

Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Pt 3 by B Nickerson {Rated PG-13}

Synopsis: Things get worse for Scott, but better for Andi and Weir.

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Note: "Ahhap" is pronounced "ah-bee" thru out.

Day Six

Logan plopped into his seat at the school lunch table, fine sawdust shimmering off his head and clothing to the floor.

"Logan!" Storm chided, "couldn't you have at least washed up?"

He stared at her, his forkful of beans and wieners frozen in mid-air. It was Saturday and he'd been upstairs since seven, remodeling *her* third-floor closet, trying to turn it into a double-wide according to *her* request. "And maybe you'd rather be doing your *own* carpentry work, Princess!" he shot back.

Storm's full lips immediately compressed into a thin-line and her eyes sparked indignation. "Just because *you're* in a bad mood doesn't mean you have to take it out on everyone else!"

His fork just resumed its course into his mouth. He *was* in a bad mood and it was because of Andi. He missed her; the taste of her, the smell of her and he wasn't sleeping well without her. The dreams were back.

Xavier hummed in, greeting them each cheerfully as he whirred into his spot at the head of the table. "Good afternoon, Storm, Logan." Mrs. Carter promptly arrived with his lunch, efficiently arranged it in front of him, then bustled busily away.

"Andi e-mailed her report this morning," Xavier announced quietly, drawing both Storm and Logan's gaze. "I trust Andi has been keeping you abreast of things?" he directed at Logan.

"Yeah. Fat lotta good they're doing over there, just sitting around, waitin' all the time!"

Storm glanced from Logan to Xavier. "I take it things aren't going well?"

"Just slowly," answered Xavier. "Andi and Mr. Weir did interview the two hotel clerks yesterday, who witnessed Jean and Scott's arrest."

"And arranging *that* took all day!" Logan grumbled.

Xavier continued. "According to them, it appears to be an arrest for drug possession."

"Oh, no!" Storm gasped. Having grown-up in Egypt, she knew all too well the severity of such things.

"Indeed," Xavier intoned. "Andi and Mr. Weir believe the alleged drugs were planted and the arresting officers most likely were operatives of Tau Omega, though, of course, they have no proof."

Logan snorted.

"Right now, they're trying to gain an interview with the local police, but the arrest and disappearance of two Americans is an embarrassment to the Turkish officials, so it's slow going."

"What about the internment camp?" asked Storm. "Anything new?"

Xavier shook his head as he neatly sliced his chicken breast into bite-size pieces. "Not yet."

Logan, eager to escape this dismal reminder of Andi's absence, changed the subject. "So, how's Rogue?" he asked Xavier.

"Progressing quite well I think."

"Talking yet?"

"When she wants to."

Logan got up to fetch a second helping and considered Rogue as he did. He'd only seen once since her rescue with Andi and, for a myriad of excuses, hadn't visited her again, though he certainly wanted to know exactly why, in view of his promise to protect her, she'd ditched him. When he returned to the lunch table, he said to Xavier, "Could she stand a visitor?"

Xavier's brows rose only slightly. "I don't see why not. You could take her lunch tray down to her, if you wish."

"That'll work."

“And try not to be as crabby with her as you are with the rest of us,” Storm cautioned. “She's not up to it.”
“She's a tougher cookie than you think,” he retorted.

Frowning, Storm consulted the Professor with a critical look, then with the barest shrug, silently returned attention to her lunch.

Logan knew he'd just been the subject of a telepathic discussion and, though he generally didn't like it, if it was gonna keep Storm off his back, then he could let it go. He bolted down the rest of his lunch, then picked up Rogue's lunch tray from Mrs. Carter and headed underground.

When he strode into Jean's lab a few minutes later, he found the isolation room door wide open and paused just short of it. “Knock, knock,” he announced. “It's the lunch wagon!”

From within, came a sudden flurry of activity and a quick, “Jus' a minute!” He waited, peering uneasily about the lab, unable to put his finger on exactly why the place gave him such heebie-geebies.

“Okay, cum in,” a soft, southern voice called.

He shrugged the geebies away and entered. Rogue was standing demurely by the card table that served as her dining area. She was dressed in sweats and seemed plumper than he remembered. “Hey, kid,” he said, as he set the tray down.

She took a seat and pulled it over in front of her. “Thanks.”

Logan turned the folding chair across from her backwards and straddled it so he could rest his folded arms on the chair back. He noticed she wasn't fixing herself up like she used to. She wore no make-up and her dark, white-streaked hair was just brushed straight over her shoulders. “So, how've you been?” he ventured.

“Fine.”

He surveyed the make-shift decor, the single bed neatly arranged with pillows against the wall like a sofa. “How's living down here? You like it?”

“Could be worse.”

Logan skipped to the meat of the matter. “So, why'd you do it?”

“What?”

“Come on, you know exactly what.”

Marie nervously pushed a loose strand of white hair behind an ear, avoiding his eyes. “Do ya mean why'd I leave or why'd I not let ya help me?”

“Both.”

She sighed. “Well, ya know why I left.”

Logan scowled impatiently at her. He was lucky to keep up with Andi most of the time and she was probably the most straight-shooting girl he'd ever met, but if Rogue wanted to play guessing games, so be it. “Was it cuz of me and Andi? I know you used ta have a pretty big crush on me.”

Rogue blushed darkly. “It wasn't that,” she drawled, humiliated he knew. “I jus really wanted ta bleeve somebody could cure me and I didn't want ta hear anythang else and I didn't wanna be talked out of it. Aspecially by *you*.”

He nodded. “I could've told you it was a waste of time.”

“Ya forget, Logan, yer mutant gift don't stop ya from holdin' or kissin' or bein' in love.” She finally raised her eyes, brimming with tears, to meet his. “Ya ain't gonna grow old and die a virgin like me.”

