

It's A Good Life, Professor by B. Nickerson {Rated G}

A Holiday Challenge set in "X to the Highest Power, Part 2" time frame, a strange visitor gives Professor Xavier the chance to know what a difference he really does make.

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Charles Xavier enjoyed watching his expanded family play games in the formal parlor Christmas Eve, then wished everyone a good-night, hummed to his own quarters and to bed. Laying there in the dark he wondered, as he often did just before drifting off to sleep, whether he was really making any difference at all. His group of X-men seemed so small in comparison to the magnitude of their task.

He awoke the next morning, stretched to full length and lazily opened his eyes to the gray winter light filtering through the shades. Suddenly he jerked upright and stared around. This wasn't his room! At least not the one he went to sleep in last night. Instead, it was the original master bedroom in the main building, the one he'd used when he first lived here and had since converted into the general office Scott now used for accounting. It wasn't his electric bed either and no metal triangle dangled above the bed to help him move about. Rather, he was lying in the king-size, four-poster bed that used to occupy this room. He wiggled his toes and moved his legs. He was also no longer paralyzed. "I must be dreaming," he muttered, then pinched himself just to check. It hurt. Just then came a rap at the door.

"Come in," he replied automatically.

A butler with neatly cut gray hair entered. He was primly attired in back pants and jacket with a crisp white shirt, topped by a black bow tie. He held a tray of breakfast.

"Timothy!" Xavier exclaimed, astonished to see his old friend and man-servant. He hadn't seen him since he left his service, about a year after they'd come to America to take possession of the mansion and had returned to England. Xavier had only recently heard from him that he was dying of cancer.

"Good morning, sir," Timothy replied as he arranged the bed tray neatly over Xavier's lap. "Did you sleep well?"

Xavier could only stare quizzically at him as he obediently leaned forward while Timothy methodically added a pillow behind him, then laid a crisp white cloth napkin across his lap, poured his tea and went to the windows to open the blinds exactly as he used to. Facing him he said, "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No...no thank-you," Xavier managed to stammer. Timothy headed for the door and just as he laid his hand on the door knob, Xavier added, "It's good to see you, Timothy."

Timothy turned back, surprised, but quickly regained his impassive air. "Thank you, sir," he replied, then left, closing the door quietly after him.

With trembling fingers Xavier picked up the neatly folded newspaper laying on his breakfast tray, opened it and stared at the date. December 25, 2016. It was the right date. He set it and the breakfast tray aside, his appetite replaced by a determination to figure out what had happened and why. Getting up, he dressed quickly, then stepped quietly into the hall. Walking itself was a delightful novelty and he couldn't help but smile as he strode along, peering curiously at the various hallway furnishings and paintings he'd long ago either sold or moved as part of converting the mansion into a school. Everything was eerily back in place, exactly as it had been twenty-years ago and the silence, deafening. No talk or laughter of young people rushing about, getting ready for breakfast and classes. He realized then how accustomed he'd become to the pitter-patter of many feet. He went upstairs vaguely hoping to find sleeping students, but only found empty guest rooms occupied once more by their original four-poster beds and decor. Xavier walked slowly back downstairs, confused and perplexed. He had no idea what had happened or what it meant. At the bottom he arbitrarily decided to turn left and to look in the formal parlor where only last night he remembered a huge Christmas tree standing in the corner, gracing the tall picture windows with its glittering presence. This morning that same corner was empty and the windows bare, making the room

seem somehow lonely without that big old tree. Only his family menorah decorated the fireplace mantle, its beeswax candles melted from use. Turning on his heel, he went down the hall in the other direction anxious to see if the study and formal dining room had also returned to their original states, hoping, in the back of his mind, that somewhere he might discover some kind of explanation. He abruptly encountered Timothy in the corridor, on his way back to fetch the breakfast tray.

Timothy regarded him questioningly.

Xavier floundered for an appropriate rational as to his sudden arrival downstairs. "I just decided I'd rather take breakfast in the dining room today."

Timothy's brows rose. "As you wish, Professor," he replied and escorted him into the formal dining room.

