

Faith, Hope and Love, Part 1 by B. Nickerson {Rated PG}

"[Pain] removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul." ~ C.S. Lewis ~

Synopsis: Sometimes it takes bringing a man to his knees to make him look up.

(All characters, names, locations, situations or businesses are either products of imagination or used fictitiously and resemblances to any person living or dead is coincidental. Copyrighted characters belong to Marvel/20thCenturyFox/BelisariusProductions/RepublicPictures, etc.)

Ro checked the school's official answering machine first thing every morning. On this particular morning, however, she was in for a surprise. A small red "1" glowed on the message counter, so she pressed the play button.

The sound of a clearing throat, then a slight cough were followed by an all-too-familiar husky voice, "*Hey, it's Boland. I know I really messed up with you guys, but if I could just have a second chance, I need your help! Please, Professor, call me back, anytime after ten. Ask for Trent Smith, room twelve.*"

Ro stared at the machine. She could hardly believe he'd even dare call much less ask them for their help--not after all that trouble he'd put them through by running away with Jubilee to New Orleans like he did. Then, even after the team found him, he'd refused to come back and she certainly had no interest in offering him any second chances--but the Professor was another matter. He'd be willing, she knew that--but with Logan and Andi out of town for a week and Jean busy nursing Scott, they were short on man-power. Only she and Jack would be available, so helping Trent seemed untenable to her. She was sorely tempted to ignore this message and pretend it never happened, but---didn't. That would be dishonest, so, with a heavy sigh, she very reluctantly replayed it again to get the details, jotted them on a Post-it, then took it to the Professor.

He smiled at her as soon as she arrived in the doorway of his kitchen. "Good morning, Ro. Tea?"

"No thanks," she said as she came forward and offered him the note. "But Trent Boland did leave us a message."

"Oh?" Xavier accepted it, read it, then laid it aside. "What do you think?"

She wondered whether he sensed her reluctance or was just being democratic. "I think we should do nothing," she answered firmly.

"Leave him to the Feds then? Let the Navy resume experimenting on him?"

"He's the one who chose not to come back."

"Apparently he's having second thoughts."

She shrugged. "Too bad. He's just too old to be here and too negative an influence. He romanced Jubilee into running away! He wrote nothing but smut notes! He was disruptive and dishonest!"

"All true."

"And we're too short-handed to go after him."

"I wouldn't want to anyway. I don't care to be fooled twice."

"So--we're just going to leave him on his own then?"

"Well, I'd rather have a few more facts before making a decision," Xavier replied. "But I won't make any promises until we can discuss what I learn from him since you are quite right about our situation. Leaving him on his own could very well be our only option, but...we'll see."

That same morning Logan also got a message. It was from Andi. She was coming back and would arrive on school grounds sometime after ten pm. "You handle shop class," he told Jack. "I've got stuff ta do," and left Jack to finish P.E. by himself.

Logan stopped by a grocery store to purchase a variety of cleaning supplies. Everything he thought he might need, since he didn't remember what they had and didn't want to be bothered with any second trips. After that, he went to a flower shop. A bell rang as he entered, drawing the attention of a stout, middle-aged woman in an apron. "May I help you?" she asked pleasantly.

He glanced around, suddenly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of plants and flowers surrounding him. He

walked toward her, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I..uh, I'd like some roses."

She moved behind the counter and pulled an order form to her. "How many?"

His dazed eyes fell on a tall clear vase full of red roses on display in the floral cooler. It was full of frilly white stuff and had a big, red bow. He pointed at it. "Something like that."

"A dozen red roses?"

"Yup."

She scribbled while he squinted at the vase thoughtfully. "Make it two," he rumbled.

"Two dozen roses?"

"Uh-huh."

"Two dozen in one vase?"

"No, two separate." He studied the display vase again. He didn't like the white stuff. "Do I havta have the white stuff?"

"I can use something else."

"No, nothing else. Just plain."

"Alright, just greenery. Would you like a card?" She indicated the rack on the counter beside her.

"Sure." He sauntered over, selected a blank one, scribbled a note, then sealed it in a small matching envelope and handed it to her. "I need them delivered this afternoon." Then he dictated the address and paid, wincing inwardly at the exorbitant cost, though he hoped it'd be worth it.

From there, he went home. He might not know a lot about women, but there was a few things he did know and one of them was you didn't let one come home to a trashed house, particularly if was *hers*. So, hauling in all his cleaning stuff, he set to work. He vacuumed, mopped, polished, scrubbed, took out trash and washed two weeks worth of dishes as well as a heap of laundry. He'd just opened the patio doors to air things out when the flowers arrived. He carefully set the first dozen on the end table in the living room, right where Andi would them as soon as she walked in. The second dozen, which had the card in it, he hauled upstairs and carefully centered on her dresser in front of the mirror, then stepped to survey the room. The bath was scoured, the furniture dust-free, the bed linens fresh and neatly turned down and the roses in place. He gave himself a thumbs-up in the mirror, then went back downstairs to finish laundry. Once that was done, all he'd need to do was pack a few things for their get-away, then get cleaned-up.

Meanwhile on Wier's jet, which was winging it's way back to New York, Sam Hamblin quietly excused herself to her flying partner, then left the cockpit and padded down the night-lit aisle. She paused at the main cabin doorway just long enough to assure herself that both her boss and Ms. Andi were sleeping and, seeing they were, she continued toward the rear cabin where she knew Scott Summers was. The cabin "door" was a heavy drapery and she peeled the edge back enough to peer inside. The 'Exit' sign on the inside above her head sign inside the doorway just above her head cast a faint red glow, enough for her to see by. Scott was on the bottom right bunk. He had a blanket up to about the middle of his chest and a white t-shirt showing above that. The dark glasses he still wore hid his eyes so she couldn't see whether he was asleep, but his stillness and quiet breathing assured her he no doubt was and slipped inside.

Kneeling beside his bed, she studied his face, her eyes drinking in his handsome countenance. With her hand held just above it, she made a pantomime of caressing that face, her fingers air-gliding just above his skin, tracing the dip and curve of his high cheekbones, his square jaw, then his full lips, smiling wistfully.

Sam enjoyed this indulgence for several minutes before finally getting to her feet to leave. She was almost to the door when Scott suddenly coughed and stirred. She froze, watching him partially raise himself on one elbow, adjusting his pillow. Would he see her? She held her breath as briefly, his glasses seemed to look right at her, but then he just lay down and returned to sleep. She slipped back out the drapery door, her heart beating with nervous excitement. She wanted more than a pantomime caress from Scott Summers--much more, but now wasn't the right time. An appropriate time would come, however, of that she was certain. She would just have to wait for it.

Logan drove back to school in the evening for chow and a way to pass the time until Andi's return. Jack, Storm and Jean were already seated at the staff table eating when he arrived.

"Get the house nice and tidy?" Jack gibed as he joined them.

"I didn't know you knew how," Ro said, adding to his tease.

Logan sat next to Jean across from the smirking pair. Since it was dinner hour and the dining room was filled with students, he knew it wasn't the right place to say what he wanted. So, he settled for pointing at them with his fork. "You just wait," he warned ambiguously. "Yours is coming," then buckled down to eating.

"You look nice," Jean remarked.

