

## Through the Shadow of the Valley of Death, Pt 4 by B. Nickerson {Rated PG-13}

**Synopsis:** *Jean is rescued, things get worse for Scott and Gambit arrives on Xavier's doorstep.*

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

Scott heard Jean's voice calling him. He ran toward it, down a long gray corridor that ended in another corridor stretching left and right. "Jean!" he shouted. Only the echo of his own voice answered. He chose right and ran to the end, finding only another junction of corridor. Turning quickly, he ran the back where he'd come from and stopped, listening hard, sweat pouring down his face. "Jean!" he shouted again.

He started awake, a hand on his arm gently shaking him and Ersay's voice. "Come, ahbap, it is time to eat."

"How long have I been out?"

"Two or three hours maybe. Up now. We must be ready when they come."

Scott pulled himself up slowly, his body stiff and sore everywhere, aware of a growing tickle in his chest. It meant a chest-cold. More misery to contend with. Rolling to his stomach, he slid his feet to the floor. "When who comes?" he asked.

"The guards."

"We don't eat here in the cell?"

"No, ahbap. We must wait in line for them to take us downstairs." Ersay replied. "First Sadi, then me, then you." He tapped Scott's blindfold. "Leave this behind." Scott had forgotten it and obeyed, leaving it on the bed. Ersay took his hand and guided it to the back of his uniform. "Hold onto me. I will watch out for you, and remember, no talking is allowed."

Scott pinched Ersay's uniform fabric and waited, the sounds of opening doors and shuffling feet growing closer until, finally, theirs opened. They shuffled forward and filed down musty corridors and ramps that echoed with footfalls, halting in a room loud with the clank and clatter of a food service. *Smells sweaty*, Scott thought, *like onions*. Moving forward slowly, Ersay eventually guided his free hand to a tray and Scott slid it along, collecting his share of whatever was being doled out, then Ersay led him to a table, where he sat and explored the items on his tray with his fingers. He identified a plastic bowl filled with something warm, a plastic cup filled with water, a large hunk of course bread and a napkin wrapped around a plastic spoon. He sampled the bowl's contents and grimaced. It was as sweaty as the place smelled. Setting it aside, he just ate the bread and drank the water, then folded his hands in his lap to wait for Ersay, listening. Except for slurping sounds and footfalls of wardens walking about, it was quiet. After an interim, the signal came to rise, empty their trays and be led back to their cells. As soon as he was back, Scott heaved himself onto his bunk and lay, breathing heavily from the exertion. He felt around for his blindfold, replaced it and curled up under his blanket, which did little to keep him from shivering. Bitterly, he wondered for the umpteenth time why he was still here. The Professor had Cerebro, surely he knew where he was. He could think of no excuse, no justification for them abandoning him this long. Anger burned in his heart and he imagined saying all the angry things he felt to first to the Professor, then to Andi. That felt so good, he told Logan off, too. Then he packed up Jean and walked out. Team, what team? What a joke! Seething with fury now, Scott envisioned avenging himself on the guards who'd tortured him, blowing them to kingdom come with his visor, then leveling this prison to the ground. He was reveling in power and control when reason interrupted, reminding him, he was neither in control nor powerful. In fact, without his glasses or visor, he was helpless and useless, no more than a handicapped guy dependent on the charity of others. Dis-spirited, he felt despair's shadowy arms enfold him, and draw him slowly downwards into her abode of darkness.

Back in her room at the hotel, Andi tossed her coat on the bed, then checked her watch, counting hours backwards, figuring time in Westchester. She hadn't gotten back as soon as she'd hoped. Keles and Ben had decided to stop at a restaurant for supper. Now she was going to have to wait until after gym class to call Logan. She paced, planning what she might say, knowing perfectly well it wouldn't matter. His reaction to anything opposing "his way of doing things" was usually a tantrum first and reasonableness later. She heard a knock at her door and opened it to find a young bellhop outside, smiling sheepishly, a large vase of flowers in his arms. Delighted, she tipped the boy and put them on the table, thinking, at first, they might be from Logan, but realized they couldn't be. He didn't know where she was staying exactly, no one back at the school did. Suspicious, she snatched the small envelope from its holder and read the card inside. "*Just trying to brighten your day,*" it read and was signed "*Ben.*" She snorted and tossed the card in the waste basket. He would, no doubt, ask her about them and she was going to have to come up with a reply that wouldn't encourage him. She made a gagging face and looked at her watch. Maybe she could put it off. She also needed to email Xavier to see if he might try to use Cerebro and get a geographical location on Scott. Sighing, she checked her watch again and decided she had time for a nice, long bubble bath first.

In Westchester, Logan wasn't happy when he drove into school. In fact, he was worried because Andi hadn't called as usual and he automatically feared that she, too, had been arrested. He was also late. P.E. class was already in full swing when he walked in, Jack running basketball drills with the boys. He just stalked directly into their office, filled his mug with coffee, flopped onto their lopsided, plaid sofa and just sat there, reasoning with his uneasiness. "*She's probably okay,*" he told himself. "*It's too soon to worry. Someone would've called by now if she were in trouble. If anything happens to her, I'm gonna kill Weir.*" His ears detected a faint beep coming from Jack's desk, but it was just his Iridium, the one just like Weir had given Andi, and he resumed nursing his worry.

That's how Jack found him thirty minutes later, after he'd dismissed class, his mug still half-full of cold coffee. His pal just cocked an irritable look at him when he walked in. He'd certainly been making everyone miserable since Andi had left, but he'd never seen him wearing that particular *almost* worried type scowl he had on today.

He sat in the desk chair facing his pal. "So, what's up, hoser?" he inquired.

Logan didn't look at him as he replied, "Have you heard from Andi?"

"Are you kidding? You know you're the only one she calls."

Logan now looked at him. "I haven't heard from her in a couple days."

"I'm sure she's okay," he offered reassuringly. "We'd have heard something by now if she wasn't," and he tapped his head, indicating he meant a telepathic notification from Xavier.

Logan turned away to stare at the ceiling again. "Yeah, I keep telling myself that."

Jack picked up his Iridium, glanced at it, noted it had a message and put it to his ear, then held it toward Logan and replayed it on speaker-mode. It was Andi voice saying she'd call again at about ten-fifteen. They both looked at the clock. It was ten after. Logan's eyes took on a gleam of happiness, then apparently realizing his guard was down, hastily resumed a grumpy air and glowered at Jack. "Whacha lookin' at?" He held his hand out for the phone. "You gonna give me that thing or what?"

Jack obligingly gave it to him, carefully pointing out which button to press to talk, then sat back with a grin, watching Logan hold it like a snake that might bite him.