Xavier followed, resigned now by his own words to eating a breakfast he had no appetite for. When they entered the dining room, he immediately noted the Matisse was back on the far wall, the one he'd sold and whose proceeds had paid handsomely for remodeling the mansion into a school. Timothy carefully seated him at the head of the long, dark maple dining table lit by a crystal chandelier, then retreated through the double doors on Xavier's right to fetch a fresh breakfast from the kitchen.

Xavier sighed and folded his hands on the table, studying the large centerpiece of fresh mixed flowers, unable to make heads or tails of what was going on. This room brought back so many fond memories of quiet family meals with Jean and later, Scott, at this very table. Then, six years ago, he'd had both this room, the kitchen and the study beyond all remodeled into a cafeteria better geared to the needs of several dozen students. Again puzzled about where his friends and children were, Xavier made a quick telepathic check around the mansion and aside from Timothy, some kitchen staff and a maid, detected no one else. His mansion was empty. "Odd," he muttered to himself. Just then the double-doors flapped open as Timothy returned and neatly arranged a breakfast on the table in front of him, once again placing a crisp white napkin across his lap. "Thank-you," Xavier said as Timothy finished pouring him another tea.

Timothy nodded, set the small silver teapot aside and straightened. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

Xavier shook his head and Timothy disappeared back through the double doors while he dubiously studied the scrambled eggs, fresh hot buttered toast and bowl of sliced strawberries on his plate, then decided to make the best of it. He ate a bit of everything, drank half his juice and all his tea, wiped his mouth on the napkin, laid it on the table, then got up and escaped into the study next door. Closing the oak double doors quietly behind him, he gazed around at the same old boar and deer heads arranged along the upper walls. He observed the original slightly worn tapestry carpet was once again back on the floor and the windows were framed heavy green brocade drapes he'd long ago disposed of. The gun cabinet full of hunting rifles and antique guns were back in place along the rear wall as well as the assortment of green wing-chairs and the darker green leather sofa were in the center of the room, arranged for idle conversation over brandy and cigars in front of the giant stone fireplace.

It was then he realized he wasn't alone. Apparently, someone was sitting in one of the wing-back chairs that had its back to him as he could see just a hint of a man's shoe and crossed leg. Surprised he hadn't detected him in his earlier telepathic scan, Xavier tried again and was even more surprised to find he could detect nothing--not a single thought.

Intrigued, Xavier was just about to take a step in that direction, when he heard the door click open behind him. Freezing, Xavier heaved an exasperated breath, put on a pleasant face and turned to face his man-servant with an inquiring look. "Yes, Timothy?"

"Did your breakfast not suit you, Professor?"

Xavier smiled reassuringly. "It was fine. I just wasn't as hungry as I thought."

"Are you feeling alright?"

"Quite well. I thought I would sit and read awhile."

Doubt remained etched on his face as he replied, "Very good, sir. May I bring you more tea then?"

"Not right now, thank you."

With a nod, Timothy left, the door gently clicking the door shut after him.

Xavier turned attention back to the mysterious guest in the chair and it occurred to him that Timothy hadn't even offered to bring an extra tea, which seemed quite odd. Striding around the chair, he found a young man he'd never seen before. He appeared twenty-ish, his face clean-shaven and his hair so blonde as to be nearly white was short and neatly combed. He was attired casually in a navy sports jacket and trousers with a tan polo shirt.

The young man offered him a warm smile and he had the purest blue eyes Xavier had ever seen. "Excuse me," Xavier prompted, "but do I know you?"

"Not really, but I know you, Charles."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage, sir."

The young man's smile broadened and he indicated the wing-chair opposite him. "You've been wondering," he replied, "whether you are truly a difference, and I'm here to give you an opportunity to judge for yourself."

Xavier didn't sit. "What?" he asked, a little taken aback.

"You do want to know whether you're making a difference, don't you?"

"Well, yes..."

"This is your chance to know."

Xavier's eyes narrowed. "And exactly who are you?"

"You may call me Adiel."

Xavier cautiously scrutinized his visitor. Even though he couldn't place his face, there still seemed something oddly familiar about him, as if he should know who he was, but couldn't quite put his finger on it. He didn't like it that he couldn't read his mind. "What is this? Some kind of trick or hallucination?"

"Not at all. This is real your life, Charles. It's just one decision different."