He was wearing his standard dress-up gear: a black leather vest over a white shirt with a bolo string tie. "Thanks," he replied.

She smiled faintly in return, stress evident around her eyes and he still wasn't used to her short hair--not that she didn't look okay, it just always made him do a double-take.

After supper, everyone headed for the Rec-room, including Professor Xavier. Nervous anticipation hung over the room and he could smell the adrenalin. He chose the pool-table for passing the time, though he kept looking at his watch, willing the time to pass quickly. Then Gambit showed-up, which was unusual, since the Cajun usually was early-to-bed due to his early-to-rise kitchen hours, but Logan knew well-enough that Gambit was just there to indulge his curiosity.

He was dismayed to see Gambit go to the cue-stick rack nearby, select one and eye it's line as he asked, "May Gambit join you?"

Logan just bent over his shot with a wrinkled nose. He knew Gambit's type; smooth-talking players who could charm old ladies right out of their life savings without a shred of remorse.

It was Jack who replied. "Sure. Next rack."

"Don't you need your beauty sleep, bub?" Logan grumbled as he lined-up on his next shot.

The Cajun smiled affably. "All work and no play make Gambit a dull boy."

"I doubt that," Logan muttered as he sank the ball.

Unfortunately, the minutes just seemed to drag by as ten o'clock came and went. Xavier finally sent all but the oldest kids upstairs to bed. Then ten-thirty came and went. Logan found it hard to keep his attention on the game and longed for a cigar he couldn't have.

It was nearly eleven before Xavier finally sensed Weir's arrival. "They're here!" he announced.

Jean and Logan both bolted out the door, Jean first though Logan quickly caught up so they both dashed madly into the garage and down the wheel-chair ramp just in time to see Weir's blue Jag purr all the way into the auto-shop area before stopping.

Rogue, Bobby, Pete, Big John as well as Jack and Ro were clustered along the ramp behind them, while the Professor remained in the hallway.

Andi emerged first from the passenger side and Jean dashed forward to converge with her on the rear passenger door that held Scott. Andi opened it and Jean helped him out.

Logan heard Rogue's soft in-take of breath behind him as a stunned silence fell over everyone as viewed Scott. He looked haggard and beaten up. His right arm was in a sling and he walked with the hobbling slowness of an old man beside Jean as she led him forward with her arm looped around his waist.

Logan stepped aside to let them pass, staring after them as they moved up the ramp, watching the students and Ro stand aside for them, then file meekly after them into the house.

He heard a thump at his feet and looked down. It was Andi's travel case. Glancing up, he was in time to see Weir just closing his open trunk and Jack heading for the ramp with Scott's duffel in hand. Then his eyes fell on his wife, walking toward him, smiling. Suddenly, nothing mattered but her and, stepping forward, he seized her into his arms, burying his face in her hair, inhaling that longed-for sweetness that so mysteriously permeated her being and gave him peace. He hardly noticed Weir's Jag speed quietly out of the garage.

Jean, on her way upstairs with Scott in the elevator, was embroiled in a mind-to-mind discussion with the Professor. “Are you sure we shouldn't just examine him ourselves?” she persisted, despite her earlier agreement that they would let their friend, Dr. Jacob Chandler handle Scott's care.

“Jacob has already committed his lunch-hour to see us tomorrow.”

“I'd feel better if I did it myself.”

“I know. And you know precisely why we shouldn't.”

She did. Charles felt they were both too close to Scott to provide objective care and though she'd initially conceded, now she balked.

“Jean, he needs a loving wife far more than he needs a poking-and-prying doctor.”

That did it. Jean gave in. She found Ro standing in the open doorway of their room, waiting for them. “Jack left Scott's duffel by end of the bed,” she said. “Is there anything else I can do?”

Jean shook her head. “We'll be okay from here, thanks.”

Ro nodded and left. Jean telepathically peeled back the bed covers. “Want your pajamas?” she asked Scott as she directed him toward to the bed.

He shook his head. He carefully set the blue bottle he'd had in his pocket on the night-stand, then sagged into bed as he was. She helped him switch his glasses for his soft-framed sleeping goggles, then tucked him in snugly. He pointed at the bottle. “More,” he rasped.

She peered at the foreign label while he swigged a cap-full down. “What is it?”

He handed her back the cap. “Turkish NyQuil.”

She scowled at it, then sniffed the bottle suspiciously as he settled for sleep. It smelled a hundred-proof and, since she knew foreign pharmacies dispensed narcotics freely over-the-counter, she was certain it contained at least codeine, if not worse. Setting it aside for later consideration, she got out her spare stethoscope and carefully listened to Scott's chest. There was the faint rattle of congestion, but the movement of air in and out seemed unimpeded. Then she gently examined his right hand, noting the swelling in his two lowest fingers and bruising along the edge of his palm to his wrist that could mean a fracture. She rose and to fetch an ace wrap and a Velcro wrist support from the med-lab, so it would be, at least, temporarily stabilized.

When Logan got Andi home, he was careful to send her into the house first, so she'd be sure and see the roses. She did.

“Oh, Logan!” she gasped.

It was music to his ears. “Wait till you see what's upstairs,” he hinted.

She regarded him archly, as if his double-entendre were too obvious, but he just smiled slyly and, with a gracious bow, ushered her toward the staircase. She patted his cheek with a coy smile as went by and he followed her up the stairs, dashing ahead to open the bedroom door for her. She walked in, then froze as she saw the second dozen. “Oh, Logan!” she repeated.

“Read the card,” he urged.

She went to the flowers and delicately removed the envelope from it's holder. He stood behind her, his arms around her waist and chin resting on her shoulder, reading the card as she did. “Just to show you how very glad I am you're back,” it said. It wasn't Shakespeare, but it had seemed right at the time.

She turned around in his arms to face him and putting a hand behind his head, drew his lips to hers.

'Yep,' he thought, 'definitely worth it'.

At the school, in his office, Xavier was busy dialing Trent Boland's number. With Scott back, he could now contend with the details of Trent's case. He listened as it rang and rang and rang, and was about to give up, when someone picked up. “Yeah, keep ya shirt on,” a gruff, inebriated voice slurred, “Who ya want?”

“Trent Smith, room twelve.”

“Dun't go nowhares.”

Xavier heard the receiver dropped, then footsteps plodding away, followed by a distant pounding and someone yelling, “Hey, Smith, phone!” A few seconds later, he heard quick footsteps and the receiver picked up again.

“Who is it?” a sleepy and disgruntled voice demanded.

“Someone you called for help.”

“Professor? You sure took your time getting back to me! I'm in trouble here!”

Xavier chose not to explain. “Where exactly are you?”

“Tampa. What's the plan?”

“I don't know. What did you have in mind?”

“Getting me out of here, of course! They're getting too close.”

By “they” Xavier knew he meant the Navy, since no else knew Trent was legally alive. “How close?”

“I was in New Orleans about month before my girl tipped me someone was snooping around her place, so I cut for Mobile. Then I was there a month and same thing, so I went to Jacksonville. A couple weeks later, I thought maybe I was being tailed, so I ditched the beater truck I was driving and took a bus here.”

Xavier heaved a quiet sigh. “Trent, have you been leaving a paper trail?”