"Okay, I got it. Buzz-off," Logan ordered.

"What? And miss the fun?"

Logan gave him the narrow-eye just as the phone played its call-melody and he stabbed the appropriate button. "Hello? Andi?" he said, at the same time giving Jack a thumb toward the door. Jack just good-humoredly grabbed his clipboard and sauntered out, chuckling as he closed the door after him.

"Yes, Logan," Andi said.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"It's been a couple days."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to wait until after we met with the Carsamba police detective, so I'd have some new information."

"And?"

"And we know where Jean is. Detective Aazcam saw her this morning, but he couldn't locate Scott. He checked the prison he was supposed to be in, but--he wasn't there."

"And that means more days of looking," groaned Logan.

"I'm afraid so."

Logan swore a stream of expletives condemning the entire genealogy of Tau Omega and the Turkish prison system and anything else he could think of. He was tired of waiting around.

"Logan," Andi interrupted.

"What?"

"You know, if I could come home now, I would, don't you? That I'd rather be there with you?"

"Yeah. I know that."

"Over the past couple phone calls, it hasn't sounded like it."

"What do ya mean?"

"I mean I *feel* blamed for being here."

"You know I don't mean nothin' by it, Angel. I'm that way with everyone. It's just how I am." Then, because he knew telling women what they were right about often soothed troubled waters, added, "You were right about me. I just don't like you being over there without me."

"Logan, what I want is to leave our phone calls feeling supported and cared about."

"I care!" he fumed defensively. "That's why I married ya. Because I care, because I want to spend the rest of my life with ya, not---this."

"I want to be with you, too. I'm hoping it won't be very much longer."

He snorted.

"Logan honey, please think about what I'm asking? Okay?"

The "Logan-honey," softened him. "Okay," he begrudged.

"I love you."

"Me, too."

"If I don't call this time tomorrow, I'll call you at home early Wednesday."

"Okay." He heard her click-off and carelessly tossed Jack's Iridium on the desk.

Jack was seated on the bleachers, scribbling away on his class schedule when Logan stormed by him in a huff and slammed out the gymnasium's back door.

As he did everyday, Charles Xavier eagerly checked the email for Andi's status reports. Today, he got good news. They'd found Jean and, according to the police detective, she was okay. They'd get a writ of release for her as soon as possible. Xavier breathed a sigh of relief. Scott, however, had been moved again without a paper-trail and would he try locating him with Cerebro as soon as possible? He hummed out of the underground computer lab, down to corridor, directly to Cerebro. It'd been days since his last visit, not since Scott and Jean's initial disappearance. He'd just been trying to keep his mind off worrying by staying busy upstairs. He put the controller on his head and focused, letting Cerebro channel mutant minds toward him, sorting through them, seeking one in particular.

"Charles?" a familiar voice interrupted.

"Peace," he thought, noting the mature resonance her voice had taken on.

"I have missed you. How have you been?"

"I'm in a bit of a hurry right now, Peace. May we converse later?"

“Why are you in a hurry?”

He choked back his exasperation, reminding himself Peace was still, somehow, a child. “I’m looking for a friend who is in trouble, far away in another country, where he’s been arrested and I must do so quickly for his safety.”

“What country?”

“Turkey.”

There was a long pause. “I am sorry, Charles. I am unable to help you.”

Xavier was uncertain what that meant. “Thank-you, I appreciate that, Peace, but I believe I can locate him myself.”

“Will you visit me when you are not in a hurry, Charles?”

“Yes, Peace.”

“When?”

“In a few days, after I’ve found my friend.”

“Good-bye, Charles.”

Xavier immediately returned to task, divined a rough regional approximation of where he believed Scott was, then geographical coordinates, then returned to the computer lab to consult an on-line map and email Andi.

In Turkey, Andi was in sweats, propped in bed, working her jigsaw puzzle book, waiting for Xavier’s reply. It was eight-thirty pm. her time when her laptop signaled she had mail. She read his reply, scribbled down the information, then, intending to take it to Ben, paused at the door with a backward glance at the flowers she didn’t really want to acknowledge. She decided not to mention them unless asked. She padded down the hallway and knocked on his door. He opened it, clearly attired for bed in silky print pajama pants, his chest bare beneath an open, matching robe. She was immediately uncomfortable. “Am...I disturbing you?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, just relaxing. Like you.” He indicated her sweats.

She held out the paper. “The Professor has pegged Scott’s location at roughly 125 miles south, southeast of us.”

Weir took it and read it. “Hmm, I’ll have to look into prison locations and see which ones might fit that description. It should narrow down our search considerably.”

“How do you plan on telling Keles where to look, since we can’t exactly give away our source?”

Weir plunged his hands into both robe pockets and was thoughtful a moment before remembering his manners. “Would you care to come in?” he offered, stepping aside.

Andi didn’t really want to, but felt she ought to hear how Weir intended to cover their backs. “Alright,” she agreed reluctantly and entered. She selected a chair at the small round table, strategically placing her back to the window, so she’d have a clear view of both him *and* the door.

Weir sat across from her. “Tomorrow Aican will be occupied with getting a writ for Jean’s release. Probably all morning. As soon as that’s wrapped up, I’ll suggest he compile a list of possible prison locations on the premise Tau probably only moved Scott a moderate distance away, maybe within few hours driving distance, since their purpose was mostly one of distraction. That’s a reasonable supposition I think he’ll buy.”

Andi nodded. Keles would probably merely think them lucky. “About Jean---when we get her, I want her on a plane home as soon as possible.”

“I agree. No sense taking chances.”

Silence fell between them. “Well,” Andi said, getting up and moving toward the door. “I’m pretty tired and all. Good-night.” Her hand was on the doorknob when Weir asked the dreaded question. “Did you get the flowers?”

“*Darn, and I nearly made it out the door,*” she thought. “Yes, I did,” she replied without turning, then quickly slipped out the door back to her room. That he’d sent her flowers was definitely *not* on her list to tell Logan.

In Westchester, Jack parked his truck outside Logan and Andi’s townhouse, then peered at the lighted downstairs window. It looked like Logan was home. He hadn’t seen the hoser since he left the gym and he didn’t

show up for shop class either. He figured he ought to check on him. Hopping out of the warm cab, he put his parka hood up against the icy wind that bit his face as he walked to the door and knocked on it.

“Who is it?” a grumpy voice called.

“It's me,” Jack called back, dancing on the step to keep warm.

The door cracked open just enough for Logan to eye him like an unwelcome salesman. “Well, whacha want?”

“To come in. It's freezing out here.”

With a sigh of long-suffering, Logan flung the door the rest of the way open, stalked back into the living room and plopped back on the sofa.