Xavier stared. He needed that chair now and just sat on it's edge. "One decision? What decision?"

"That climbing expedition to Mt. Everest. You didn't go."

He remembered that expedition all too well. He'd been the sole survivor of that ill-fated trip and it'd cost him the use of his legs. That's also when he'd gotten the inspiration to create this school to help both mutants and mankind. What if he'd never gone? Xavier's brow furrowed deeply as he considered the ramifications. "Are you suggesting that because I never went and was never injured, I never turned my home into a secret school for students?"

Adiel nodded.

Xavier didn't want to believe it. "How is that possible?"

"You have to understand that while individual decisions may not seem significant in themselves, each one impacts every other subsequent decision, like a domino effect. Your decision not to go on a climbing expedition effected your every other decision resulting in the paradigm you now see."

Xavier mulled this over. It seemed too incredible to be true, yet he couldn't deny he was standing here on two legs and he had an inkling Adiel was speaking the truth. It was evident in his eyes that seemed to glow with a captivating joy that made his neck hairs stand on end. "Alright, for arguments sake, let's just say what you're saying is all true. So, now if I'm no longer running a school for the gifted, what, in this paradigm, am I doing?"

"Well, you live quietly, travel often and teach at the local university extension several times a week. Sometimes you use your telepathy to try to understand your students to help them, but nothing noticeable, nothing they could complain about. Since you're now a registered mutant, you can't afford to be either noticed or complained about."

Xavier cringed inwardly. "Mutant registration?" he repeated. That'd been the late Senator Kelly's brain-child. "Is Senator Kelly still alive?"

"No. He still died from the effect of Mr Lensherr's mutant wave, but this time, because your school didn't exist and Dr. Grey didn't exist, he simply died in a hospital, alone among unsympathetic strangers."

The part about Jean not existing was like a slap in the face. "Jean doesn't exist?" Xavier repeated incredulously. "Did she die?"

"No. She just never became a doctor. In fact, without you, Miss Grey never recovered from the mental trauma of being telepathically linked to her best friend when she died. She had to be institutionalized."

Xavier fell backwards into his chair, overwhelmed. Jean was like his own daughter. He'd practically raised her

since she was eleven.

"I'm sorry, " Adiel said.

He raised grief-stricken eyes. "Where...where is she?"

"At the Rosewood Mental Health Institute in Albany." Adiel paused a moment, then added, "It's Christmas day and not very far. I'm sure we could visit her, if you wish."

Xavier straightened and looked at his watch. It was still early and it'd only take three hours to drive there and back. Plenty of time. He snapped to his feet decisively. "Let's go then."

In the hall, Adiel stopped him before he could head for the kitchen to inform Timothy he would be going for a drive. "It'd be best if you didn't mention me," he cautioned.

"Why?" Xavier looked him up and down. "Are you invisible or something, like some kind of Harvey?"

Adiel chuckled. "No, I'm quite visible, but your staff isn't aware of my presence and telling them you're going somewhere with a stranger they are unaware of will only make them think you more daff than they already fear, " but before Xavier could ask how he'd gotten in, he said, "I'll just meet you at the garage, " then sauntered away.

Xavier scowled after him a moment before proceeding to the kitchen. There he found Timothy seated at the small kitchen table with a steaming teacup, quietly reading the morning paper. He looked up as soon Xavier entered and jumped up. "Sir? Did you need something?"

"I just wanted to tell you I've decided to take a drive."

"You don't want me to drive you, sir? It wouldn't be any trouble."

"No. I feel like doing it myself today. I'll be back this afternoon."

"Very well, sir, " Timothy replied tolerantly, "if that's what you wish."

Xavier gave him a reassuring smile, then turned on his heel and headed for the garage. "Daff, indeed, " he humphed. Grabbing a coat and scarf from the hall closet along the way, he met up with Adiel by the interior garage door. Entering the garage, Xavier first surveyed a string of small hooks that held keys to every car, then surveyed his collection of vehicles. It'd been a long time since he'd driven a stick and now that he had the use of his legs...he selected a key and led the way to a sleek silver Porsche 959.

"Nice choice, " Adiel remarked as Xavier tapped the auto-unlock on the fob.