“Like using my social?”

“Yes, like that.”

“Yeah, well, since I'm supposed to be dead, I didn't think anyone would notice.”

“They noticed.”

“But I only did that in New Orleans.”

“What about Mobile?”

“I bought the truck off a guy, but I, uh, needed to have insurance to register. That's why I figured I had to ditch it.”

Xavier could hardly believe Trent's naivete. “And now that you're in Tampa?”

“I'm avoiding as much paper as I can and practically living and working like an illegal, man. It's the pits.”

Xavier suspected it wasn't just the Navy Trent wanted rescuing from. “So, what do I get?”

“What?”

Xavier rephrased the question more exactly. “What am I going to receive in return for helping you?”

There was a potent silence. “You want me to *pay* you?” Trent asked incredulously.

“I wasn't thinking of currency.”

“Uh, well, what then?”

“That's something I'll have to get back to you on.”

“What am I supposed to do in the meantime!” Trent demanded.

“Lay low,” Xavier replied. “I'll call you in a couple days,” then hung up on Trent's sputtering.

Upstairs, Jean spent her night dozing lightly beside Scott, vigilant to his least sound or movement. Haunted dreams seemed to make him twitch and whimper. Sometimes he woke enough to cough and shift position and once she even coaxed him into swallowing some Tylenol. From time to time she checked his temperature and kept him covered.

Eventually gray morning light peeked beneath the curtains, turning sunny by the time Scott stirred awake.

“Good morning,” she said as she felt his forehead for the umpteenth time.

“Have to go,” he muttered, so she helped him out of bed to the bathroom. Unfortunately, standing and moving also woke his coughing spasms, which would've been bad enough under any circumstances, but with a fractured rib made every inhale excruciating. She'd wanted to give him something for pain, but nothing that would knock him out, since she'd be needing him awake for the trip to the doctor today. The short walk to and from the bathroom sapped him of strength, so he just flopped back into bed, exhausted. He pointed at the bottle of blue liquid on the night stand.

Jean shook her head. "Sorry, sweetie, but I need you awake. We've got a doctor's appointment in a couple hours."

"Doctor?" he croaked.

She sat beside him. "You remember Jacob Chandler?"

He nodded as he coughed. She opened a bottle of regular cough syrup, filled the medicine cup and offered it to him. After a last reluctant glance at the blue bottle, he drank it and handed the cup back. She took it *and* the Turkish Nyquil into the bathroom, just so it wouldn't be in easy reach. "I'll get you something better for pain and some breakfast," she said cheerfully as she came out, "then we'll get you up and ready."

By noon, she, Scott and the Professor were in Manhattan, at St. Vincent's Medical Center standing in front of Dr. Jacob Chandler's door. As prearranged, Jean knocked twice, since his office was technically closed for lunch. It cracked open and a handsome face with kind hazel eyes peered out, then it opened wide and a grinning Jacob Chandler ushered them inside. He gave her cheek a peck. "It's been a long time." he said.

She smiled. Jacob was tall--at least two inches taller than Logan, and broader-shouldered. He had thick, flaxen hair that he wore cropped short, though tufts of it showed at his open shirt-collar and he already had a five-o'clock shadow. It so happened that Jacob was also a son of a mutant. She'd only seen his father once, very briefly about ten years earlier when she'd accompanied Charles on one of his rare sojourns into the netherworld maze of tunnels running beneath Manhattan. They'd been delivering a donation of medical supplies to the underground community that lived there and were met and escorted from a hidden entry in Central Park to a central room, which happened to be full of books. It was here she glimpsed Jacob's enigmatic father. He came to the doorway just long enough to acknowledge the Professor; a huge man with the face of a lion and a mane of curly flaxen hair. It was his eyes, however, that had struck her most; gentle hazel eyes full of wisdom and pathos. Vincent paused only long enough to offer them a nod of thanks, then vanished from sight.

"How's your father, Jacob?" Xavier asked as they traded a hearty handshake.

"Complaining he's old," Chandler chuckled, then clasped Scott's hand.

Jean watched him eye Scott in that way common to doctors when they visually inspect a patient.

Jacob's father was, in fact, named Vincent after this very hospital, where the man who raised him, Dr. Jacob Wells, had found him discarded in an alley outside. Apparently, Dr. Wells and the Professor had once been well-acquainted before Jacob Wells dropped out of touch, then later inexplicably disappeared. Later, after the Professor built Cerebro, he not only located Vincent, but also his old friend, Dr. Wells, who by then had established an entire underground community. Though, how Vincent came to have a son, she had no idea.

Since his staff was at lunch, Jacob Chandler did all the exam preliminaries himself. He weighed Scott, took his temp and blood pressure, then sent them both into an exam room, so Scott could undress, while he went with Xavier to his office.

Xavier saw a Coke and a burger with a couple bites out of it on his desk. "I appreciate you doing this," he said.

Chandler waved it off as he sat down and resumed eating his burger. "Not a problem. Glad to help."

"Still not married, I see," Xavier observed.

"With the hours I keep..." Jacob just shrugged. "And if I'm not here, I'm helping Dad." He lowered his voice.

"May I ask how Scott got himself jailed in Turkey or is that off limits?"

"It's complicated. Suffice to say, we were trying to find something out that someone else didn't want us to."

"I can see he was roughed up. Raped?"

Xavier shook his head.

"Good. One thing less to check." Chandler polished off the burger, wadded up the wrapper and took a last swig of Coke. He glanced at the time. "They should be ready by now. I'll fix him up, Professor, you can count on that." Then he banked the wrapper-wad off a wall into a wastebasket and headed for the exam room.

Jean was seated in a chair near the exam table, which Scott was now perched on, indecorously attired in an aqua exam gown. She was flipping through a magazine and looked up as Jacob breezed in.

"Let's get down to it, shall we," he said cheerfully as he washed his hands, then examined Scott.

Jean just looked on. Jacob had often stopped by the school with in medical school. She'd even checked him for the X-gene, which he happened to carry, though, obviously, it had remained abeyant. She did warn him, however, that the absence of mutant traits in himself didn't mean they wouldn't exhibit in his children, if he had any, especially if he married a woman with the X-gene, whether abeyant or not.

Having finished the exam, Chandler fished several vacuum tubes from a tray and loaded them with needles, clearly intending to do a blood-draw himself.

"Do you want me to do that?" she offered.

Chandler tightened a rubber band on Scott's arm. "No, no. I can use the practice." He winked at Scott.

"Not funny," Scott grumbled.

Chandler quickly filled the tubes, then gave Scott a subcutaneous injection on his forearm. "TB test," he explained as he applied a bandage. Then, he handed Scott a urine cup. "I need a pee sample. There's a little door above the toilet. Set it in there."

Scott accepted it without enthusiasm, then sullenly limped out of the exam room.

Chandler perched himself on a stool facing her, a prescription pad balanced on his knee under his hand. "Have you scanned his ribs and wrist?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I'd rather leave that to you then have to send him downstairs to the x-ray wolves. It's a mad-house."

"I'll do it as soon as we get back."

He handed her a stool cup. "I'll also need a stool sample." He scribbled on his pad and handed her a script.

"You can turn that in at your local lab. They'll fax me the results."