It was a harsh, jarring truth; one he couldn't fix. Rogue put down her fork, dropped her hands to her lap and stared down at them, a tear sliding down her cheek, making the helplessness he felt that much worse to bear. After an infinite awkwardness, he finally decided the best he could give her was his own hard-won wisdom, since he'd tried a couple desperate things to escape his own situation. He tapped the table to draw her sorrow-filled gaze. “Kid,” he said, “you gotta think of life as kinda like a card game. We're all dealt certain cards and all *any* of *us* can do is play them out the best way we can. We can't get new cards.”

“It's not fair,” she whispered.

"No one said it was, but we are who we are."

She made no reply, just stared at her hands and, since there seemed nothing more to say, he stood. "Well, I'd better get back upstairs. I have work to do."

"You ken take the tray," Rogue replied softly. "I'm done."

He looked at the barely touched food. "Ya sure, kid?"

She nodded, so he scooped it up and left, his heart stinging him some, but there'd been nothing else better to say. She'd was just gonna have to accept herself as she was, like it or not. Even so, the words, "die a virgin," echoed pitifully in his mind, like a piece of song caught in his head. He dropped the tray off in the kitchen, then proceeded to the third floor, eager to bury himself in remodeling Storm's closet and forget it.

When he got there, he found Jack surveying the fresh studs lining the back, a tool-belt already fastened on. He turned, greeting him with a wry smile. "Hey, I was startin' to wonder if you'd skipped out on me."

"I was downstairs, visitin' Rogue."

Jack's blond brows rose at this remarkable news and he came over to where Logan was, in the middle of the room by the saw-horses, buckling his own tool-belt on. "And did you find out what you've been wanting to know?"

"That she ran away because she wasn't facing facts about who she is? Yeah, and I told her she needed to accept things as they are and get on."

Jack shook his head. "Marie looks up to you, man. I can't believe you'd just slam her with that."

Logan eyed him irritably. "I didn't just slam her. I *can* be diplomatic if I wanna. Besides, what'd you expect me to tell her? That there's magic out there to stop her from being a mutant? I might as well tell her there's a Santa Claus."

Jack shook his head. "I just think there's a better way."

Logan snorted. "If you think you can do better, hot-shot, be my guest." He cocked his head toward the closet. "So, are we just gonna stand around here, jawin' all day or are we gonna throw-up some sheet-rock?"

Jack grinned. "Sheet-rock, hoser."

On the other side of the world, in Turkey, Scott was struggling through his morning rations, carefully saturating his crust of stale bread with soup bite by bite until it was gone, then tried tipping the bowl to his lips to force a couple gulps down before his throat tightened in revolt. But, as soon as he had his first mouthful, he felt something alive, with legs, squirming in his mouth. He spat into the bowl, thrust it aside and lurched to his feet, stumbling forward far enough to vomit everything he'd just eaten.

Paul, of course, leapt immediately to his side. "Are you alright? What happened?" he asked.

Scott wiped his nose and mouth on his sleeve. "A bug... in my soup."

"I am sorry," Paul replied. "I should have checked for you. They are dead usually."

Scott's stomach twisted at that. "This one wasn't."

"Sorry," Paul repeated.

Scott just nodded, allowing Paul to guide back to his seat on the pallet, where he could only lay miserably, the acid taste of vomit still in his mouth and no water to rinse it out with. No food either. So, he focused on various rescue plans again, trying to keep his mind off his empty belly.

On Jean's ward, she was both pleased and surprised when, that afternoon, a pair of guards guided a man with a doctor's bag in to check Adja. Then, shortly afterwards, ambulance attendants arrived with a gurney and took her away. Emboldened by her success, Jean decided her next effort would be to try to get the guards to bring her some basic medical supplies, so she could better help the other inmates.

By the time evening rations came, Scott was depressed. He skipped the soup this time, passing it directly to Paul, settling instead for just the bread and water. Then he curled up under his blanket, where he shivered and brooded about why no one had yet come for him. He couldn't figure it out and even let himself wonder if

circumstances were different, *if* it were Jack instead of him, might Andi have already gotten here?

Of course, Scott couldn't know that Andi wasn't far away, enduring another polite evening at the Keles residence, fervently wishing she could be in Carsamba with their private detectives, quietly visiting off-duty police personnel, flashing photos of Jean and Scott. When Ben brought her back to Sheridan, she went to bed and slept fitfully, shadows of Logan's nightmares haunting her dreams.

Day Seven

Andi woke very early Sunday and, since it was still midnight in Westchester, called Logan, but his grouching about the time it was taking them to wade through Turkish red-tape only squelched her good spirits. After she hung up, she stared at the phone awhile, very much wishing she *were* home, then dressed, grabbed her crossword book and went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

That's where Ben found her later when he came down, a stack of empty Nescafé packets evidence she'd been there quite some time. "Good morning," he said cheerily, taking a seat across from her.

She looked at him, but her face lacked its usual sprightly animation and her green eyes dull and tired.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes."

He didn't believe her. "So, how are things at home? How's Logan?"

"Fine."

There was a slight tightening about her lips that told him he'd hit upon the sore point. If Logan was the storm, then he intended to be the calm. A waiter arrived and Weir ordered a continental breakfast with American coffee.

As soon as the waiter left, Andi leaned forward and whispered, "I'd feel better if Jack could fly Airwolf over and be nearby."

Weir leaned forward as well and, in an effort to be comforting, placed a hand over hers. "I know it's difficult waiting around," he whispered, "but this *will* work."

Andi promptly recoiled at his touch.

Weir straightened, displeased, but continued smoothly, his tone calm and steady. "All the photo-flashing our P.I.'s have been doing should prompt the Carsamba police to *want* to see us. Probably soon." He paused, as the waiter returned with a platter of hard rolls, assorted jellies, soft cheeses and instant Nescafé, which he arranged in front of Weir, then left.