Xavier settle into the driver's seat and fastened his seat belt. "What about Scott?" he ventured as he compressed the clutch, turned the ignition key on and revved the engine.

"In a prison in Nebraska, " Adiel replied.

Xavier froze. The Scott he knew had just gotten back from Turkish prison where he'd been without his glasses for two weeks and was only now getting over the ordeal of it. He couldn't imagine how the Scott of this paradigm would possibly cope with long-term prison. "I don't understand. How could that happen?"

"It happened because you and Fred Duncan weren't there to save him from that bad crowd he got in with after running away from the orphanage."

Xavier just sat there listening to the engine, suffering private grief for a long moment before shaking himself out of it. He put the car in reverse, then tried coordinating the clutch and gas sufficiently to back out. The engine immediately died and he looked at Adiel. "It's been a long time," he offered with an embarrassed laugh. Adiel just smiled pleasantly and nodded as Xavier restarted the engine and managed to back out, shift to first, then pull out of the garage with only minor lurching. As soon as they were out of the driveway and on the road though, he immediately turned back to the topic of Scott. Fred Duncan had been an integral part of locating and rescuing him.

"It was Fred Duncan who originally got in touch with me about Scott, " he said.

"Not this time," Adiel replied.

"Is he still with the FBI?"

"Yes, Mr. Duncan still works the midwest, but now he's considered only a mediocre agent and hasn't got good prospects for any significant promotion."

"I'm sorry to hear that. He's a good man."

"Yes, he is, and it's too bad. He had a seed of compassion in his heart for mutants, but without you, that seed

never took root."

Xavier winced. Each new truth stung as he heard how tragically everyone he cared about was being effected by his absence from their lives. "So, how did Scott end up in prison?"

"He just gradually worked his way up from misdemeanors to robbery and felony assaults. Without you, he never learned to manage his anger. He was even arrested for battering his girlfriend." Xavier winced again. "Then the Mutant Registration Act came along and, because he was a known mutant with a criminal record, he was charged with second-degree murder after a man he assaulted died."

"How long?" Xavier gasped.

"Sixty years. Sentences are doubled for mutants and no parole is allowed. It wasn't much of a trial either. The Act allows direct sentencing of mutants without a trial by jury."

Xavier was appalled as much by the Act as what had happened to his boy. He'd raised Scott from the age of sixteen and he was like a son. He couldn't stop the tears from running down his face as he drove. "How do you know all this?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I thoroughly acquainted myself with everything I thought I needed to know before I came." Adiel replied simply.

Irritably, Xavier swiped away his tears. "And where exactly is it you came from?"

Adiel turned his face to look at him, a face radiant with calm and peace. "From the case I was working before yours. I'm something like a social case-worker." He smiled.

That smile was starting to feel patronizing, as if he were some child who lacked understanding and Xavier didn't like it. Frustrated with Adiel's ambiguity, Xavier returned to the topic of Magneto's machine. "You said Erik still used his mutant-wave machine on Senator Kelly? "

"Yes."

"I take it he used it on New York as well?"

"I'm afraid so."

Xavier was astonished. Even without their friendship and philosophical differences, Magneto had still ended up doing exactly the same thing, for probably the same reason. Xavier replied, "That's funny. I always thought it was my fault that Erik became Magneto."

"And what do you see now?"

"That what happened, happened anyway---even without me."

Adiel nodded. "That evil sprang from Erik's own heart, Charles."

Xavier was silent, lost in the realization he'd been blaming himself for something he'd never truly been responsible for.

"And, this time, Mr. Lensherr succeeded, " Adiel added softly.

Xavier started. "And Rogue?"

"She died in the machine."

Xavier's knuckles tightened to white on the steering wheel. So, maybe there'd been no school and no X-men to save her, but hadn't she originally been with Logan just before Sabretooth tried to nab her? "What about Logan?" he asked. "Couldn't he have done something?"

"Without your X-men, there was no one to stop Sabretooth from absconding with the girl and leaving Logan unconscious on the hood of his vehicle."

"My people rescued him just before it exploded."

"This time the explosion threw him clear with a few burns and he was unconscious a good while healing from his injuries. When he awoke, Sabretooth was long gone."