Scott returned and re-seated himself on the exam table.

"Ribs take six weeks to heal, minimum, so no athletics," Jacob told him. "And when you sleep, try and sleep on your opposite side as much as possible, so your lung can fully inflate. It'll prevent pneumonia. It also helps to take a deep, full breath about once an hour." He started scribbling on his pad again. "I'm giving you a vid-pill, so we can check your innards. I'm also giving you what's normally a three-day antibiotic for five days. Take one every day until they're gone. Also an expectorant to take twice a day and an inhaler to use as needed for those bronchial tubes. Plus a little something to get rid of any pesky parasites you might've picked up."

He tore off several more sheets and handed them to Jean. Then he went to a cabinet and drew out a small box and a tiny packet, which he also handed her. "Here's the vid-pill and the receiver. He needs to keep the receiver on or near him until the pill is passed. Then, just Fed-Ex the receiver back. That's it. He should feel better in a day or two. If not, call me. Otherwise, I'll see him again in about two or three weeks. Questions?"

Jean shook her head.

He stood, kindly shook both their hands, said, "I'll see you in two weeks," then left.

Jean stared at the scripts, humbly aware how right the Professor had been about seeing Jacob. However effectively she performed as a general physician, her specialty was still research, while Jacob was an Internist and this was his area of expertise.

Scott slid off the table and began to dress. "You could've done this yourself!" he criticized.

"We thought this would be better."

"We? You mean the *Professor*, don't you?"

She looked at him, neither understanding his tone nor the bitter anger she sensed. "No, I mean we, *as* in Charles and I, together," she replied.

He looked at her impatiently. "Don't we *do* anything ourselves anymore?"

She blinked at him. "What you mean?"

He waved at the exam room. "I mean this! This is your job, not Chandler's. Yet here we are, letting him do your *job*! When I was in prison, who came after me? Our own team? No, Weir did everything!"

"I'm sure it was just a matter of what was more covert."

"You always take the Professor's side, Jean. Always defend him."

She stiffened, but held her tongue, since she didn't want to have a row right in Jacob's office.

"And what about *you*?" he continued accusingly. "It should've been *you* leading the charge to get me out! It should of been *you* I saw first!" A wave of coughing happily interrupted his tirade.

Guilt pricked her conscience. "I wanted to stay, but they said it was too risky." She didn't understand why he was attacking *her*. "And as it so happens, I was also in prison."

"Huh!" he snorted. "Were you beaten? Were you thrown into some weird basement solitary?"

Her eyes widened at these new details. "What? What happened? How long were you there?"

"It doesn't matter. That's not the point."

Jean glared at him, angry to be brushed off. "The point is, Scott, I *was* in prison just like you when all the rescue decisions were made. If you have a problem with that, then you need to take it up with the Professor. As for Jacob, he's doing right by you." She shook the prescriptions in his face. "I can't do a vid-pill! I don't stock tuberculin and these antibiotics are way better than anything I have on hand!" With that, she marched to the door, paused just long enough to smooth her hair and put on a smile, then stepped into the corridor.

When she reached the waiting room, she was relieved to find the Professor too engrossed in a live news report to pay any particular attention to her and notice her emotional state. In fact, as she drew closer and realized what he was watching, she too became engrossed. A French journalist and his camera man were accompanying a Tau Omega team on a mutant search somewhere in Paris. Sedating-gas grenades were being fired into a slummy, abandoned looking building, then the Tau team and the reporter and camera man, after donning gas-masks, proceeded into the building. The Tau team leader rapidly pointed out various unconscious indigents to test, then another Tau member would pull open a collar and press a small, hand-held device against bared skin. The camera moved in to show the bloody, tell-tale circle it left behind, a circle startlingly identical to scabbed-over ones she'd seen on every child she'd examined in the Turkish internment camp.

Scott joined them then, just in time to see that last portion before it ended. She could feel his anger flare at the very sight of Tau, reminding her of how irascible he'd just been with her in the exam room. "We're ready," she quietly informed Xavier.

Xavier wheeled around, his brow furrowed with preoccupation, clearly disturbed by what he'd just seen and rolled out of the waiting room ahead of them.

As they followed, Jean slipped her hand into Scott's, but he didn't respond. He didn't grip her hand in return. She'd pulled her hand back by the time they'd joined Xavier at the elevators, feeling both rejected and blamed without any idea why.

It proved a quiet drive home and once there, Xavier whirred off on his own business, while she took Scott underground and scanned him as Jacob had suggested. He initially refused, though she persistently blocked his path until he gave in, which didn't take long, since he was too weak to put up a fight and he endured the brief procedure with tacit bitterness. Fortunately, only one rib and two fingers had hairline fractures. She did a better job setting his hand, then got him re-settled in bed upstairs and reluctantly gave him more of the Turkish Nyquil, which he stridently insisted upon, then dutifully left to get his prescriptions filled in town.

Professor Xavier entered his classroom office unhappy with what he'd just witnessed about Tau. He'd been hoped for more time. Because of the incident in Turkey, the UN had ordered Tau's operations suspended while the matter was investigated, but, according to the French reporter, interim operations was being granted Tau as long as they had media representative with them. It wasn't good news and what Tau was really up to remained a mystery.

As troubling as Tau's activities might be, however, Trent Boland and what to do with him was a more immediate problem. As much as he wanted to help the lad, Xavier agreed with Storm's evaluation. They couldn't keep him, neither could they spare anyone to go after him. He sorted student papers mechanically as he considered who he might ask to take the boy in. First to mind was Gunter and his Academy in Germany, but he quickly dismissed that, since Trent would likely cause identical problems there. In the end, he could only think of one friend

who *might* be willing take him. He glanced at the time. It was still early in the UK, though probably too late to catch Eli before he left for campus. He could call his wife, Anna, though, and leave word to call him.

It was midnight before Eli called back. "Charley!" his old friend's voice boomed loudly in his ear. "Sorry, old boy, not to ring you back sooner, but I had a staff meeting. An extra long one today. You know how it goes."

Xavier smiled. No one but Eli Kaufmann called him 'Charley' and had ever since they'd shared a flat at Oxford, back when the most important thing in life seemed to be flirting with girls.

"So," Eli continued, "Anna tells me you have something important to ask?"

There was no beating about the bush with Eli. "I have a young man who is trouble," he replied. Eli already knew what he what his school was about, so no further explanation was necessary. "He's too old for me to keep here and he has an urgent need for a new situation, preferably out of country."

"I see," Eli replied.

"He'll require a firm hand, I'm afraid."

"Hmm, I'll have to talk to Anna."

"I appreciate your willingness to consider it."

"Urgent, you say?"

"Yes, very."

"We'll talk it over tonight and I'll ring you early tomorrow."

"Thank you, Eli."

"G'night, Charley."

Early the next morning, as promised, Eli called and confirmed he and Anna would take Trent in, which only left transportation issues. So, Xavier researched bus tickets, then contacted Ben Weir about the use of his jet and, once he had a rough plan ready, invited Ro and Jack to his office after school. As soon as they walked in, though, he could see that winning their support for anything regarding Trent Boland would be difficult. Their body-english spoke volumes as they plopped on the red sofa in front of him.