Jack closed the door, then followed him, throwing his hood off as he surveyed Logan's messy living circumstances. He was obviously doing his sleeping on the sofa. The coffee table in front of it was cluttered with beer bottles, assorted fast-food boxes, empty ketchup packets and pieces of french fry. Five or six pizza boxes were stacked under it, a pizza crust or two peeking out. A pile of clothes lay in the easy-chair while another heap lay strewn in front of the garage entry and the place smelled like the dumpster behind a pizza joint.

Jack shoved enough blanket aside to make a place for himself to sit on the sofa. “What's up?” he asked conversationally.

Logan's eyes never left the TV screen. “Nothin' ”

“Whatcha been doing all day?”

“Drove around, played pool.” Logan shrugged nonchalantly.

“How 'bout some supper?”

Logan gave him an annoyed “are-you-kidding ” look.

“Just thought I'd ask.” Jack stood again. “I've had my mind on a nice cold glass of stout and a fat juicy steak at Hobart's all day, but, hey, if you don't wanna a free meal...” Jack just shrugged. “Guess I'll see you tomorrow,” then went to the door and let himself out, careful to keep his pace slow as he walked toward his truck, an ear on the door behind him. He wasn't even halfway down the walk when he heard Logan's heavy steps pounding down the walk after him. Jack smirked. He knew his pal's achilles heel.

“You did say Hobart's?” Logan asked.

“Yup.”

“And you're buying?”

“Yup.”

## Day Nine

Jean was surprised when a warden came and called for her. She stood and followed him warily, afraid of where she was going. They paused at a room where she was given a square bin containing what looked like her own clothes, then was directed into a room to change. Tears ran from her eyes as she touched her clothes. It meant the Professor had finally come through. She dressed eagerly, smoothed her hair with her fingers as best she could, then opened door. A different warden was waiting there and he led her to a small reception room with dingy white walls and a handful of plain, wooden chairs. Two people who were seated there and both stood as soon as she walked in. One was a neatly suited, curly blonde-headed gentleman with a briefcase and the other was a woman she'd know anywhere. “Andi,” she cried joyfully and rushed into her embrace.

“Jean! Thank God!” Andi exclaimed.

Filled with relief and happiness, Jean sobbed on her shoulder. Andi just held her, gently patting her back until it ebbed a bit. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“I'm okay,” Jean murmured. “But what about Scott? The detective who visited me said he wasn't where he's supposed to be.”

Andi whispered in her ear, “It's true and we have a plan, but let's save the details until we're alone at the hotel.”

Jean pulled back, nodding, wiping tears away with the back of her wrist, making streaks of clean skin amidst the grime. Noticing her dirty fingernails, she smiled self-consciously. “I'm sorry, I'm filthy. I must smell awful and,” she

rolled her eyes upward towards her hair. "I'm probably infested."

"Nothing we aren't prepared for," Andi smiled, then indicated Keles, who stepped forward. "Meet our lawyer, Mr. Keles."

Jean politely inclined her head.

"Everything to find your husband will be done," he promised, then gestured toward the door. "We should go now."

Andi nodded and linking her arm through Jean's, followed Keles out of the building to his Mercedes. As they walked, Jean softly asked, "Who else is here? Did the Professor come?"

Andi shook her head. "Just Ben."

"Weir?"

"This *is* his area of expertise and it's the arrangement he and Charles agreed on."

Jean gave her an arched brow. "I bet Logan liked that."

"Not in the least," Andi answered with a measured smile. She opened the car's back door, allowing Jean to slide in first, then slid in beside her, throwing a blanket around her shoulders, since she was shivering. Andi rummaged through her back pack for the hard rolls she brought and gave them to Jean, who happily devoured them, then fell into a doze in the warm car. When they reached the hotel, Andi took her directly to her room and sent her to the shower. "There's de-lousing soap and shampoo in there and a change of clothes."

"Thank-you. I don't know whatever became of my things or my passport."

"The hotel staff secured your things and Ben's people picked them up."

Jean looked where Andi pointed, seeing both her own and Scott's light carry-on satchels, but no med kit. "Did they rescue my med-kit?"

"No. Apparently, someone else got it first."

"Figures," Jean snorted as she went into the bathroom.

"Put everything you have on in the black garbage bag," Andi instructed. "Mr. Keles offered to make sure it gets burned."

Jean nodded as she closed the door and took a shower. Afterwards, while toweling her hair dry, she regarded her long auburn hair disparagingly, thinking she ought to change her style. Maybe when she got back. Exiting the bathroom, she found Andi seated at the small room table waiting for her. "I ordered you some food," she said, tapping the silver cover on the table across from her. Jean took a seat, lifted the lid and breathed in the heavenly aroma of real food. While she ate, they traded stories, going over details about the internment camp, the arrest and speculations about Tau Omega's involvement.

"I think they just wanted to keep us busy," Andi said. "Looking for you and Scott was meant to keep us out of their business."

Her stomach full and satisfied, Jean pushed her plate aside. "What about Scott? What's your plan?"

"Well, we know he's in a place roughly 125 miles south of here, but since we can't just tell Mr. Keles 'oh-look-here', so Ben will have him put together a list of all the jail and prison facilities within a couple hundred mile radius of here for him to check. Then it should just be a matter of confirming his location and getting a writ of release." Of course, Andi knew all the governmental red-tape made that easier said than done, but she didn't want Jean to be more worried than she already was.

"I suppose you have to do things that way," Jean sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go home."

Jean balked stubbornly. "I'd rather stay and help."

Andi placed a reassuring hand on her forearm. "I understand how you feel. If it were Logan, wild horses probably couldn't drag me away, but you've got to remember you've seen things in that internment camp *someone* wants to keep quiet. We don't want to find Scott and turn around just to find you arrested again. It's not safe for you to stay."

As much as she didn't want to admit it, Jean knew Andi was right. "I just want to see him so much and let him

know everything's okay. I'm afraid he's blind.”

“He is,” Andi asserted, rising. She drew two manila envelopes from the night-stand drawer and handed one to her. “Your things. Courtesy of Detective Aazcam.”

They emptied both onto the table. Jean eagerly put her wedding set back on and her watch, then picked up Scott's red onyx glasses and turned them meditatively in her fingers. “He hates being blind,” she murmured. “It makes him feel out of control.” Then she met Andi's eyes. “And you know how he is about staying in control.”

Andi nodded. “That's what worries me.” She picked up Scott's wedding band and held it out to her. “You should hold onto this and I'll hold onto the rest.”