Xavier heaved a sigh of relief. "So he's alive and well then." Adiel nodded. "But Logan was quite fond of the girl. He didn't go after her?"

"For a short time, yes. but the trail was just too cold. Don't forget, Mr. Logan wasn't looking for a cause and without you to drag him into yours, he just went on living life the only way he knew how, which was a great loss

really. Your intervention gave him some of the best gifts life has to offer."

Xavier gave Adiel a puzzled glance. "It did?"

Adiel nodded. "With you he found a community to belong to where he depended on others and they on him. You gave him a higher purpose than just living for revenge. Even a chance for love. You gave him meaning."

"I never realized," Xavier murmured.

"No one was created to be alone, Charles."

Though that truth pricked his heart, Xavier couldn't meet Adiel's pure gaze, so he changed the subject. "So, without us to save Rogue and stop Magneto, then his mutant wave would have swept over the UN summit and New York City like a tsunami. Thousands probably died."

"And did," Adiel agreed. "It mutated the genetic structure of every person it touched. Every UN representative and thousands of other New Yorkers died within days of various severely altered states. The out-cry both here and abroad was so great, mutant registration and a dozen other laws were immediately signed into law. So now, as a mutant in the US, you may no longer leave the country or even cross state boundaries. You cannot hold public office. You cannot create a disturbance or discomfort humans in any manner through the use of mutant powers. You cannot marry or reproduce with another mutant without penalty of law and all penalties of law are doubled..."

"I get the picture," Xavier interrupted irritably. "And all because of me."

"The point you have to understand Charles, is that all decisions have ramifications. Everything matters. Everything touches everything else."

"Like a stone thrown in a pond."

"Something like that."

They were both silent awhile as Xavier sped along the sunny highway still edged with dirty clumps of melting snow. "And whatever became of Erik?" he finally asked. "I hope he was caught and punished."

"He is a wanted man, but as soon as his machine's mutant-wave proved a disaster, he and his flock of mutants fled the US and found asylum in the Caribbean."

Xavier's brows rose in surprise. That was exactly where Magneto had ended up after Mystique broke him out of prison in his other paradigm. Obviously the main pattern of events didn't change even if the relationship details did. "You wouldn't happen to know what he plans to do, would you?"

Adiel chuckled and shook his head. "Sorry, I'm not a fortune teller."

"Just an expert on the past."

"Actually, I only work in the present. That's all that really matters."

Another one of Adiel's ambiguous explanations. Xavier chose to ignore it and moved on to the only X-team member he hadn't yet asked about and that was Storm. He knew the influence he'd had on her. He'd located her in Egypt about five years earlier, where she was serving as a weather goddess to a small town in exchange for their material gratitude and after convincing her she was no more a god than he was, he'd offered her his vision for mankind instead. Shortly thereafter, since she was technically an American citizen, he'd brought her home and sent her to college, so she could become a teacher. "So, what about Storm?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"Miss Munroe is betrothed to the Prince of Jordan."

"Well, is that good or bad?"

"That's for you to judge."

"Alright, Adiel. Tell me."

"You remember Miss Munroe fancied herself a goddess?" Xavier nodded. "The Prince considers it advantageous both to himself and his nation to have a goddess for a queen and she desires all the wealth, power and prestige that position has to offer."

Xavier heaved a sigh. That wasn't the Storm he remembered. "And what about Andi and Jack?"

"She's still in California, of course, living with her younger son, Alex, but they are both quite grieved about Jack. As far as they know, he just suddenly quit the Marines, took Airwolf and disappeared."

"You wouldn't happen to know where he went?" Xavier asked, though he expected him to either deny he knew

or give some cryptic reply.

"He was secretly recruited by the Tau Omega Corporation."

Xavier started. In his own paradigm Tau was somehow behind arranging for Andi and Jack to bring Airwolf to his school for yet unknown purposes, but in this paradigm Tau had apparently managed to still get Jack and Airwolf. Who exactly was behind that mysterious organization's manipulations was still in question. "Do you know who's running that organization?"

Adiel shook his head. "Sorry, I'm afraid I don't."