He smiled as he laced his fingers together and looked between them. "You know if any action is to be taken on Trent Boland's behalf, it will fall to you two." He observed flames of resistance in both their eyes. "However, nothing will be done except what we can agree on." That seemed to ease things a bit. He looked at Ro. "And you were right, Ro, when you said we can't keep him here. He doesn't fit and his influence is detrimental. Nor can we send anyone after him." He was rewarded with her satisfied nod.

"It's not like we owe him anything," Jack said. "The little snipe told Mom and Logan he *wanted* to be on his own."

"What if I had a place to send him?" Xavier offered. "Say, England? My friend Eli Kaufmann and his wife, Anna, are agreeable to taking him in."

"England?" Jack mused. "That *could* work. It'd sure make it harder for the Navy to get him."

Ro frowned. "I don't know. Dumping him on someone else doesn't seem right. Do your friends even know what they're getting into?"

"Eli and Anna raised two sons and one was quite a pistol. Believe me, they can handle him," Xavier assured her, though her expression remained dubious.

"There's still the little problem of getting Boland *here*," Jack observed.

"And from here to England," Ro added.

"I was thinking of Greyhound e-tickets," Xavier replied, "and leaving the getting here to Trent."

"As long as he understand we can't and won't rescue him if he gets caught anywhere along the way," Ro stoutly cautioned.

Jack nodded in agreement. "If that happens, it's game-over."

"Very well," Xavier replied. "I'll accept that condition. And as for getting him to England, Mr. Weir has again offered us the use of his jet."

"So, all we'll have to do is pick up him at the bus?" Jack reiterated.

He nodded. "If you two would be willing."

Jack looked at Ro. "Sounds okay to me, but... it's your call."

She faced Xavier. "Exactly how long will Boland have to be here?"

It was the million-dollar question. "If Trent agrees to everything," he emphasized, "as I expect he will, you'll pick him up ten o'clock Sunday morning and Mr. Weir's jet will be available Monday evening, so...not quite a whole two days and I'll keep him here. in my apartment with me, so he'll won't bother any students."

She and Jack exchanged glances. He nodded and she said, "We agree."

Xavier cleared his throat. "There is, however, one other small detail. Mr. Weir, along with the provision of his jet, is willing to guarantee Mr. Boland's delivery to the Kaufmann's, as long as we provide an escort just to generally keep an eye on the boy."

"That'll be my job," Jack replied quickly. "Boland still sees me as an officer and that gives me an edge."

Xavier smiled. "So, are we settled then?" Jack and Ro inclined their heads that it was. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't discuss this with anyone. I'd rather make a public announcement closer to his arrival, so I can immediately defuse any bad feeling." They nodded understandingly. "We're done, then. I appreciate your help." He watched Jack and Ro leave, then worked until it was late enough to try and reach Trent again. It took several tries before someone was willing to answer the rooming-house phone and fetch him.

"Yeah, who is it?" Trent Boland demanded suspiciously as soon as he got on the phone.

"I believe you requested help," Xavier replied.

"Yeah, and what's it gonna cost me?"

"Nothing if you don't want it."

There was a pause. "I want it."

"Are you willing to go anywhere I send you?"

"Where the heck are you sending me?"

"Someplace where the Navy will be less inclined to find you. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yeah, okay. Wherever."

"You agree then."

"Yeah. Is that it?"

"You must also agree to live where I've arranged without making trouble and without running away."

"How many things do I gotta agree to?"

"Do you agree?" Xavier repeated.

"Yeah, okay, I'll stay put."

"You will also attend college."

"Man, I can't afford that!"

"Never mind, it'll be arranged. Do you agree?"

"Yeah, okay, that, too."

"This is your last chance and my last resource. There won't be anything else I can do for you if you blow it, so you'd better plan on making the most of this opportunity. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Very well, I've arranged a series of Greyhound e-tickets to get you here. Your first bus is tomorrow morning at eight-fifteen. An ID will be required. I hope you have one."

"Yeah," Trent grumbled. "I have what I was using in Mobile, but it might still be hot."

"I suppose you'll have to take that chance," Xavier replied. "In any case, you should understand we can't come after you under any circumstance. If you get caught or miss a bus, you're on your own. So, remember, first bus, eight-fifteen tomorrow. Don't miss it. See you Sunday," then hung up.

The next morning, as Jean was waiting for the elevator with a basket of laundry, the third floor door behind her opened and Ro popped out, obviously dressed for an outing. Her hair was up and topped with a black beret-cap.

Gold hoops hung from her ears. Frosty pink lipstick enhanced her honey-colored skin. She wore a tweed cowl-necked sweater over black boot-cut jeans and carried her leather overcoat on her arm.

"You look nice," Jean smiled. She'd been so preoccupied with Scott's care, they'd hardly talked. "Going someplace special?"

Ro joined her in waiting for the elevator. "Thanks. no. Just running some errands. How's Scott?"

"Better since the antibiotics kicked in," Jean hedged, though the truth was his attitude wasn't improving even if his health was and he still seemed as closed and resentful as the day they'd come home from the doctor.

The elevator dinged its arrival and Storm opened the ornate iron gate.

"He even ate breakfast at the table this morning," Jean added as they stepped inside, trying to sound up-beat. "He's taking a shower while I run this downstairs." She patted the laundry, able to feel the bottle of Turkish NyQuil she'd hidden beneath its folds. Much to her concern, Scott had been using it to keep himself knocked-out and it was because she feared its addictive potential that she was smuggling it downstairs to get rid of it. That suddenly reminded her of the stool sample and vid-pill receiver waiting in her lab for a trip into town.

The elevator stopped and Ro opened the gate.

"Could you add in a couple of my errands to yours?" she asked as they stepped into the hallway. Ro was hesitant. "Please, she added. "It'd *really* help me out."

Reluctantly, Ro gave in. "Oh, I suppose. What is it?"

"Just two tiny things dropped off. One to the hospital lab and one to the post-office."

Ro consulted her watch, then sighed. "Alright-- if you hurry. I'll meet you at the garage."

Jean nodded, then quickened her pace. She handed-off the laundry basket to a passing student to deliver to the laundry room, careful to remove Turkish NyQuil as she did so, then went straight to her lab. There, she un-capped the bottle and left it upside down in the sink while she packed the stool cup inside a mini-cooler with dry ice, then grabbed the lab prescription and the ready-to-mail receiver, then dashed back upstairs.

Ro was waiting in the hallway by the garage entry, impatiently checking her watch, irked she'd even consented to Jean's errands. Then, when Jean arrived, she quickly accepted everything, endured the explanation of what went where and hurried into the garage, where Jack and Bobby were both leaning on Jack's truck's front end, chatting amicably.

"Alright, let's go," she commanded briskly.

Jack pointed at the cooler. "What's that? Lunch?"

Ro rolled her eyes. "Hardly. It's Jean's. We'll need to go by the post-office and hospital lab once we're done casing the bus station."