Jean traded her the glasses for the ring and Andi returned them and his wallet to the manila envelope. “So, when do I leave?” Jean sighed.

“Early tomorrow morning. You're booked on a nine-thirty flight out of Frankfurt for New York. You'll be home just in time for Thanksgiving.”

“It won't be the same without Scott.”

Andi patted her arm reassuringly, certain her own Thanksgiving stuck here with Ben Weir wouldn't be a thrill either.

In Westchester, Remy Lebeau was strolling up Xavier's drive, having just spent his last dime on a taxi. It was early morning. The sky was a dull winter gray and dirty patches of old snow lined the walkway that led to the front entry of the stately brick school. He hopped up the steps to the double-doors and, noting the 'no-smoking' sign posted on the glass, took one last drag on his cigarette, dropped it, ground it out, then entered the foyer. He was hardly prepared for the vision of loveliness that met him: a buxom, white-haired angel who could've only come from above.

“Is dis heaven?” he asked.

The angel's brow knit quizzically. “No, this is a school. May I help you?”

Remy fished a paper from his coat pocket and consulted it. “De headmaster here, he is Professor Charles Xavier, no?” The angel nodded. “Den dat is who I wish to see.” He stuffed the note back in his pocket.

The angel regarded him skeptically. “Why?”

Remy lifted his sunglasses and settled them on his knit cap allowing this angel to see his black eyeballs with their deep red irises. Her lips parted as a slight gasp escaped. “Because, sweet angel,” he explained with a dazzling smile, “I be one of *you*.”

Storm promptly put a mental call to Xavier informing him he had a mutant visitor.

“*Bring him to my office*,” Xavier thought back.

“Follow me,” she announced, turning curtly on her heel.

He fell in beside her. “I be Gambit. And you be...?”

“Ororo,” she replied.

“Aurora,” he repeated.

She ignored his mis-pronunciation and avoided looking at him. Something about him made her feel uneasy.

Gambit surveyed the valuable art and antiques along the corridor, habitually casing his environment. At Xavier's office, Storm opened the door and ushered him inside. “This is Mr. Gambit,” she announced, then closed the door leaving Gambit facing a distinguished, bald-headed gentleman seated behind a desk, sipping from a tea-cup.

Xavier set the cup down and waved at the dark red sofa in front of his desk. “Please, have a seat.” Gambit did so. “What can I do for you, Mr. Gambit?”

“I ran into some of yo' associates in N'Orleans.”

“Yes, I seem to remember they mentioned you.”

“I helped dem catch de young man dey came after.”

Xavier nodded, knowing he meant Trent Boland. He quickly surface-scanned Gambit's thoughts, learning his criminal past and his present predicament, which had brought him there, desperate for refuge.

“Now Gambit need yo' help. He need a place ta stay awhile.”

“Ah,” Xavier replied. He'd already realized Gambit was a kinetic-mutant; one able to charge objects with energy and turn them into volatile projectiles. *Certainly a useful gift for our team,*” he thought, *“but keeping him would be risky. The Assassin Guild would never rest till they found him. Still...”* Aloud, he asked, “You want sanctuary, then?”

“Oui, dat is de word.”

Xavier smiled accommodatingly. “I think that can be arranged, but there *are* some requirements you must agree to first or no deal.” Gambit nodded and gave him his full attention. “This is, first of all, a school with quite a few adolescent girls. You are not to touch them.”

Gambit appeared appalled. “Of course not. I may like de women, but Gambit is no robber o' cradles!”

“Not one valuable from this school shall be missing for any reason.”

“Gambit no steal from his friends.”

“For your protection and ours, you will change your dress and appearance in any any manner I dictate. Do you agree to these terms?”

Gambit nodded, stood and offered a manicured, ring adorned hand for Xavier to shake. “Oui, Gambit agree.”

Retaining Gambit's hand, Xavier looked sternly into his black eyes and spoke warningly into his mind, *“And if you break even one of these rules, I swear I'll have you hog-tied and dropped right in the middle of Assassin territory.”* He then released Gambit's hand.

Gambit looked as surprised as a man just slapped. He turned pale and sank back upon sofa.

“Are we clear?” asked Xavier.

“Oui.” He scrutinized Xavier. “You read de mind?” Xavier nodded. “You know everyding den, about Gambit?” Xavier nodded again. Gambit was humbly quiet.

“It seems you've arrived just in time for Thanksgiving.” Xavier stated. “We'll let you get acquainted with things a bit, then discuss how we shall change your looks on Friday. Until that's done, I want you to stay on school grounds.”

“As you say,” Gambit agreed.

“Storm will show you to a room.” Then as if by magic, Xavier's office door clicked open and Storm poked her silver head in. Gambit, realizing he was dismissed, rose and walked toward the door.

“Oh,” Xavier suddenly added, making Gambit pause and turn back. “There's no smoking inside the school or anywhere in sight of my students.” Gambit nodded then followed Storm out the door.

Xavier looked after them, mildly amused Gambit secretly believed he was running some kind of con-game, but felt confident Gambit's curiosity would lead him to the truth. He'd sensed a good heart in the young man, despite his criminal upbringing. That good heart combined with his kinetic gift would make him a fine addition to the team, though Xavier could imagine Scott's reaction. Thinking of Scott made his amusement fade, though, and he pulled out his black velvet yarmulke, perched it on his head, opened his prayer book and quietly began to pray for Scott's safe return.

Storm showed Gambit his quarters, then dropped him off in the cafeteria, so he could catch breakfast. He surveyed the hunting trophies that still adorned the higher walls surrounding the dining area, then joined the students in line and got a plate of bacon, scrambled eggs and toast. Filling a mug with coffee, he selected a table at back and sat down, too intent on pondering his next move to pay attention to curious glances and whispers. That he would need something to do was certain and it had to be something useful, something valuable enough to guarantee him a place in this institution, while he figured out what Xavier's *real* operation was also certain. He sampled his breakfast as he thought, but quickly found it displeasing to his gourmet palate. The bacon was overdone, the eggs bland and the wheat toast hardly inspirational. *“Gambit could do better,”* he thought as he pushed it aside. That's when the idea came to him. *He* could cook. It happened to be a hobby of his, one he enjoyed so much he'd even considered opening his own restaurant, but his *previous* career had precluded him that

opportunity. Now, since that career no longer existed, he could indulge his passion as he liked. So, with that in mind, he waited until the last student was gone, then approached the steam-table and, flashing his best smile, introduced himself to the three matronly cooks cleaning up behind it. "Bonjour, fair Madames. Gambit is de name."