Xavier wanted to shout, "What good are you!" but refrained and heaved another deep sigh. Ahead, he saw Albany's skyline fast nearing on the horizon. Suddenly, his stomach growled reminding him of his scanty breakfast and growing hunger. "Are you hungry, Adiel?"

"No, I'm fine, but if you are, please stop."

Xavier nodded and pulled off the highway. He selected a fish-type fast-food chain to drive-thru. since his passenger wasn't eating. and because hamburgers gave him indigestion. He carefully ordered a lightly-bread fish sandwich and iced tea, then hit the road again. Back on the highway, he just thoughtfully ate his sandwich and drank his tea while Adiel looked out the window. He finished just as traffic thickened at the city limits. "Do you know where Rosewood is?" he asked Adiel, who nodded and gave him directions which took them north on I-787, off an exit, then winding through several streets until they arrived in the nearly empty parking lot of the huge red-brick Rosewood Institute, that stood nestled among trees overlooking the Hudson river. Xavier parked, then he and Adiel followed the sidewalk lined with clumps of old snow to the front steps, where a wreath adorned double glass doors. As they went up the steps, Xavier eyed the adjacent wheelchair ramp marveling again at the refreshing novelty of being able to walk. Adiel skipped ahead to grab the door and hold it open for him, then followed him inside.

They found themselves in a brightly fluorescent lit lobby, it's walls draped with red and green crepe paper. A rather well-used artificial tree coated with patient-made decorations stood blinking gayly in a corner. Xavier approached the front desk where an attractive attendant with dull brown eyes and short hair looked up and smiled tiredly at them. "May I help you?"

"Yes," Xavier replied. "I've come to visit one of your patients, a Miss Jean Grey."

Her brows rose slightly. "She doesn't get many visitors. How do you know her?"

Xavier smiled as he looked into her thoughts. The nurse was suspicious, because no one had visited Jean in years and she wondered who he was. "Actually I'm an old friend of the family and a doctor," he said.

"A medical doctor?"

"Yes." He pulled out his wallet and showed her his ID. Satisfied, her eyes then drifted to Adiel beside him. "And this is my friend, Adiel, who's visiting me for the holidays."

Adiel met her eyes and smiled warmly. "Merry Christmas," he said.

Xavier watched with interest as the young nurse's dull eyes and tired expression lit up like some inner-light had suddenly clicked on. She returned Adiel's smile like someone who'd been given a wonderful gift. "Merry Christmas," she repeated softly, then pointed down the hall to her right. "I believe Miss Grey is in the patient lounge."

"Thank-you," Xavier said. As he and Adiel walked, he asked, "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing. I just wished her Merry Christmas, Charles."

Xavier frowned, uncertain whether Adiel was just being smart with him, but seeing the patient lounge ahead brought his focus back to what mattered and that was finding Jean. Not that he knew what he was going to do once he found her, but he just knew he had to see her. Maybe because it might prove this was all true or maybe because he could try do something to make things better in this paradigm. The lounge, too, was strung gayly with crepe and paper-chains and had another worn, but well-decorated tree blinking lopsidedly against a wall. Christmas music was playing softly from ceiling speakers. Patients were scattered about, some playing games at various small tables either alone or with others, some were in chairs quietly reading, many were scattered on sofas watching

television and a few were walking idly around. They ranged in dress from hospital type pajamas to street clothes and he noticed regretfully that he and Adiel were the only visitors. A few patients looked up curiously at their entry, but then returned to whatever they were doing almost immediately. Xavier scanned the crowd, looking for Jean, though he was unsure what she might look like. He saw no one resembling the Jean he remembered. "Where is she?" he whispered to Adiel.

Adiel scanned the room a moment, then pointed at a dark, high-backed club chair under a reading light in far corner, facing away from them. "Over there, I believe."

Eagerly, Xavier went to her, Adiel trailing after him. As he neared, he could see the top of her head just over the chairs back, her dark auburn hair cropped short and when he came around she looked up from her paperback.