The "bus station" was no more than a store at the end of an old strip mall. Jack parked toward the rear of the large corner parking lot, then passed out the breakfast biscuits they'd picked up along the way. He handed Bobby his soda and her a coffee. She added creamer and surveyed their surroundings while she ate. The parking lot had two entrances, one on each street and seemed well-suited for both bus and patron parking. The strip mall was a straight, brick-faced structure containing a total of five storefront units. Two were 'space available'. The one on their end was the bus station and the remaining middle two housed a consignment shop and an accounting service. Directly behind was an alley, which had a banged-up dumpster blocking the entry. A chain-link fence fitted with green privacy slats flanked the alley and the parking lot, separating the eye-sore strip mall from a residential subdivision behind it. Long, yellow lines on the pavement marked where the bus pulled in next to the building and a large sign on the wall read, "Bus Parking Only."

She looked over her shoulder at Bobby. "When we get out," she directed, "I'll case the inside and you take the alley and stay out of sight until the bus leaves, okay?"

With his mouth full of biscuit, Bobby just nodded and gave her a thumbs-up that he understood.

When ten o'clock drew near, she and Bobby got out and parted ways, each intent on their separate missions. She entered the station through the side door on the bus-parking side, noting there was a front entry facing the

main street as well. She quickly scanned the room. Battered mini blinds covered the old store front windows. Three rows of orange plastic seats with five seats to a row occupied the center of the room and held smattering of patrons awaiting the next bus: a girl who looked too young to be a mother with a toddler in her lap with a runny nose, a gray-bearded black man in a worn fedora reading a paper, a college-age boy with stringy long hair and a backpack and primly-attired elderly couple sitting together holding hands. All of them glanced her way as she entered and she immediately realized her attire was wrong for the environment and made her stand out like a sore thumb. Seeing a soda machine across the room, she strode directly to it, as if that were her purpose for being there and bought a soda, then casually sipped it as she continued her canvas of the premises. Beside the soda machine was a coffee machine and a snack machine, then an ATM and a self-service e-ticket dispenser. A service counter ran along the back of the room and mounted on the wall above it, screen displaying bus arrival and departure times.

Strolling to the counter, she glanced over it's stock of travel pamphlets and observed a small sign next to a bell that said, "Ring if you need assistance." Hearing the faint sounds of a television, she spied a partially closed door to the far right from whence the sounds came. Her ears caught the rumble of a diesel engine followed by the hiss of air-brakes and from behind her the sudden rustle of patrons gathering their things and flowing out the side door to the bus. She trailed after them remaining to the rear while observing the flurry of activity as passengers de-boarded, baggage was unloaded, new baggage added and new passengers boarded. Then waiting loved ones collected whomever they'd come for and cars left, then the bus quickly pulled out, allowing her to see Bobby leaning against the building in casual bored-teenager fashion. She cocked her head toward Jack's truck, then walked toward it, he falling in beside her.

"The other end is blocked off, too," he informed her. "Doesn't look like anyone's been down that alley in a coon's age."

"Back doors?"

"One on every store, all locked." He politely opened the front-cab door for her.

"So?" Jack asked as he put the truck in gear.

"Cake," Bobby replied as he got in.

"I need to dress a little more low-key," Ro replied. "Otherwise, it seems a very low concealment environment with high visibility and lots of room." She shifted around to look at Bobby. "I've decided you should be the one to meet Trent while I take rear-guard."

Bobby made a face. "Do I have to?"

"You'll look like a school-mate picking up a friend...unless you rather I asked someone else?"

"No, I'll do it," Bobby answered quickly.

"Good," she replied as she face forward again, though she caught a wink from Jack, which meant he had fun up his sleeve.

"Why don't you give Trent a big 'ol hug when you meet him tomorrow!" he teased, grinning into the rear-view mirror at Bobby. "You can even tell him Aunt Ro and Uncle Jack are along to see him home!"

Bobby grimaced. "Ha, ha. Funny, Coach."

"You know--that actually isn't such a bad idea..." Ro mused.

"Which part?" Bobby asked cautiously.

She shifted around to look at him. "All of it. Treat him like an old friend. Tell him you *did* bring Aunt Ro and Uncle Jack along. It will look and sound perfectly natural, which is exactly what we want."

"Do I have to hug him?"

Ro gave him wry smile, then winked at Jack as she turned back around. "Yes, I think you should be *very* friendly."

Bobby slumped in his seat. "Aw, man," he groaned.

Jean, as soon as she left Ro, had gone to the laundry room, which was at the far end of the north wing, just off

the kitchen. She could remember when they'd only needed one washer and dryer, but now had five stackables plus the original pair of machines. Her basket was on the floor in front of one of the stackables. Everyone here was responsible for their own laundry, including bedding and towels, and, thanks to Scott's neatly typed schedule posted on the door, everyone had an assigned day. Thinking of it made her sigh. Today was her and Scott's day and laundry was something they *used* to do together. She sighed again as she stuffed the darks into the washer. Those days of togetherness seemed so long ago and far away right now. She longed for the kissing and laughing and hugging and--love. It was what she deserved. It's what she'd been waiting all these days for him to come back for. She didn't deserve his lumping her into whatever rescue failures he was blaming Charles for. It was *so unfair!*

She was not in good humor when she returned upstairs and was even less so when she saw Scott. He'd gotten up and had dressed, but *not* in any of the clothes *she'd* so carefully laid out and was presently surfing channels. More than that, he'd shaped his new beard growth into a goatee with clear intention of growing it out when he knew perfectly well she preferred him clean-shaven.

Insulted, she announced crisply, "Well, since you're up, I'm changing the bed," then, using her telekinesis, began stripping it.

"You took it, didn't you?" he suddenly said.

She bristled. His first whole sentence to her in three days and what was it about? *That bottle.* She didn't reply. "The antibiotics worked and you're better," she retorted flatly. "I didn't see that it served any further purpose."

"Whether I needed it or not isn't the point. I would've like to have been asked. I would've *liked* to have had a say," he replied irritably.

"Why, so we could argue like we are now?"

"If it concerns me, I should have a say," he insisted. "It's about time I had some choices around here."

"No one's stopping you from making choices, Scott," she chided sharply as she floated a fresh sheet over the mattress, settling it into place. "I see you've already made some," she said with a gesture at her chin to indicate the new goatee.

His stroked the new growth. "I figure what's good enough for Logan, is good enough for me."

It was a cruel barb that cut her to the quick. Why did he always have to bring up that meaningless flirtation with Logan? How many times did she have to apologize? Flushing with anger, she had to clench her fists to keep herself from hurling something at him. "If it's choices you want," she snapped, "then from now on you can just march downstairs for your own meals and pick out what you want to eat yourself! I won't be bring you meals up here anymore!" With that, she scooped up the dirty sheets and huffed out the door with his, "Fine! I can take care of myself!" echoing after her.

Taking the sheets to the laundry room, she irritably shoved them into a washer, along with the rest of the whites, then, slamming the lid shut, leaned against it and stewed, arms folded on her chest. One thing she wasn't going to do and that was go back upstairs. Not after that little conniption. Nor did she want to run into him in the cafeteria, so she decided it best just to go down to her lab. She grabbed a couple apples from the cafeteria on her way to tide her through lunch, then spent the next three hours inventorying supplies, updating records and organizing stuff until she couldn't stand anymore. By then, melancholy had replaced her earlier anger as well as guilt for having lost her temper, so she slowly walked upstairs to look in on him. At the door, she hesitated, afraid she might be walking back into the same argument, then, after a deep breath, cracked it open and peered in. Thankfully, Scott was a quilt-covered lump in bed. Opening the door a bit further, she spied a knife and jar of peanut-butter on the small round table, but couldn't make herself go in. Instead, she eased the door shut and leaned dismally against it. That man in there--she didn't who he was. Sure, Scott could be a little moody and obstinate at times, but she'd never seen him like this. She'd been know him to shut close down and shut her out so entirely. It was like he didn't see her as on his side anymore and didn't know how to contend with that. What if he stayed like this? What was she going to do? The question Logan had so long ago asked her came suddenly to mind. "Is that your gift?" he'd snidely asked her, "putting up with that guy?" Tears came to her eyes.