Weir first mixed his Nescafé with the hot water. "Until then, we have to make the best of things," he said, as he stirred. "So, with that in mind, I've invited Max and Sam to meet us for lunch. We'll go to a nice restaurant in town somewhere, then Sam and I will go take a look at that internment camp, while Max accompanies you sight-seeing here, around Samsun." He glanced at her. She didn't appear enthralled. "I know it's not much," he went on, "but it's better than sitting around here all day. And a change of pace will do us all good." Selecting a roll, he sliced it and carefully spread it with cheese, giving her time to consider before arching a brow at her for a response.

Andi heaved a resigned sigh. "Alright, Ben. It *would* be better than just sitting here." She gestured at the empty Nescafé packs. "And I *know* I've had more than enough coffee!"

Meanwhile, on a highway in Mississippi, Remy Lebeau was headed north, for Chicago. He'd ditched his beloved sports car back in Baton Rouge, but it couldn't be helped. Not now. It wasn't even his fault. He'd just been defending himself, but that it happened was inevitable. His brother-in-law, Julian, had always hated him, always hated his marriage to his sister Bella and the alliance between their two Guild's that marriage bought. Brewing nearly a year, that hate finally boiled over three hours ago, when Julian and his Assassin cronies tricked him into coming to a warehouse, where they were waiting for him. There, Julian demanded a fight to the death and Remy grimly accepted a knife and having his other arm tied to Julian's for the ritual fight, while doing his best to reason with him. But Julian wouldn't have it. So, they'd fought, Remy immediately throwing his knife aside, then grabbing Julian's wrist as he made his first slash, wrestling backwards with him until he had him pinned against the lift-shaft

of an idle forklift. He'd wrenched Julian's wrist around to cut the tie binding their forearms together, then smashed a left-cross into his jaw, sending Julian staggering back, dazed. Recovering, he'd come at him again and Remy hit him with a right-cross, sending him tripping backwards over the metal forks of the lift, falling to the cement, his head hitting with a loud thud. Then Julian lay still. Thinking him merely unconscious, Remy fled, leaving Julian's gang gaping at their fallen leader. It wasn't until he heard the sudden shout, "Julian's dead!" did he realize he must leave New Orleans and run for his life. Now the Assassin Guild would never stop hunting him until he was dead; not after killing their leader and only male heir.

So, that's how he came to be headed for Chicago, with just enough cash in his pockets to get him to Westchester, New York. After meeting that red-headed telekinetic and the guy with knives on his fists back a few months ago, he'd traced their vehicle license, researched their school and even called their listed phone number, getting a polite answering machine explaining enrollment was currently full. Back then, it'd been a mere curiosity, but now, putting himself among other mutants might be his only hope of survival. His chances of persuading them to take him in might be slim to none, but he had just didn't have any other options.

When Jack arrived on school grounds early Sunday, he went directly underground, intent on seeing Rogue. He found her peering into Jean's guinea pig cage when he strode into the lab. "Good morning, Sunshine," he announced cheerfully, startling her.

She gave him a cross look. "Whacha doin' down hare anyways?"

"Jez visitin' " he drawled, imitating her accent. He joined her at the cage, peered in at the guinea's, selected a black one, then gently lifted it out and held it on his palm, stroking it's fur. "We had all kinds of pets when I was a kid. Dogs, cats and our share of gerbils and hamsters." He smiled. "But Mom drew the line at snakes, iguana's or birds." He looked at her. "What about you? Back home, I mean. Any pets?"

"A cat." Rogue smiled, remembering the feel of her cats fur and the soft vibration of her purr, but that'd been back when she could touch things without hurting them. She sighed. "I wish I could really touch the lit'l critters."

"Their fur should insulate them."

"I'm afraid I'll hurt 'em."

Jack was thoughtful a minute, then brightened. "Hey, why do you think they're called guinea-pigs?"

Rogue smiled faintly at his humor, unconvinced.

"What can it hurt to try?" he prompted.

She scrutinized his face, it's even tanned features, twinkling blue eyes and broad, easy smile. The only thing of Andi she could see in him was the splash of freckles over his nose. She remembered back when he and Logan were building the repelling tower on the obstacle course and she and Kitty used to hide in the rhododendrons spying through binoculars at their bare, muscular chests. She self-consciously tugged down on her sweat-shirt, aware she was no longer that same, thin girl.

Jack offered the black guinea on his palm for her to pet and she reluctantly ran a light finger over it's silky back. The rodent reacted by scratching it's ear, then sniffing around on Jack's palm and she beamed with success.

Jack placed the still-alive critter back with it's cronies. "There now," he said. "Not everything is impossible."

"You want to cum in for a spell?" she asked cheerfully, indicating the open door of her isolation room.

"Sure." He followed her in and they sat across from each other at the card table.

"Want a coke?" she offered. She had a mini-refrigerator stocked with soda and snacks.

"I'm fine. Thanks."

"How cum you haven't visited b'fore?"

"I heard you weren't too keen on visitors."

Rogue blushed, embarrassed. "Well, *you* ken visit anytime ya want to."

"I think all your friends would love to visit you--if you'd let 'em."

"Aw, thay're either jus feelin' sorry fo' me or they wanna ask a buncha noisy questions 'bout why I left." She ducked her eyes and played with a pencil on the table. "An' I don't want neither."

"Tell me what you really think about your mutant gift?"

Her face clouded and she regarded him suspiciously. "Why ya askin'?"

"I'd really like to know."

She studied his blue eyes, trying to judge if he meant it, but saw no guile in them. "It's a curse. One I'm stuck with apparently."

"Well, not being able to touch people is pretty tough," he agreed, then smiled. "Ever consider a career in special forces?"

This surprising turn of wit and Jack's bright grin made her snicker despite her self-pity.

"I think every gift comes with a price," he said seriously. "Take me, for example. I have this long lifespan, maybe hundreds of years. I don't know yet, but that doesn't sound like a bad thing, does it?"

She shook her head.

"But, here's the catch. If I marry just any girl, I'll out-live her. She'll grow old and gray and die in my young arms."

Rogue stared at him with widened eyes, grasping for the first time she wasn't the only one facing relationship difficulties. "Whacha gonna do?"