"Jean?" he asked softly. Her brows knit together. Of course, she didn't know him, but it was, indeed, her. He recognized her widely set gray eyes and finely chiseled cheekbones. He read her thoughts and found she hadn't spoken for eighteen years; not since that disastrous mind-link. What Adiel had said was true. She'd never recovered from it and had been on medication for depression ever since. Crouching down so he was more eye-level with her, he answered her unspoken question. "No, you don't know me, but my name is Charles Xavier." He offered her his hand, but she just looked at it uncertainly, so he withdrew it and, instead, looked at her book. "So, what are you reading?"

She held the paperback up for him to see.

"Ah, a suspense novel." Well, some things didn't change, he thought, though it wasn't an adult-level book. More of a teen-type.

She wondered what he wanted and why was he really here.

"Well, I thought I could come visit you once in a while, if you wouldn't mind," he replied.

Why? No one else visits me.

"I hoped, maybe, we might become friends."

She was surprised and her lips turned up with the faintest smile. *Alright, when? When will you come again?*

"I'll visit again next week," he promised as he straightened. He had to shake a crick out of his knee. It'd certainly been a long time since he'd had one of those. "Do you like to color?"

Her smile broadened. Yes, I love to color.

"I'll bring crayons and paper next time then. How would that be?"

You promise?

"I promise," he assured her, handing her one of his business cards. "And you can have one of the nurses call me if you need anything."

She accepted it, slipping it carefully into the pages of her book and looked at him with wonder, pleased he seemed to understand her.

"We are more alike than you imagine," he told her, looking down on her fondly, disappointed her mind was simple and childish rather than mature as he was accustomed to. "I have to go now," he said. She smiled, nodded and returned to her reading. Xavier looked at Adiel, who had been standing quietly behind her chair, out of her sight, and nodded. As they walked down the hall, Xavier said, "I told her I'd be back next week, but will I?"

"I don't know."

Xavier just glared at Adiel's pleasant profile as they walked, unsatisfied with his strange mix of truth and ambiguity. Adiel suddenly looked right into his eyes.

"It's not my place to know," he informed him.

That didn't help. As they passed the front desk, the young attendant bounced out of her chair and raced to greet them. "Did you find Miss Grey?"

Xavier made himself smile pleasantly at her. "Yes we did, thank you."

Her eyes went to Adiel, who graced her with another smile. Xavier didn't know how, but the light in the young woman's eyes just seemed to increase. She trailed after them to the front door, then held it open for them. "Merry Christmas," she called after them eagerly.

"And to you," Adiel responded serenely as they walked out.

Xavier glanced back over his shoulder to see the young lady just standing where she was, watching them depart. "You certainly made her day," he snorted.

"The least I could do," Adiel replied matter-of-factly. "One of her children is sick with pneumonia and she couldn't get the day off to be with him."

Xavier stared at him. "I didn't know you were a telepath."

Adiel laughed, a laugh that seemed to float on the air like heavenly music. "I'm not. Sometimes all it takes to make a difference is a smile and a kind word."

They reached the Porsche, but instead of going to the passenger side, Adiel followed him to the driver's door. Xavier looked at him quizzically.

"I'm not going back with you," Adiel explained. He waved toward the town. "My next case isn't far from here. I can walk."

Xavier blinked. "You're done with me? Already? But I still have questions."

"You understand the pattern well enough to discern your own answers, Charles." He gestured at the car door, which Xavier unlocked, then Adiel held it open for him.

Xavier reluctantly got in. "What will happen now?" he asked, peering upwards into his joyful blue eyes.

Adiel just smiled that smile of a father smiling on a child. "I suppose that depends on you, but whatever happens, it will be the right thing." He closed the Porsche's door and Xavier dismally watched him saunter away as he started the engine, shifted into reverse and tried to back up. He killed the engine again and self-consciously looked around to see if Adiel had noticed, but he saw no one. Putting the car in gear, he got out and stared around surprised Adiel could disappear from sight so quickly on foot, then got back in, started up and managed to back out successfully. On the three hour drive back to Westchester though, he made up his mind he liked his old paradigm better, though nothing changed magically back to what it had been.

He pulled back into the estate garage shortly before four o'clock, the sun already succumbing to encroaching winter dusk and stepped into the house. As if he had ESP, Timothy appeared to take his coat and scarf. "Did you enjoy yourself, sir?" he asked as he neatly folded them over his arm.

Xavier didn't think "enjoy" was the appropriate word, but couldn't very well tell him the truth. "Yes, Timothy, I did."

