inter-mutant conflict for superiority, it was a massive conspiracy being run by an unknown third party. He suddenly felt as vulnerable as a man in a rowboat in front of a tidal wave. "So, you say we stand a chance if we unite and fight this together?" he asked. Lei nodded. Unable to rely on telepathy, Xavier turned instead to his gut-instinct, which suggested Lei was worth trusting. Besides, Andi trusted him and he could use every ally he could get. "Alright," he agreed, offering his hand across the desk, "I'm in. You've got a partner."

Lei leaned forward and grasped his hand. "And now we begin our journey of a thousand miles."

"What do you want me to do?"

"First, allow me to meet your people and explain our adversary to them, though I'll use more general terms. After so much cloak and dagger, they deserve to know who they're dealing with up front. In turn, I'll give you all the information and support I can."

Xavier nodded. "Very well. We can meet before school hours, say seven a.m., in my office. Mr Weir knows where it is."

Lei stood and bowed. "Tomorrow then." The door opened and Ben Weir appeared to escort his master away, but before he could leave, Xavier indulged his curiosity. "Hezekiah?" Lei turned to him. "Exactly *how* old are you?"

Lei smiled. "Old enough to know that no matter what, the sun still rises every morning."

Then, with a final bow, he followed Weir out.

Continued in "X to the Highest Power, Part 2" in "Runaways"...