"Look for a girl who has the same lifespan trait as me."

"That might take an awful long time."

"I have a long time."

"Ya don't think ya might fall in love anyways, even if she ain't like ya?"

Jack laced his fingers together on the table, his look pensive. "That *could* happen, I suppose, but it wouldn't be my first choice."

"At least ya have a choice," Rogue lamented gloomily.

"Maybe you have more choice than you think."

Rogue looked at him sharply.

Jack continued. "Let's imagine possibilities. Look at all the different kinds of mutant abilities just here in this one school. What if, out there somewhere, you have a perfect opposite, like a mutant who can either counteract you or, at least, be unaffected by you?"

Rogue's heart warmed at this new idea. "I'd never really considered that b'fore. Do ya really bleeve I might?"

"Why not? I think there's a girl with a long life span out there for me. My philosophy is do what you can, not what you can't." He checked his watch. "Time to go."

She stood also. "You'll cum back sometime, won't ya, Coach?"

"Can I bring someone?"

She looked suspicious. "Like who?"

"Bobby or Kitty maybe,"

She nodded, relieved he didn't suggest Logan. She was kinda mad at him. Jack sauntered out, leaving her alone with her television again and plenty of food for thought. "Do what you can," she murmured to herself, "not what you can't."

In Samsun, Andi spent the prescribed time touring around with Max, who was a happy, talkative gent, especially proud of his two sons, who were both in Ivy League schools. She was feeling decidedly more cheerful by time he dropped her back at the hotel and didn't see Weir again until dinner, when he arrived at her room to pick her up for dinner at the Keles's.

"So, how was the camp?" she asked immediately.

"Fenced so you can't see a thing, busy as a beehive and ringed with military security," Weir reported. "Though, we did see *one* interesting thing outside the perimeter. Two really."

This was news. "What?"

"Two empty heavy-equipment flat-beds and the ground to the entry was chewed-up like they'd driven a couple

bulldozer's or something inside.”

It gave her a yearning to see for herself, though she knew she couldn't. She'd made Logan that promise. “Did you hear them in use?”

Weir shook his head. “Not a sound, but I'm having Sam stay in Carsamba to keep an eye on things.”

“Any word from our detectives yet?”

“Not yet.”

Andi sighed as they walked to the elevators.

Meanwhile, outside Chicago, Remy Lebeau abandoned his stolen car in the back forty of a mall parking lot, careful to leave no incriminating fingerprints behind. Clutching his silk suit jacket tightly against the freezing wind, he hurried into the mall, then into the first convenient department store. There, he purchased a small suitcase, undergarments, including a couple pair of thermal underwear, jeans, a shirt, a sweater, a winter coat, warm gloves and a knit cap. He stopped at a men's room along the mall corridor and changed into his new wardrobe, carefully tucking the silk suit into his bag. He paused at the mirrors, giving his new reflection a once over. Dressed in his new winter garb with his dark blue knit cap pulled down to his eyebrows above gold-rimmed sunglasses, he now looked like any other Chicagoan. He proceeded to a drugstore where he purchased basic toiletries, a paperback, a lighter and a carton of cigarettes. After that, he grabbed a bite at the food court, buying an extra sandwich to go, called a cab from the pay phone and waited for it outside the main entrance, chain-smoking until it arrived. The cab took him to the train station, where he purchased a sleeper-car ticket to New York on the nine-twenty, then settled down to wile away the hours until boarding. He'd put enough distance between himself and his enemies to relax a little and stretched out his long-legs, crossing them at the ankle. He opened his book and appeared engrossed in it, though, by habit, kept a covert watch on every passer-by, knowing he wouldn't be safe until he reached Xavier's School for the Gifted.

Day Eight

Scott struggled to his feet for morning roll-call, pushing his blind-fold up his forehead as he did everyday. His name was called, but today it was also followed by a Turkish command.

“Step forward,” Paul whispered beside him. “They want you to go with them.”

Scott did so, only to have his arm grabbed and pulled along. His heart beat with sudden hope that Professor Xavier or Andi had finally come for him, hope he'd soon have real food to soothe his empty stomach and fresh water to quench his dry throat. He was quickly disappointed. The guard jerked him to a sudden halt. The blanket strip was jerked off his head and a wide belt was fastened snugly around his waist, his wrist secured into two cuffs in the front of the belt.

“What's this?” he demanded, but just got a shove forward in reply. Billy clubs jabbed him in the ribs and back, herding him blindly along until a bright glare landed on his eyelids and fresh, cold air hit his face telling him he was outside. Another prod urged him forward. He took two steps and on the third found himself half-falling, half-tripping down two or three cement steps and, with no hands to catch himself, crashed unmercifully to the asphalt. His left shoulder and hip burned with pain. He swore. Guards pounced on him, jerked him to his feet and escorted him the remaining distance by his britches and collar, then hoisted him up through a doorway onto a cold metal floor. More billy clubs prodded him up to sit on a metal bench against a smooth metal wall. A metal door slammed shut, a motor started and the vehicle rumbled into motion, taking him to a destination unknown, yet another twist in this endless nightmare.

In her prison, Jean was quite surprised when, shortly after breakfast rations, a guard arrived, handcuffed her and gruffly escorted her to a tiny room containing only a small wooden table with a chair on either side and a man she'd never seen before. He stood when she entered, his blue sports jacket falling ajar, revealing a police badge on his belt. “Mrs. Jean Summers?” he asked.

He had only the faintest accent. She nodded, the door closing ominously behind her.

“Please,” he said, indicating the other chair. “My name is Aazcam. Detective Aazcam, from the Carsamba Police Department.”

Jean cautiously took a seat, giving his thoughts a cursory scan, surprised to find them in English. A Turkish-American, Detective Aazcam was consumed by the enigma of her and Scott's disappearance, convinced there was more to it than the mere honeymoon story he'd gotten from the private detectives and was determined to interview her while he could, since there were people here looking for her. He had an appointment with them and felt this was his last chance to find out what was really going on. She sighed with relief. *Finally* something was being done.