Below ground, Xavier was in Rogue's isolation room for their daily morning breakfast and tea chat; he having the tea and she, the breakfast. Though still reticent about returning upstairs, her over-all attitude was greatly improved and she was caring for her appearance now, wearing her gloves and scarves as she used to. It had something to do with Jack, of that he was fairly certain, but what the young man had said to her to make such a difference he hadn't pried into. She was also allowing Bobby and Kitty to visit, which was a good sign of her increasing mental health and openness. He dressed his tea with cream and stirred it in before making his announcement. "I have good news. We've found Jean."

Rogue's fork paused in midair as she looked at him. "That's great, P'fessor. Is she awright?"

"Thankfully, yes."

"What about Mr. Summers?"

"Well, we have a good idea where he is, but he's not in hand yet."

She ate silently a few minutes. "Seems to me ya'll's little look-see turned into a peck of trouble."

He chuckled. "It did, indeed."

"Why ya bother, P'fessor? I've been nothin' but trouble. Pyro trashed yer car. Ya had ta go chasin' cross country afta Jubilee. It don't seem worth it."

"Feeling up to a philosophical discussion today, I see." He set his teacup aside and took a deep breath. "Well, I suppose it's because I'm an optimist who believes everyone is worth helping because there's some good in all. I hope that by helping someone, they might, in turn, help someone else."

"Ya have a heck of a lot more faith in people than me, P' fessor."

"Perhaps just more practice," he said and was pleased to get a smile.

"Ya know, I still have what's-her-name in my head...."

"Elsie," corrected Xavier.

"Yeah, well, bits and pieces of hers keep poppin' up. Seems like more everyday. What's the deal? I thought Dr. Summers and ya were s'posed ta have removed everythin'?"

"I'm afraid the human mind is not so simple as a computer file one simply deletes, though we removed as much as we felt we could without harming you."

"Ya mean I'm stuck with her, too? Ain't it bad enough I'm stuck with Logan and anyone else I've ever touched awready?"

"That you retain the memory of those you touch *is* a difficult side-effect certainly, but not an impossible one. I could teach you a few mental disciplines I use that might help."

She nodded. "I'm willin' ta do 'bout anythin' that'll help."

Xavier watched her push her tray away with a satisfied sigh, hesitant to say what he knew he must. "You know all that remains of Elsie is in you."

"That's not my fault!" Rogue retorted sullenly, "And ya know it."

"Of course and I'm not suggesting otherwise. However, I would like you to consider honoring her by how *you* live and how you use the gifts she's passed on to you. If you put them to good use, then her death will not have been in vain."

Rogue heaved a deep breath. "Ya don't make nothin' easy, do ya P'fessor?"

When Logan and Jack sauntered into the dining hall for lunch, Logan immediately spotted Gambit, in a cook's apron at the staff table arranging Xavier's lunch in front of him, and frowned, trying to place where he remembered him from. Then it came to him. It'd been in New Orleans. He was the dude in the black sports car who'd helped them corner Trent Boland. Logan abruptly left the lunch-line and stepped into Gambit's path, blocking his return to

the kitchen. "Whacha doin' here, bub?" he challenged.

Gambit looked Logan up and down. "Ah, Gambit remember you." He held his fist's up. "You be de one wit de knives in de fists."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I be staying awhile," Gambit replied with a smile, then tried to side-step him, but Logan just side-stepped with him, still blocking his path.

"Not good enough," he rumbled.

Xavier, observing the situation, hummed over to quickly to quietly diffuse it. "Ah, Logan, I see you've met our new *friend*, Gambit."

"Friend, huh?" Logan retorted. He jabbed a forefinger into Gambit's chest. "I be watching you, bub," he mimicked, then strolled back to his spot in the lunch-line.

### **Day Ten: The Day Before Thanksgiving**

In the Sheraton hotel in Turkey, Ben Weir's cell beeped loudly, waking him. He groggily flipped it open and put it to his ear. "Yes?"

"Sir," a feminine voice replied, "the World Health Organization people are assembling their luggage in the lobby as we speak." It was Sam. She was in the same hotel in Carsamba as the W.H.O. staff. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

Fully alert now, Weir sat up and checked the time on his phone. Five a.m. "Have they made any statements to the press?"

"Not yet. Apparently they're postponing until they're back in Geneva. Turkish soldiers are keeping the media at bay for now."

"Okay. Go ahead and come back. We'll get you and Mrs. Summers to the jet, then I'll drive out there."

"Yes, sir."

He flipped the phone shut and hurriedly threw on jogging clothes, then called room to room to Andi. Her voice was sleepy. "Hello?"

"Change of schedule. Have Jean ready within the hour. Sam's on her way back and as soon as I get her and Jean in a taxi, I'm going to Carsamba." He dropped the phone in it's cradle, abruptly hanging-up on her.

Andi stared at the dead phone, miffed he didn't even let her ask what was going on, but, obviously it was urgent. She turned on the TV and flipped channels, hoping to recognize something among the mish-mash of Turkish programming, but didn't.

"What's going on," Jean muttered sleepily. "Who called?"

Andi looked at her as she turned the set off. Jean was propped on an elbow, her hair askew and eyes slightly puffy. "It was Ben," Andi told her. "Something's up in Carsamba. Sam's on her way back now so she can get you to the airport and leave Ben the car to go back and check things out. You'd better get dressed."

Jean nodded and sluggishly rose, stopping at the sink to peer at her reflection. "Oh, my gosh," she gasped. "I look pathetic!"

Andi wasn't listening. She was too busy composing a note for Jean to deliver to Logan. She should've done it last night, but had procrastinated, thinking she'd have plenty of time this morning. So much for that.

By the time Ben arrived, Jean was presentable in a neat navy pants suit, her auburn hair wound into a chignon and russet lipstick giving her pale features a bit of color. Andi handed her the carefully folded Sheraton stationary. "Could you give this to Logan for me?"

She nodded. "As soon as I see him," and put it in her jacket pocket, then clasped both Andi's hands. "Tell Scott I love him."

"As soon as I see him," Andi promised.

They traded a hug and kiss, then Ben led Jean away. Andi closed the door and pondered whether she should wait a couple hours and call Logan when it was midnight, his time, or wait till afternoon and call him at the usual

time. She decided on the earlier option.

In Westchester, Logan was occupying himself with a mindless game of playing solitaire on the dining table amidst a clutter of beer bottles when he got her call. Moving to the sofa, he flopped on it and grabbed the phone from its charger on the coffee table. "Hello?"

"It's me."

He still had a sore spot from his last conversation with Andi and wasn't sure what he should or should not say, so he chose something safe. "So, what's goin' on?"

"Not a thing. That's the problem. I'll probably be waiting around here for hours until Ben gets back."

"Where'd Bennie go?"