Xavier's soothing voice suddenly entered her mind. *"I'm fixing tea. Come, join me."*

Slowly, she walked downstairs to his quarters, feeling like a child on her way to explain herself to her father, but she often felt that way about Charles.

His quarters were at the end of the east wing that, in the mansions hey-day, had housed the servants, though now those rooms were classrooms. She paused in front of his double-doorway.

"Come in, my dear. I'm in the kitchen."

Entering, she passed through the sitting room into the kitchen, where she found him seated at his white, tile-topped kitchen table with tea-for-two already prepared. Like magic, a chair moved out for her and she slumped into it.

Charles offered a gentle smile. "Tell me what's troubling you so."

She peered at him, wondering that he didn't know it all already. The crows-feet around his gray eyes wrinkled ever so faintly with amusement. Of course, she knew his policies about mental prying and allowing people to find their own solutions. "It's Scott," she said flatly. "He's not... himself. He just seems so cold and angry. He hardly talks to me and this morning all we did is argue. I don't even know who he is anymore." the tears welled back up in her eyes as she raised them to him hopefully. "I...I just don't know what to do with him--or for him. Nothing seems right."

Charles stirred his tea thoughtfully. "Do you remember when you were a little girl and thunderstorms would come?"

She nodded. They used to terrify her.

"What was it I used to tell you?"

"That however dark the clouds were, the sun was still shining above them and that...that storms were temporary but the sun was always there." A tear slid down her cheek as she got his meaning.

He leaned across the table and patted her hand. "This storm will also pass, my girl. Scott will find his way. I have faith in him."

She couldn't say the same. "I just feel *so* tempted to read his mind. At least then I could understand what's going on with him and maybe help him better." This promptly drew a sharp look from Charles, since reading the mind of one's intimate partner was one of his strictest taboos. "I just *feel* tempted," she quickly countered. "It's not like I'd ever *actually* do it."

"It *is* a great temptation," he agreed. "That I know."

She observed a shadow of regret pass over his eyes.

"But, I can assure you, what you'll lose in the way of trust isn't worth what it seems. The best method for managing relationships is still good old-fashioned communication."

She put her head in her hands. "That's not working," she groaned. "This morning our whole conversation consisted of him telling me I wasn't giving him any choices. I never knew he could be such a brat!"

"Do you remember what Scott was like when he first came?"

She did and the memory brought a slight smile to her lips. Scott had been seventeen, a high school junior and she, twenty-one and already well into med-school. "I thought he was the worst hay-seed punk I'd ever met."

Charles chuckled. "Well, there's a lot you probably didn't notice, since Scott always put on his best face whenever you were around, but the rest of the time..." His face took on a nostalgic sadness. "Scott was bitter and cynical and full of pent-up rage he had no idea how to express and some well-established passive-aggressive mechanisms he was used to communicating his anger with. His most frequent choice was cold-shouldered withdrawal."

She nodded, recognizing it. "But you've taught him better ways," she countered. "And he's changed since then."

"Indeed, he has and he does know the right way, but you know as well as I do that people who've been under a great deal of duress very often fall back on past, comfortable patterns of coping. At least temporarily."

It was a psychological truth she couldn't deny and nor could she deny this might be exactly Scott's case. She heaved a deep sigh. "I just don't know what to do and nothing I'm doing right now seems to help."

“Right now, I think what he needs most is to see that the people who say they love him, won't leave him or give up on him.”

Jean blushed with embarrassment. She's was already at the point of giving up.

“Give him a little more time to work things out. As brief as his imprisonment was, he's still suffering some shell-shock.”

“I was also a prisoner,” she retorted defensively, “and I'm okay.”

“Yes, but you had one important advantage that Scott did not. You could see. His blindness left him both more vulnerable and more out of control and you and I know those are two things he absolutely hates.”

Suddenly Scott's persistence about “having choices” made sense. He was trying to regain a sense of “control” and while she wanted to feel “nurturing” love and paradoxically, Scott probably wouldn't have much in the way of nurturing love to give *until* he felt in control again. She heaved a sigh. She would have to be the strong one and wait. She stood to leave. “I'll try, Charles.”

“Things change,” Xavier assured her. “He'll come around. Have faith.”

She nodded and went back upstairs, intending to do her best.

That evening, students and staff were gathered in the Rec-room awaiting for Professor Xavier. Jean also was there, glad for a moment of escape. Scott had remained upstairs, having declined any interest in anything Xavier might have to say.

A few minutes later, Xavier arrived and whirred to a position in front of the large-screen TV. A number of students were already seated on the long, L-shaped sofa in front of him and the rest gathered in a semi-circle behind it. She, Storm and Jack stood together at the very back.

“Thank you for coming,” Xavier began. “A situation has arisen. A young man, a mutant, has requested our help and I've agreed to give it. He's a young man familiar to you all, someone who left here on less than good terms. I believe you remember Trent Boland.”

Murmurs of protest erupted, but it was Big John Proudstar who gave them voice. “Not that guy! Not after last time!” Heads nodded and there were rumbles of agreement.

Professor Xavier had to raise his voice. “I know and I agree. He broke our trust and we cannot grant him asylum, so I've arranged a place for him in England. However, the transportation arrangements require that he stay with us *one* night.” Murmurs escalated again. “But he will be staying with me in my quarters,” Xavier continued, “You won't see him. Even so, I'd like your assurance that none of you will do anything against him. No powers. No retaliations. Can I count on you for that?” He paused, his gray eyes scanning sour, dubious faces. “I *need* to count on you,” he emphasized. “I shouldn't have to remind any of you that before you came here, many of you were equally alone and in trouble.” There were mutterings and shufflings and down-cast looks. “May I see a show of hands of support?” Every student, however half-heartedly, at least raised his or her hand part way. “Thank you,” Xavier said and whirred out of the room.

Jean was stunned. She glanced quickly at Jack and Storm to see if they were as well, but no surprise showed on their faces. They were preparing to leave, she stepped in front of them. “You two knew about this, didn't you?”

Jack took Jean's elbow and politely guided her out of public hearing in the Rec-room, into the hallway.

Jean pulled her elbow out of his grasp. “And didn't even tell me,” she challenged with a pointed look at Ro.

“You've been a little busy,” Ro replied. “Besides, the Professor asked us not to.”

Jean's accusing look didn't waver. She knew Ro despised Boland. “Still, I'm surprised,” she said.

The air between them fairly prickled with static electricity.

“It's no big deal,” Jack interjected quickly. “Really. We're just picking 'ol Fish-face up at the bus station tomorrow and then putting him on Weir's jet Monday night. That's it. Done.”