“Are you alright, Mrs. Summers?” he asked.

She focused on his sincere, concerned gaze.

Have you been mistreated in any way?”

She shook her head she hadn't. “The food could be better.”

He made a note in the open folder on the table in front of him. “Would you mind answering a few questions? I'm trying to get the facts in order.”

“Go ahead.”

“Your husband's name is Scott Summers?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you and your husband come to Turkey?”

She decided to stick with the story she'd read in his mind. “Honeymoon.”

“And why did you choose Carsamba?”

“We were told it was an interesting place.”

He tapped his pen thoughtfully on the open folder. “Do you have a profession, Mrs. Summers?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I'm a school teacher.” She didn't want to mention being a doctor.

“And Mr. Summers?”

“He is also.”

He noted her answers. “How did you arrive in Turkey?”

“By private jet.”

“Yours?”

“No, a friend's.”

“I wish I had such friends,” he commented. “Where did you land?”

“Samsun.”

“Then what?”

“We rented a car and drove to Carsamba.”

“Immediately?”

She nodded, keeping her gaze steady, candid.

“How long were you planning to stay in Carsamba?”

“A night or two.” She shrugged.

“And you checked into your hotel, then...what?”

“Had dinner. Drove around. Returned to the hotel.”

“How long were you out?”

“Oh, two or three hours maybe. I'm not exactly sure.”

Aazcam studied his notes. “Then you were arrested.”

“Under false pretenses.”

“How long were in your hotel room before that?”

"Maybe fifteen, twenty minutes. I didn't check my watch."

"Two police officers and two military officers came to your room?"

"I'm not sure which was which. I'm not that familiar with your uniforms."

"And they put you in police cars?"

"They were unmarked."

"How many escorted you and your husband into the police station?"

"All four."

"Who interrogated you?"

"Only one I recognized and another officer I didn't."

"Did they identify either themselves or what police department they represented?"

"Not that I recall."

"After being questioned you were detained in the Carsamba jail until morning, then what?"

"I was put in a vehicle and brought here."

Aazcam jotted on his note pad, then met her eyes, his gaze critical, searching. "Is there anything else you can tell me about what you did in Carsamba?"

Jean shook her head.

"Are you very sure, Mrs. Summers?"

"I'm sure."

Aazcam closed his folder. "Now let me tell you something I'm sure of, Mrs. Summers. I'm sure this has *nothing* to do with drugs and you *didn't* come here for a honeymoon. But what I am sure of is you and your husband dabbled in something so serious, it made someone hack into our computer system *just* to make you two disappear. Maybe even that internment camp outside of town, but whatever it was, it'd help if I had all the facts." He paused for a response, but Jean remained impassive. "Alright, have it your way," he sighed. He collected his folder and moved toward the door.

Jean hurriedly stood. "If you really wanted to help us, Detective," she challenged, "you'd get us released. You know Scott and I are innocent!"

He faced her again, frustration evident. "It's not that easy. This is Samsun, not even my jurisdiction and, technically, this isn't even a police matter anymore. It's diplomatic. I have an appointment with some friends of yours later today. I'll make sure they know where you are."

He turned back to the door, but Jean heard his thoughts: "*if they don't move you like they did your husband.*" Her knees turned to jello and she put a hand on the table to brace herself. "Scott," she gasped. "Where's Scott?"

Aazcam was about to pound for the guard, but stopped. "I wish I knew," he said without looking at her, then thumped the door. A guard let him out and another escorted her back to her ward, where she sagged to the floor and, for the first time, wept.

Scott, still inside the transport vehicle. By two loudly conversing voices, he judged there to be two guards in with him and, by the body odor and sounds of breathing, a number of other prisoners. That's all he heard for quite awhile, then there came a sudden loud yelp, followed by a dull thud of something landing on the floor and the guards snickering like bad school boys. He stiffened apprehensively. Minutes passed like an eternity as he sat petrified, straining for the next sound, trying to discern what was happening. Finally, he heard a low moan, then harsh commands from the guards, some shuffling and grunting and finally--quiet. A dreadful quiet. Blood pounded in his temples and his stomach knotted. A second outcry came, making him jump nervously. It, too, was followed by a thud and the guards snickering, then eventually a piteous moaning and stifled sobbing. Sweat poured down his face and chest. Not from the atrocious heat of the confined space, but sheer fear. In his mind he debated yet again the pros and cons of opening his eyes and blasting his way out, but, as always, the cons won. Without his lenses to control the beams, not only could he not control the destruction, but he'd never be able to even see where he was going even if he did escape. And, in a moving vehicle, such a rash act was out of the question. Too many innocents

might be injured or killed leaving him guilty of genuine felonies that'd keep him here forever. Not to mention never seeing Jean again and it was thinking of her that was keeping him going.

Suddenly, all his nerve-endings lit on fire as a white-hot jolt screamed through his body.

When he came to, he was on his side on the floor, his head pounding so fiercely he could barely think. His teeth hurt. He smelled urine. He tried to move, but just fell back numbly with a groan, like a turtle on his back. A night-stick jabbed his side, forcing him to try again. With his hands bound, he only had his elbows and managed to leverage himself into a sitting position. Once he did, he noticed a squish in his pants beneath him, the stink of diarrhea wafting to his nose. No more worrying whether his bowels would make it to their destination. He got another jab in the ribs and a barrage of Turkish motivating him to squirm to his knees, then to his feet, the diarrhea running down his legs, filling his socks. Making it to the bench, he rested his pounding head against the cool metal behind him. Through a fog of pain, it came to him that this belt he was wearing was a stun-belt and the guards were enjoying a cruel game of stunning their charges. Anger at their sadism rose quickly in him, then, just as quickly, fell away as prudence and thoughts of Jean once more restrained him. He stayed still, waiting with beating heart and awful dread for the next victim to cry out and thud onto the floor.

A moment later, it was him.