"Carsamba. Something's going on with the internment camp, I'm sure, but he didn't say what. He just bumped Jean's departure time up so he could get the car sooner. You'd better tell the Professor to keep an eye on the news."

"So Jean's on her way back, huh?"

"Yes. I can give you the flight information--unless you'd rather I email it directly to the Professor...?"

"Nah, I'll get it. Hold on a minute." He went back to the dining table, grabbed a pen and a junk-mail envelope. "Okay, go." He scribbled down the carrier, flight number, Laguardia and four-thirty p.m. "I'll make sure she gets picked up."

"She wanted to stay," Andi said, "but I couldn't let her. Too risky."

"I don't blame her," he replied heartily, then wondered if that sounded critical and held his breath for her response.

"Nor I," she replied easily.

He let out his breath.

"She's just worried how he's coping."

"Right," he agreed. There was an uncomfortable silence and, since he couldn't complain, he was at a loss for what to say.

"What about you?" Andi finally asked. "How are things with you?"

"Okay."

"Any snow?"

"About four inches three days ago, nothing impressive."

She laughed lightly. "Not for an ol' Alberta Canuck like you." There was a long pause. "So, how' are you doing on sleep?"

He couldn't keep sarcasm out of his voice. "Great. I just love sittin' up all night playin' solitaire."

"Well then, I wouldn't want to keep," she returned, a touch of coolness to her tone.

He knew he was pushing her away and had better say something quick to save the situation.. "Andi," he quickly said, "I don't sleep good without ya and I can't wait for ya to be home."

"I love you, too," she replied, her tone once warm. "I'll call again on Thanksgiving. Talk to ya later."

She clicked off and he set the phone back in the charger with a sigh, then sat down to his solitaire game again, shaking his head ruefully as he looked over his cards. "Ya nearly lost yer chestnuts on that one," he told himself.

As soon as Weir put Sam and Jean in a taxi for the Samsun airport, he sped to Carsamba. Once there, he parked on the north side, pulled a knit cap on his head, put on sunglasses and, incognito as a jogger, ran the remaining five miles to the internment campsite. He found the low, scrub-covered hills flanking the fenced camp covered with other on-lookers, listening to the the roar of heavy equipment beyond the tall perimeter fence watching black diesel smog and gray smoke from burning debris boil into the sky. A small force of Turkish soldiers still guarded the area, but none seemed interested in chasing curious on-lookers away. As Weir joined the spectators, he noticed the shelter roofs that used to house the sick mutants were no longer evident above the perimeter fence and guessed that was probably what was burning. The air stank with more than diesel smog and burning wood, though. It also smelled of burning flesh, a smell he knew all too well. Sudden memories of sailors screaming as they burned alive in

the oily waters among the sinking ships of Pearl Harbor made him wince.

“What's up?” a familiar male voice suddenly asked.

Drawn back to the present, he glanced at the man next to him. It was Detective Aazcam, his dark, blue trench coat buttoned against the wind blowing off the Black Sea. “Nothing,” Weir replied.

Aazcam gestured in the direction of the internment camp. “So, what do you think was really going on in there?” He shrugged. “Whatever it was, they're burning all the evidence.”

“This place was operated by Tau Omega. Know anything about them?”

“Just what I read in the papers, same as you.”

Aazcam clucked his tongue. “Somehow I seriously doubt that. I think you and your friend's came here specifically to look into their little operation, but Tau got wind of your game and trumped you.”

Weir admired the young detective's tenacity. He was sharp, maybe too sharp for his own good. Weir shrugged. “It doesn't matter now.”

“I helped you out, Weir. At considerable personal risk, I might add. You owe me *something*.”

Weir looked Aazcam square in the eye. “Alright. The truth. That's what we were looking for.” Weir's eyes drifted back to camp vanishing in flames and bulldozers before them. “And it's going up in smoke as we speak.”

Aazcam followed his look and they silently watched the demolition process until the last fence post was hauled away, and the site bull-dozed clean. Finally, yellow tape was strung around it and quarantine signs posted, warning trespassers away in Turkish, French and English. It was mid-afternoon by the time he drove back to Samsun.

At the Sheridan, Andi had just finished e-mailing her response to Xavier about what to do if a person wants to hide their previous identity when there was a light knock on her door. Opening it, Ben breezed past her and flopped in her chair in front of her notebook PC. “You on-line?”

“Why?” she asked, somewhat annoyed.

He rapidly tapped keys. “I had Sam stay in Frankfurt to keep an eye on the news,” he explained. “The World Health Organization held their report until they got back in Geneva. She called me while I was driving back just now and said it was all over the news.”

Andi immediately moved the other chair beside him so she could read the screen as well.

“Here it is,” he said.

Andi read the A/P wire report intently. *According to the World Health Organization, the Cappadocian cave-mutants all died of a mutated strain of cholera. The general public, however, is in no danger, since the strain seems limited to the unsanitary living conditions of the caves. As a precaution, the Cappadocian caves will be temporarily quarantined for testing and will be reopened as soon as they are determined to be safe for public use. The site of the internment camp has been cleared and quarantined as well.* “That's a load of crap,” Andi pronounced as soon as she finished.

“When we lost those blood samples,” Weir said, “we lost the one thing that would've told us what was *really* going on.”

“And why it was so important to keep us from finding out.”

At LaGuardia airport, Logan and Jack were waiting for Jean just outside the security checkpoint for the International passengers. “There she is!” Jack announced, pointing beyond the security equipment to the fresh stream of passengers strolling toward them.

Following his finger, Logan recognized Jean, her auburn head bobbling along above the average height passengers surrounding her. She waved when she saw them and smiled a pleasant, yet tired smile.

Jack enveloped her in a glad hug. “Good flight?” he asked.

“It was alright,” she replied as she stepped back.

She turned to him next and Logan gave her a quick hug. He always remembered that, on their first meeting, he'd grabbed her by the throat.

"I have something from Andi for you," she whispered and pressed a slip of folded paper into his hand as she drew away.

He yearned to read it, but held off, sliding it into the inner pocket of his jean jacket for a more private moment. Then Jack offered Jean his elbow and they set off for baggage claim, Logan falling in on her other side, listening as she related her experiences, though human traffic often forced him to dodge behind. When they reached the carousel, he stepped away and turned aside to read his wife's note. Pulling it from his pocket, he unfolded it and read, his eyes devouring every word :

*"My dear Logan. I think of you everyday. It's hard being apart and my days are bland, monotonous hours spent either in my room or in the restaurant downstairs working cross-word puzzles waiting for the next bit of good news. I've nearly finished my book and must soon resort to something else. I count the days until I'm home in your arms!*

*XXX, Andi*

*P.S. I'd love a get-away weekend, just you and me."*

Smiling to himself, Logan pocketed it again and rejoined Jack and Jean in time to see the luggage carousel lurch into motion.