"Would you care for some tea in the study? I've set the fire."

Xavier nodded. "And this mornings paper, please"

"Very good, sir."

Xavier headed for the study while Timothy methodically returned his coat and scarf to the hall closet. "I never did read it," Xavier muttered to himself as he strode down the hall. He entered the study and sat in the same chair he'd been in before, silently contemplating Adiel's empty one until Timothy arrived with a tray of tea and the newspaper. There had been something familiar about Adiel, though exactly what still eluded him. After Timothy left, Xavier gazed into the cheerfully blazing fire as he sipped from his china cup thinking over his options and potential courses of action. That he might help Jean, save Scott and find Logan were possibilities, but a lot depended on what happened next. It didn't seem practical that a man should be left in one world with memories of another. Therefore, one of two things must occur; either he must cease to remember the one life and adapt to the new one or he'd somehow return to the other, remembered life. That settled, he put aside his teacup and picked up the paper and read until dinner was called. He ate a lonesome meal in the formal dining table again, watched some TV, played a little billiard by himself, then called it a night and let Timothy prepare him for bed.

"Timothy," Xavier said as his man-servant peeled back the covers for him, "When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

Timothy arched his brows. "Not in a good while, sir. You know, I rarely take sick."

"I know," Xavier replied as he got in bed and Timothy tucked the covers around him. "But humor me and make an appointment for a physical after the New Year."

Timothy straightened and clasped his hands in front of him. "Very well. I will, if you will, Professor."

Xavier smiled. "Gladly. Make one for me then as well."

Timothy nodded. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks, Timothy. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," Timothy replied as he switched out the light. Xavier heard the door click closed as his eyes gradually drifted shut and sleep enveloped him. He was afraid he'd still be here when he awoke and wouldn't know the difference, the life he'd left behind no more than a dream.

Xavier suddenly started awake, like some Scrooge worried Christmas Day might've come and gone without him and glanced about anxiously wondering what new Twilight Zone he was in today. The red clock digits on his bureau read 4:45 AM, but what day was it? Jerking upright, his head struck against the metal triangle suspended above his bed. Gripping it and rubbing his forehead, he laughed joyously as he looked around his familiar bedroom. He was back! Back in his own single electric bed with his wheelchair beside it and all the other accretions of a handicapped man. He tried to move his legs and when they didn't respond, he laughed all the more till his eyes watered and sides-hurt. Celine, his furry black cat curled at the end of the bed blinked her golden eyes at him like he was daff. "I'm not daff, old girl," he told her, "just happy to be home where I make a difference everyday." For reply, she just stretched out, purring loudly. Smiling, he leveraged himself into a sitting position with his legs off the bed, shrugged his blue-quilted bathrobe on over his pajamas, then shifted into his wheelchair and hummed determinedly out of his quarters and through the main corridor down to the formal parlor. If he could see the tree, he'd know what day it was and whether Christmas had come and gone or even if he was in the right world. It was still too early for anyone to be up, but in his mind he felt his house full of all the people he knew and cared about.

Whirring into the parlor, he saw it--the Christmas tree-- standing splendidly against the picture window, lights twinkling and presents still stacked beneath its protective boughs. He grinned. It was still Christmas. He hadn't missed it. He glanced at the grandfather clock against the wall on his right. It said it was 6:10 and he hummed over and lit the firewood laying ready in the fireplace in anticipation of his wildly extended family pouring downstairs to open their gifts. As the fire blazed to life,, he looked up at the family menorah on the mantle above him wondering if he'd really just dreamed it all. Suddenly, it came to him and he remembered what exactly about Adiel that was so familiar. It was his voice. He'd heard it before, years ago on Mt. Everest, when he was laying trapped in a crevasse, alone and helpless in the snow and ice, hanging tenuously between life and death. It had been Adiel's voice he'd only vaguely heard calling to him, saying, "You must not give up! You must live! You have yet much to do and many like yourself to help!" Those words had kept him alive until rescuers arrived.

Xavier smiled with wonderment. He'd always attributed it to a guardian angel and now, just maybe, if he could believe it wasn't all just a dream, maybe he'd just met him.

The End