When he came to this time, he was on the floor, but not alone. He was in a sea of arms and legs, moans and weeping, some maybe even coming from him. He wasn't sure. He tried to move, but couldn't. Bodies jostled against him, slip-sliding on a floor slick with urine, his ears ringing so loud he could barely hear the guards laughing, enjoying their great joke, having stunned everyone at once. Time seemed an infinity before hands seized him and threw him back on the bench, where he slouched listlessly, his limbs twitching convulsively, his mind drifting away to watch from afar, as if all this were happening to someone else.

Andi sat beside Ben Weir in front of Alican Keles desk, in his office. It was a modern, utilitarian-style office decorated in gray tones, a nice corner suite on the ninth floor of a tall building. It had two windows overlooking the city and the blinds were open allowing her to gaze across Samsun's downtown skyscrapers on one side and a congestion of red-tiled roofs stretching to a shining, ebony snake along the horizon that was the Black Sea. She watched Keles expectantly, keenly interested in knowing what their private investigators had turned up. That's why they were here.

"As you say in America, I have good news and bad news," Keles announced as he handed them each a set of stapled papers.

Andi scanned the particulars, disappointed it wasn't even a full two pages. The report did, however, confirm Jean and Scott were seen at the police station in Carsamba on the date in question. Apparently four, perhaps five, officers of mixed police and military affiliation appeared with Jean and Scott at the Carsamba station, requested the use of interrogation rooms, then had them incarcerated. That was the end of the report. Andi frowned at it, then at Keles. "What's the bad news?"

"Our P.I.'s cannot get any more information. The police refuse anymore talk and our P.I.'s have been threatened with license removal if they continue."

That explained the shortness of the report.

"And the good news?" asked Weir.

"We have the interview you wanted with the Carsamba police. They will see us today." He consulted his computer screen. "At two this afternoon, an appointment with a Detective Aazcam."

Andi looked at Weir. "You know they either want what we know or want to warn us off --or both."

"Probably both," he agreed.

"Do not worry, my friends," Keles assured pleasantly. "With me with you, they can only blow steam."

Andi smiled indulgently. He meant "smoke".

Scott felt the vehicle come to a stop. Fortunately, after that last mass stunning, the guards had apparently tired

of their game, but now he wondered where he was and what new torment lay ahead. Doors opened, allowing fresh, cold air to rush in and bright light to strike his eyelids. He was prodded from his seat to the door where he hopped out, landing somewhat awkwardly, but still on his feet. Jabs guided him forward until a change in light and air indicated he was inside a building again. He heard sharp Turkish commands, but unaware of their meaning, rammed headlong into another prisoner stopped ahead of him, who cuffed him sharply in the chest. Scott heard the punitive whack of billy-club striking the other man at the same time one landed between his own shoulder blades so hard, it knocked the wind out of him and he dropped to one knee to keep from falling on his face. Fingers seized his hair and bent him back, off-balance and hot, smelly breath shouted Turkish in his face. His teeth clenched against the pain and gasping for breath, he shouted hoarsely, "American. No Turkish!"

Sharp orders were given and he was released. Hands grabbed his arms on either side and jerked him to his feet. He feared what might happen next, but was only un-cuffed and felt the stun-belt removed. He smelled strong aftershave close-by. "Why do you not open your eyes?" asked a thickly accented voice.

"Blind," he replied. Silence. His arm was taken and he was led somewhere.

"Take off your clothes," the same voice ordered. "Keep the shoes."

Scott trembled. "Why?" he dared ask, afraid of evil intentions.

"For new ones."

He was nearly light-headed with relief. They were giving him new clothes, so he obligingly stripped, glad to be rid of the diarrhea saturated ones. He expected to be handed a new uniform, but instead a hand touched his elbow, making him jump nervously, again apprehensive, Paul's tales of prison rape filled his imagination.

"Go forward, this way," the voice instructed and pushed him toward strange hissing noises, that grew louder as he approached, his hands extended in front of him feeling for obstacles. His fingers contacted a cold mist. It was a shower with a strong chemical scent, probably for delousing. It stung every rash and raw spot on his body as he moved through it, then a second and finally a third hissing spray, his fingertips now running along the slick cement wall, keeping him straight. At the other end, he was handed a thread-bare towel to dry off with, then a new uniform, which he hastily donned, and wool socks he decided to hold onto until his feet were thoroughly dry. The wool stocks itched him badly enough on dry feet. A bed-blanket roll was thrust into his hands and he was escorted by the elbow upstairs and down passages filled with murmuring voices. Finally, he was jerked to a stop, a buzzer sounded, a door slid open and he was shoved inside, then it clanged shut behind him, leaving him standing uncertainly in yet another prison cell.

He surveyed his situation first with his ears, detecting the tinkle of running water from a faucet and a slight creak of bedsprings, then with his nose, detecting the usual rancid smell of cigarettes and body odor indicating other prisoners. "Hello?" he tentatively asked.

"Merhaba," a young man's voice responded. "You American?"

"Yes, and...blind." Scott heard him get up and approach.

"What's your name, ahbap?"

"Scott." He offered his hand and felt it gripped.

"I am Ersay. Come, I will show you around."

A hand touched his bruised shoulder. Scott instinctively winced away.

"I mean no harm," Ersay assured.

"Sorry. That side hurts, that's all," replied Scott. Ersay took his elbow and led him forward, Scott carefully counting his steps. At ten, they stopped.

"This is the lavatory," Ersay announced. Scott bent down and felt the metal toilet bowl. Then Ersay guided his hand to the metal sink beside it. "And the sink." Scott traced it's rim to the faucet, feeling the trickle of running water he'd heard. Turning the spigot on, he bent down, filled his cupped hands and gulped down several mouthfuls before straightening and wiping his dripping beard on a sleeve.

"It only runs cold," Ersay remarked, then turned him, walked him four paces and placed his hand on a mattress about chest high.

“Your bed,” said Ersay. “You get the top bed, since you are new.”