### **Day Eleven, Thanksgiving**

Scott had given-up keeping track of time and wasn't counting meals anymore. It didn't seem to matter, not after Ersay's revelation about his circumstances. They were discussing how he'd come to be here and upon hearing he'd been imprisoned without a trial, Ersay promptly labeled him "a political."

"And what exactly is a political?" he'd asked, though Ersay's awed-tone gave him premonitions of bad news and, according to Ersay's reply, a political was someone put in prison basically to "lose" them in the system.

"I have always heard rumors of such people, but you are the first I have met," Ersay said.

"Great," Scott had muttered in reply, but Ersay's explanation haunted him because it suddenly made his situation make sense. It was the reason no one had come, probably because they couldn't, though he was hard pressed to believe the Professor hadn't used Cerebro to locate him. Admittedly, Tau *had* demonstrated considerable resources and could be preventing his friends from finding him and, if so, then he had little hope of escaping this miserable place anytime soon. After that, he just settled for existing, drifting in a dreamy surreal state, neither fully awake nor asleep, since the constant coughing kept him from it, either daydreaming about food or morbidly re-viewing every unhappiness of his past and only rising at Ersay's prompting.

"Up, ahbap," a voice hissed.

Scott felt his elbow being shaken, knew it was Ersay. "Breakfast already," he mumbled, automatically sliding his feet to the floor, the sudden shift from prone to upright causing a round of coughing and he clung to the bunk weakly until it passed.

"No, ahbap. Showers."

"Showers?" he repeated. All he'd had so far was a nasty, cold de-lousing shower. "Are they hot?"

"No, but they give us soap and new uniforms."

He took that in, not looking forward to being colder than he was. "So, is this something done often?"

"It depends on the guards."

"Figures." He left his make-shift blindfold on the bed and lined up behind Ersay, pinching the back fold of his uniform firmly. Eventually, their door slid open and they shuffled forward.

When they halted sometime later, Scott knew by the dank smell this could only be the showers. A guard barked, then he heard the sounds of clothing rustling, bare feet slapping concrete and the quick hiss of several showers. As in the chow-hall, no one spoke. They just inched forward until it was their turn to be handed fresh uniforms, socks, a thin towel and slivers of soap. Ersay, as always, diligently guided his hands to receive his share and Scott

doubted he would've ever managed without either him or Paul Hooper. Together, he and Ersay hung their fresh uniforms and towels on hooks, left shoes and socks below them, stripped, then Ersay guided him into the shower by the elbow. They shared a shower-head and the water was, indeed, icy cold. Trembling with chill, he lathered his hair and beard, glad to get clean, even so.

Ersay took advantage of the shower noise to whisper an odd observation. "There are many guards watching today. More than other days."

"What do you mean?" Scott whispered back.

"There are always a few who watch, but today there are more."

"Watching?" Scott repeated, not liking the implication. "You mean looking-at-us watching?"

"Yes."

Scott could imagine a dozen guards leering and pointing at the naked, white American. "Perverts," he bristled.

"Do not think about it," Ersay said, "Come, we are done now."

They left the shower, Ersay guiding him by the elbow back to where their clothes waited. Scott dressed and slipped bare feet into his rubber thongs, preferring to wait until back in his cell to put on the wool socks. The things were obnoxiously itchy anyway, but worse on damp skin. He felt Ersay back-up against him so he could grip his uniform, then they shuffled into line and waited. Finally, the command came to move out and just as Scott felt the tug of Ersay's uniform in fingers, a billie-club was suddenly thrust across his chest, preventing *him* from going anywhere. To his dismay, Ersay's uniform slid from his fingers, leaving him alone with an unknown number of guards, their sweat and cigarette smoke strong in his nostrils. Every horror story ever told him by Paul Hooper about in-mate abuse suddenly filled his mind and he trembled with fear. The club stayed against his chest until the shuffling sounds of the other prisoners faded out of earshot, then it lifted and he was prodded in the small of the back, indicating he should walk. Hesitantly, he obeyed and, clutching his socks with one hand, reached out with the other to feel his way, his fingers finding the rough cement wall. His pulse raced, pounding loudly in his temples as he wondered why they'd kept him back and what they intended to do. He was jabbed in the back again, this time with a command he knew meant "hurry," so he walked faster, nervously aware he didn't know where he was going. Suddenly, he tripped and fell. The guards around him laughed and guffawed and he knew they'd tripped him on purpose. A club urged him to his feet again, then to walk and he obeyed with growing irritation. A few minutes later, they tripped him again. Their laughter only antagonizing him and turning his irritation into anger. He hated ridicule; he'd had too much of it as a kid. Now he resisted their prodding, rising only slowly and walking only slowly, unwilling to be their plaything, though it didn't seem to discourage them. They just tripped him anyway. This time he took advantage of a coughing spell to stay on the floor, but they didn't buy it. A guard just seized him by the arm and the seat of his pants and boosted him to his feet, then pushed him against the wall. Scott felt the guards' breath hot against his neck as he made some remark to his pals that made them laugh, the hand on his butt starting to feel around. Both afraid and furious, Scott dropped the socks, grabbed the guard's hand and with a swift manipulation of his wrist, had him bent over and his hand twist up the middle of his back. There was a palpable moment of stunned silence, then a hailstorm of clubs fell on him, pounding him to the floor.

Scott writhed on the floor, like an earthworm on hot pavement, for what seemed like an eternity as blow after blow fell. He was stoic at first, trying not to cry out, but this only enraged the guards even more and they beat him until screams were wrenched from his throat. They beat him until he was on the verge of passing out, *then* they stopped. He lay helplessly curled on the floor, hurting everywhere, especially his right side, which stabbed him sharply with every breath. Above him, orders were barked and two guards seized him, one on each side. They yanked him to his feet, making him cry out from the pain in his ribs, then hauled him half-walking, half-staggering down the corridor.

A lucky man would've been taken back to his cell, but he wasn't a lucky man. Instead, he soon recognized the familiar damp musty order of the shower area. They jerked him to a stop. From across the room he heard a loud scraping, like wood across cement, which stopped directly in front of him. The guards on either side hammer-locked his arms behind him while another kicked the back of his knees, forcing him to his knees, then they

bent him across a bench and a guard sat on either side leaning on him, holding him down. The agony of their pressure on his broken rib made tears run from his eyes and he could barely inhale a breath. He still coughed, but without being able to fully inhale, it came out as more a weak wheezing, choking sound. Blood ran to his dangling head making him dizzy and nauseous and terrified, he did something he hadn't done since a child in the orphanage. He prayed; he called out to God for help and, remembering Professor Xavier's admonition not to make vows he couldn't pay, he promised he would talk to Him again if He would just save him.