Jean looked between them, dissatisfied to be left out of the loop, particularly since she was feeling so closed out by Scott, but decided to let it go. She had enough to contend with and, after wishing them good-night, returned upstairs. She found Scott exactly where she'd left him, seated on the floor in front of the love-seat playing a video

game. Resuming her seat on the love-seat above him, she picked up her cross-stitch.

“So, what was the *big* announcement?” he asked sarcastically.

“We're helping Trent Boland again.”

“What?” he spat.

“It's no big deal,” she said, repeating Jack. “They're just picking him up at the bus station tomorrow, then putting him on Weir's jet Monday night.”

Scott paused his game and looked at her. “*This* Monday?”

She nodded. To her surprise, he suddenly tossed the controller aside and got to his feet, pulled a shirt on over his t-shirt, stepped into his slippers, then moved toward the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked with concern.

He didn't answer. He just paused in the doorway. “Just tell me where that old fart is,” he commanded.

He meant the Professor. She did a quick mental search. “In his office,” she said and he stalked out.

She stared after him and couldn't help but hope it might help Scott to finally have it out with Charles. She sent a warning to the Professor.

“*He's coming,*” she thought.

Downstairs, in his office, Xavier was going over requisitions for supplies when he heard her and glanced toward the Tau Omega file waiting beside him. A plain manila folder, it contained hard-copies of Jean's, Andi's and Mr. Weir's after-action reports chronicling their observations of events in Turkey. He already knew, of course, that Scott blamed him for his incarceration. Not because he was a mind-reader, but because he was a psychiatrist and because he knew Scott. He knew duress such as the young man had just endured made the might do strange things to survive and it was simply more logical to believe someone else was somehow at fault, then to accept the illogic of it being an entirely random and meaningless event. Tau had just arranged Jean and Scott's imprisonment as a distraction. His suffering had no significance and that was the crux of the matter. His recovery hinged on facing these truths and processing them, which is why he had this file on stand-by now. Hopefully, reading it would help jump start Scott's return to normal, though Xavier didn't in any way expect the pill to go down easily.

Xavier thanked Jean for forewarning him, then continued reviewing requisitions while he waited. It wasn't long before he heard Scott's approaching footfalls and his office door was flung open.

“You must be going senile, old man!” Scott challenged.

Xavier spared him only a brief glance. “You know I'm willing to hear you on anything, anytime Scott,” he replied evenly as he kept working, “but *civility* is *still* a prerequisite.” It was a reminder of the communication rules Scott knew well, which included *no name-calling*.

Scott came to his desk. “Why?” he spat, “are you letting Boland back here?”

Xavier now peered up at his young leader, standing there with his arms folded sternly on his chest, glaring down on him like a teacher confronting an errant child. This wasn't precisely the issue had Xavier expected, but any open door to communication was workable. “I am *not* allowing him back unequivocally,” he replied, still keeping his voice moderated and calm. “He will remain in my quarters until Jack and Ro put him on a plane for England, so he'll be here a grand total of twenty-four hours.”

“Yeah, on Weir's jet. I heard. Why's everything Weir's jet? What's wrong with *ours*?”

“Not a thing. However, using Mr. Weir's jet does allow us a bit more anonymity and also conserves our fuel resources.” He observed Scott's jaw work as he considered these irrefutably valid points.

Scott switched back to his original topic. “Why are you even bothering with Boland? He refused to come back from New Orleans, he's already had his chance.”

“I suppose now that he's faced with a choice between the Navy or us, he'd rather have us, but we *are* only providing minimum intervention.”

“Minimum intervention, ” Scott scoffed. “Is that *your* new word for it? Is that what you were doing for me, in Turkey? Providing *minimumintervention*? Were you conserving your *precious* resources then, too?”

Ah, finally *the heart of the matter*, Xavier thought. He offered him the Tau file. “I think you'll find your

answers in here.”

Scott eyed it suspiciously. “What's that?”

“Everything that happened in Turkey.”

Scott's tone dripped acid. “I *know* what happened in Turkey! We lost the blood samples and I ended up in jail, no thanks to *you*.” He spun on his heel the door.

Xavier lay the rejected file on the front edge of this desk even as he telepathically closed the office door before Scott could reach it.

Scott came to a dead stop in front of it. “You *know* I could just blast this door right off it's hinges.”

”And you know I won't allow it,” Xavier replied coolly.

It was a stalemate. Scott stayed where he was, arms folded on his chest facing the door and Xavier went back to reviewing requisitions. The clocks' gentle ticking was audible in the ensuing silence.

Finally, Scott gave in. “What *exactly* is it I have to do to get out of here?” he asked disgustedly.

“Read this file,” Xavier said.

Wheeling around, Scott came back, haughtily snatched-up it up, then withdrew to the rear of the room to review it.

Xavier returned his attention to his work. In that file, Weir, Andi and Jean all agreed that Tau Omega as the most likely culprit behind Jean and Scott's arrest, the subsequent elimination of any records regarding that arrest and the abduction of Jean's sample case all for the purpose of preventing anyone from discovering what was actually being done inside Tau's interment camp. About the rescue mission, both Andi and Weir cited the obliterated computer records as being their primary obstacle to any kind of speedy rescue. In summary, they all agreed that the imprisonment had been no more than a pawn-play by Tau.

A few minutes later the file landed abruptly on the pile of requisitions in front of Xavier.

“Done,” Scott announced curtly. “Now can I go--or do you have some other hoops for me to jump through?”

Xavier folded his hands on top of the file and scrutinized Scott's face, reading all the receptivity of a brick wall in it. “Is there anything you just read that you'd like to talk about?” he asked.

“No.” His tone was stone-cold.

“Talking about what happened *would* help you, Scott.”

“What would help me is *you* just replacing all the bad memories in my head with new ones.”

Xavier shook his head. “You know my policies against that.” All his people knew he believed life experiences made people who they were and that he wouldn't simply erase them because they were inconvenient.

“Oh, don't give me that. You did it for Marie!”

“That was entirely different. She'd been forced to absorb another human being to death and removing that girl from Marie's memory was the only way to preserve her sanity. Even so, I still left just a bit Elsie behind, just enough so the poor girl wouldn't be completely forgotten.”

“Fine. Have it your way, since that seems the *only* way things go around here. May I leave now?”

Xavier glanced toward the door and swung it open. He watched Scott stalk out, looking after him pensively. Sometimes truth, like a tea-bag, needs a little time to steep.

Scott returned to his apartment deeply agitated. Reading that file had acerbated his prison memories making them fresh as a bad dream from which he'd just awakened.

Jean was seated on the love-seat, reading as he came in. “So, how'd it go?” she asked, naturally curious and hopeful, but was quickly disappointed.

“I'd rather not talk about it,” Scott grumbled as he sat on the floor again, picked up his game remote and began absently playing.

He played until Jean was in bed and well asleep before laying the remote aside. A strategy was beginning to take shape in his mind. Reading those files had succeeded in one thing: they'd reminded him of certain issues he needed to resolve and this thing about flying Trent to England presented an opportunity for him to do just that.

It was a decision that would prove life-altering.

Continued in Faith, Hope and Love, Part 2.