Scott lay his blanket roll and wool socks on it. “So, how many of us are there in here?”

“Three. You, me and Sadi. He has the other bed.”

“Only three? Where I was before there must have been fifty or sixty.”

“Those are the old style. This one is more like prisons in America.”

“Ah,” Scott replied blandly, more interested now in just laying down. He was feeling pretty weak and jittery still from the shock-treatments “Is there a ladder or do I just hop up?”

“No ladder,” replied Ersay. He directed him to the end of the bed. “Put your foot here, on my bed, then up.”

Scott did so, thrusting himself stomach first, up onto his bed, then righted himself into a sitting position, felt for his socks and put them on. Whether it was modeled after American prisons or not, it clearly was no warmer than the first place. Unrolling his blanket, he again tore off a strip to tie over his eyes, then curled-up under what was left to rest despite the desperately empty stomach, lingering headache, darn itchy socks that made him scratch his ankles constantly and the stuffy cold already plugging-up his nose. Back when he was a kid, he'd considered himself cursed and dealt an unfair share. He'd lost his parents, was comatose a year, spent two learning to talk and walk again, grew up in an orphanage and had a mutant gift he couldn't even control. Then, finally, two good things happened: Professor Xavier took him in and he met Jean, making him believe that maybe he wasn't cursed after all, that his life was taking a much deserved turn for the better. Now, he doubted he was on any better road at all.

At the Carsamba police station, Andi, Ben Weir and Mr. Keles were politely escorted to Detective Aazcam's office. It proved to be a small, rectangular room with two desks arranged side-by-side with enough space for a waste basket between them. The back wall was one long row of gray, five-drawer type metal filing cabinets.

Their escort traded fast Turkish with Keles, then left and Keles indicated she and Weir should sit in the two wooden chairs in front of Detective Aazcam's desk, which was the second desk.

“Detective Aazcam will be with us shortly,” Keles said.

Andi sat in the chair closest to the wall. Weir sat in the one next to her and Keles located a third chair and put it next to Weir. She surveyed the items on Aazcam's desk, trying to get a feel for who they were dealing with. She noted first how neat and orderly his desk top was. Everything was in its place. It wasn't even dusty and stood in high contrast to his partners cluttered desk. A black lap-top lay closed to the right side of the desk, next to it was an old fashioned phone and stacked to the left side were ten or twelve brown file-folders. A desk calendar in the center was edged ornately with swirls of doodling. His name plate was centered on the front of the desk with a pencil holder and stapler aligned to its left and a single 5x7 photo frame, its back to her, on its right. All in all, it bespoke Aazcam as a man of preciseness and detail who probably didn't like untidy, loose-ends, which might not be in their favor. She picked up the photo frame and turned it for a quick look. It was a family photo of Aazcam, his lovely, dark-haired wife and young son of about two, all smiling. Aazcam appeared thirtyish, with even, clean-shaven features, dark hair and dark eyes. Andi put the photo back in its place and studied the framed university certificates on the back wall, above the filing cabinets. One in particular caught her eye and she tapped Weir's arm to point it out. It read: “*Dennis L. Aazcam, Bachelor of Arts, Criminal Justice, University of Florida.*”

They traded arched brows.

Aazcam strode into the room, all business, stylishly dressed in dark blue trousers and matching sports jacket over a tan polo shirt, badge on his belt, a tan file-folder in hand. “Good afternoon,” he said crisply.

Mr. Keles stood and made introductions, Aazcam shaking each of their hands.

“Still a Seminole's fan?” asked Weir conversationally as Detective Aazcam flopped the file on the desktop and took a seat behind it.

Andi immediately recognized the photos attached to the file front, photo's that looked oddly like the ones they'd issued to their P.I.'s. They'd been confiscated, no doubt.

“As often as my cousin records and sends me games,” Aazcam replied with a smile. “I hope to go back and finish my Masters in the not-so-distant future.”

"I can't say I expected to find anyone with a American degree in such a small place," remarked Weir.

"And I'm an American who never expected to be in such a small place," Aazcam responded. "I had Miami in mind."

Andi glanced at Weir and Keles, who appeared as surprised she was. *This* could be very much in their favor.

"You are a duo-citizen, then?" asked Keles.

"Triple. I was born in Landstuhl Army Regional Hospital in Germany. My Dad's Turkish and my Mom was an American G.I. I grew up an Army brat and lived everywhere until Mom retired. Then she and Dad settled in Florida when I was in high school."

"So how'd you end up here?" asked Weir.

"I met a nice Turkish girl in college." He smiled wryly. "We got married, had a boy, then right in the middle of my graduate studies, her Mom developed heart trouble, so we had to come back for her sake. That was nine months ago. Turns out that wasn't the worst of it. She's dying of liver cancer."

Andi watched him doodle scrolls on this desk calendar as he spoke. "I'm sorry," she offered sympathically.

He shrugged. "Stuff happens. Lucky for me, this is a big tourist area in summers with lots of Europeans and some Americans and the Chief here thought I'd be good for public relations."

"Quite lucky," Weir echoed.

"You don't know how great it is talking to folks from home," Aazcam sighed. He tapped his pen on the case folder, then opened it, all business now. "Unfortunately, you folks are also in a good bit of trouble, though I do have a little good news." He opened a side drawer, drew out two large, slightly bulky manila envelopes and handed them to Andi. "I believe these are Mr. and Mrs. Summers personal effects. You might check them, make sure everything's there."

She accepted them eagerly, opening first one, then the other, touching the contents as if they might connect her to them: Scott's glasses, wallet, watch and wedding band were in one and Jean's wedding band set, a necklace and the bulky flex-band watch that had been her father's in the other. "It is their things," Andi confirmed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more sooner," said Aazcam, "but I was out of town for several days for medical reasons with the mother-in-law and I've been behind the eight-ball on this case ever since. The other good news is I saw Mrs. Summers this morning. You'll be glad to know she's okay. She just needs a meal and a shower."

"Thank God!" Andi sighed heartily.