Then he waited, certain the rear of his uniform was about to be torn open at any second.

Suddenly, the guard's radio squawked urgently, conversation ensued, then orders were barked. To Scott's immense relief, the two guards holding him down jerked him to his feet and hustled him down the corridor. However, his relief was soon replaced by apprehension as he realized he was being taken *down* stairs, not up.

Finally, they jerked him to a halt. One of his guards let go and his footsteps went few paces forward. Scott heard mysterious metallic clicks followed by a louder clank of heavy metal hitting the cement, then the guard returned and the two of them hustled him forward, hoisted him by arms and britches and tossed bodily through some kind of opening. Metal clanged into place behind him and the guard's footsteps receded into the distance, leaving him alone, his cheek resting on cool, packed earth. He hurt too much now and was overwhelmed with despair. Things may have been bad enough before; now they were worse.

In Westchester, Logan arrived in the school dining room shortly before two and glanced around, inhaling the rich aromas of Thanksgiving feast. Students were scattered about the room, some seated, some clustered in groups chatting and laughing. He saw Gambit hovering over the buffet, presiding obsequiously over its arrangement and gave the Cajun's back a disapproving scowl, considering him little more than a rich, pretty-boy. Then Logan spotted a forlorn, willowy figure, gazing pensively out a window at the far end of the room. He walked over and quietly joined her in gazing out on the drab landscape, the trees just brown skeletons in the bright winter sunlight. Boring. "Have you met the new guy?" he asked.

Jean stopped worrying her wedding to look at him. The sunlight made her face paler, intensifying the lines of stress etched in it. "Gambit? Yes, I did. He's kind of a refugee."

"Refugee from what?"

"Some kind of trouble."

"You've read his mind?" he quipped, trying to be light.

She shook her head as she smiled, the smile softening and warming her face. "No, the Professor told me."

"What kinda trouble?"

"The Professor didn't say."

"Probably avoiding a shot-gun wedding."

She shrugged slightly, her smile languid, but her eyes glinting with an eager intensity. "Have you talked to Andi?"

"Yeah, this morning, but no good news yet. That lawyer of theirs is still working the list."

Her face fell and she turned away. She began worrying her ring again.

He tried to be reassuring. "Scott will come through okay. He's tough."

"I'm not so sure," she replied, her voice a whisper. "What you see...how he seems...that's not who he really is...you know, down inside. He's more vulnerable, less sure of himself..." her words faded out.

Logan stared, uncomfortable with this turn in conversation, but was saved by the bell, the dinner bell, that is, as Storm announced it was time for everyone to take a seat. He stayed with Jean, though, thinking she ought not be alone and steered her to a seat across from Storm, then glanced around. He hadn't seen Jack. "Where's Jack?"

"Downstairs," Storm replied pleasantly. "having Thanksgiving dinner with Bobby and Rogue."

In Rogue's isolation room underground, candlelight danced and flickered off the walls gaily, her card-table graced with Xavier's finest china heaped with Thanksgiving fixings. It was a merry, festive meal full of laughing and

talking, just her, Bobby and Jack, maybe even the happiest since she'd left home. When the main course was over, it was Jack who rose and cleared away their plates to the tea-cart he and Bobby had used to bring everything down on, then handed them each a dessert plate, slices of pumpkin pie dolloped with whipped cream.

"Whare's yers?" Rogue inquired.

"Upstairs," Jack replied, pointing upwards. "I promised Jean and Storm I'd have dessert with them. You two enjoy yourselves," then gave Bobby a discreet wink as he left.

Bobby purposefully cut into his pie, trying to distract his trepidation. It had been Jack who'd insisted he quit dawdling and tell Marie how he felt. His leaving was all part of the plan, but now that the moment was here, he was nervous.

"We aw-ways used to have peecan- pah at our house," Rogue remarked.

"That's because you're from the South."

"Well, we ken't all be purfect, ken we?" she smirked, her twinkling eyes daring him to say or do something. So, he scooped some whipped cream on a finger and looked at her.

"Ya wouldn't dare!"

He looked at the glob on his finger studiously. "Maybe you're right." He lowered it, as if reconsidering, then, quick as a snake, shot his arm out and tagged her on the nose with the cream. He grinned at her startled look, but his grin faded as she wiped it off and scooped the *entire* glob of whipped cream from her pie.

"Now hold on a minute, I only used a little bit!" he protested as he evasively scooted backwards.

The devil glittered in her green eyes as she just smiled a wicked smile and, with a snap of her wrist, flicked the whipped cream, strafing him diagonally from forehead to waist.

He blinked with surprise. "That was *not* nice," he playfully admonished as he reached for a napkin.

"Ya started it," she snickered.

"Then I guess I got what I deserved."

She smiled, her glance coy as she peered at him from beneath dark lashes, reminding him of his purpose and that Jack would return within the hour. He carefully laid the whipped-cream laden napkin aside and mustering his courage, said, "You know I like you and I've liked you for a long time, ever since you first came."

She nodded, her look pensive. "I know and I've aw-ways liked ya, too."

"And we've been friends, good friends, all this time."

She nodded again.

"But now, I...uh, was wondering if we...uh, might be more...I mean, more than just friends."

Her expression clouded and she looked down. "I don't have that sorta more ta give. Ya know that as well as me."

He felt his cheeks grow hot, but made himself say it plain. "You mean sex and kissing and stuff."

"Isn't that what boyfriends and girlfriends do?"

"No."

She stared perplexedly at him.

"I mean, yes, they do, uh...I mean, they can, but they don't *have* to. What I'm saying is there's more to being intimate than just the physical part. It's also about sharing and caring and talking and doing as much as you can to make the other person happy. I researched it. Lots of people enjoy fulfilling and devoted relationships without sex just that way."

Rogue chewed her lip. This was a new thought, daring even. She studied Bobby's stubby nose, freckled cheeks and curly brown hair, a handsome face with a wide smile that lit up a room. A boy, no a man, perfectly capable of being either sensitive and caring or the life of the party as the case might be. Jack's words came back to her then and she decided this was her moment to try doing what she could rather than mope about what she couldn't.

"Awright," she finally said. "I'd like ta try."

Bobby beamed and held out his hand. She placed her gloved hand in his.

Of course, she hadn't yet met the Cajun upstairs---yet.

Continued in *“Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Pt 5”*