Aazcam drew a post-it pad to him, scribbled on it, then handed Keles the note. "Here's the names of the prisons they were each taken to. Both are Samsun."

Andi was greatly relieved, since it meant getting home to Logan, but Aazcam quickly quelled her hopes.

"The bad news," he said, "is I *didn't* find Mr. Summers. He wasn't where *he* was supposed to be. The admin people couldn't find any record of him in their computers, even though my hard-copy paperwork specifically designates him as being sent there." He shook his head. "We rely on computers way too much."

"Hard-copy paperwork?" Weir repeated incredulously. "You found some? Where?"

"The old-fashioned way. I went through the dumpster." Aazcam looked at Keles pointedly. "Maybe you should have your fancy P.I.'s do a little dumpster-diving over at the prison and I'd follow-up on Mrs. Summers *real* fast."

Keles consulted Weir with a look, then as at his nod, left the office, cell-phone already to his ear.

As soon as he was gone, Aazcam opened another side-drawer and withdrew a stack of photos.

"And you had no problem locating Jean?" Andi asked, while he sorted through them. "She was plainly listed at her prison?"

"Plain as day. Seems to me *someone's* playing games." He handed several photos to Weir.

As Weir flipped through them, Andi leaned in for a look and was taken aback. They were telephoto shots of Ben with Sam Hamlin, crouched behind brush, Sam clearly aiming her camera at something out of sight. Probably the internment camp. "*This isn't good*," she thought as she sat back in her seat again and waited for Weir to reply. They were in no position to question Aazcam's reasons for being there, doing the same.

"I took these at the internment camp yesterday," Aazcam explained.

Weir passed the photos back. "Not bad. Photography seems a good hobby for you."

Aazcam smirked as he tucked them back in his drawer. "Cute, but let's not be coy, Mr. Weir. I don't believe this honeymoon story for a minute. I don't know why your lawyer is buying it, but you need him, so I'm not saying this in front of him. But I think your Mr. and Mrs. Summers dabbled in something of such magnitude it motivated somebody to arrange their arrest just to lose them in our prison system." He tapped the photos. "Probably that internment camp--judging by your interest in it."

He paused to scrutinize their faces for a response, but Andi was careful to give nothing away in her expression. She just continued looking at Aazcam as if this were new and unheard of information. Apparently, Weir did the same, since Aazcam continued his subtle interrogation.

"Whoever that somebody was," he said, "they managed to move your friends from jail to jail simply by manipulating electronic records. How, I can't fathom, since the police department is on an entirely different network than the prisons. Plus, the programming is entirely in *Turkish*." He leaned smugly back in his chair. "Explain that," he challenged.

"Sounds like an inside job," Weir suggested nonchalantly.

Aazcam shook his head. "This is a small town. I know every officer and every secretary, where they live, their families. The Summers were brought in on night shift and the only strangers anyone remembers seeing were the officers who brought them and because they looked official, no one asked any questions."

Of course, Andi knew perfectly well that nothing in cyberspace was sacred and no matter how annoying or mysterious Tau Omega's methodology appeared, a cyber vulnerability had been found. "You wouldn't happen to have some kind of janitorial service working at night would you?" she asked.

The smug expression immediately dropped from Aazcam's face letting her know they did and he hadn't thought of it.

"You might find they had a new employee who has recently quit," she added. "Though, they most likely used a false name and address."

Aazcam jotted a note on a Post-it. "I should've thought of it," he muttered.

"And you implied your prisons are on a different network, one they all share?" she inquired.

"And an internet connection to Interpol," he said, shaking his head. He added another scribble to his Post-it, then set it aside with a sigh. "Unfortunately for me, this investigation is over. I've been ordered to let the dust settle, even though all of us in this room *know* Tau Omega is behind everything that's being going on."

Andi wished they could tell Aazcam all the details--but they didn't dare. If Tau could manipulate Jean and Scott so easily, she hated to think what they might do to Aazcam and his family.

"Be that as it may, our primary concern, Detective, is still the release of our people," Weir replied.

From the back of the case file Aazcam drew out a neatly typed paper and handed it to Weir. "Give this to your lawyer. It should help."

Andi leaned over for a look, but it was in Turkish. "What is it?"

"It's an affidavit that basically states that the arrest of Scott and Jean Summers was a case of mistaken identity and that they were imprisoned without due process because of a paperwork mix-up. I'd avoid mentioning any suggestions of records being altered or lost, since that would only attract the government's attention and they'd put a freeze on everything while they investigated, which would put any chance of getting your kids out of here right down the toilet."

Weir carefully folded the paper and tucked it away. "Wise advice we'll be sure to adhere to, Detective."

"You realize, if anyone *else* had been handling this, that would've already happened."

"A fact we deeply appreciate," replied Weir as he got to his feet. Andi rose too, taking it as a cue they were ready to leave.

"How long do you think your mother-in-law has left?" Weir asked.

Andi chose not to wait and, excusing herself, quickly thanked Aazcam for his help and left.

"I'd be surprised if she makes it into the New Year," Aazcam replied to Weir's question about his

mother-in-law.

“Then you you'll return to Florida and school?”

“That's my plan.”

Weir handed him his business card. “Give me a call when you do.”

“Right,” Aazcam replied, taking it. They shook hands, then as soon as Weir was out the door, Aazcam ripped the card in two and dropped it in the trash.

Outside, Andi pulled her coat tightly around her against the chill, passing Keles on the police department steps, still on his cell. However, it was Logan she was thinking of. She hadn't called him yet-- partially because she'd wanted to wait and see if Aazcam might provide something more concrete to report and partially because Logan's cantankerousness yesterday had put her off. His constant griping about how much time they were taking and how t he thought they ought to be doing things *had* to be addressed. It had to stop. It was just too much extra for her to deal with on top of waiting around and putting up with Ben. The question was, if she did say something, would Logan be willing to cooperate or just get mad?

Continued in Through the Valley of Death, Part 4

