

Paradise

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Chapter 1

"Ouch!"

The throb of a headache pulled him into consciousness.

The light in the room seemed to be uncomfortably bright. But even so, he fought to put that aside and force his eyes to open anyway.

The sight that greeted him was a shock.

He was in a little white, sterile room.

It wasn't like a motel room, not that he knew from personal experience what one of those looked like, but still, there wasn't anything to make the room feel 'inviting'. No pictures. No ornaments. No... nothing. A white bed with white sheets and a white blanket, and a few sparse pieces of featureless white furniture.

As he slipped out from under the sheet and blanket, the next surprise was to find that he was naked.

He struggled to think past the headache that had taken residence inside his skull and seemed to be determined to punch its way out.

A glance around the room revealed two other doors at opposite ends of the room, one closed, and the other open. Through the open door there was evidence of a lavatory.

Upon seeing that, his bladder immediately let it be known that he had a biological need to attend to, forthwith.

He walked into the 'too bright' white, sterile bathroom and did his business then walked to the mirror over the sink to look at himself.

The dark circles under his eyes immediately caught his attention.

Even though he knew that he'd just been asleep, he looked as though he'd been awake for days on end.

The few whiskers formed on his chin were another curious thing.

He had been shaving since he was thirteen. Of course, even if he had never shaved, he wouldn't have been able to grow anything remotely resembling a beard. But, with his father's encouragement, he had been shaving the few scraggly whiskers that sprouted in an effort to keep himself looking 'respectable'.

The strange thing was, the growth of his 'beard' was such as to indicate the passage of a lot more time than he could account for.

As he was about to start searching through the cabinet under the sink, to see if there might be any shaving supplies in there, another thing caught his eye.

In the mirror, a small red dot in the crook of his elbow drew his attention.

He immediately looked down at his arm, and upon closer inspection, he could find evidence of three individual punctures, undoubtedly caused by needles.

An examination of his left arm revealed three more injection sites, although they seemed to be nearly healed.

Abandoning any further thoughts of shaving, he walked back into the 'bedroom'.

His first impulse was to wrap the white sheet around himself, but before he could do that, he speculated that if there were a dresser in the room, there might also be clothes.

Going to the white molded plastic dresser, he found that the top drawer held white cotton boxer shorts.

Uncomfortable with his nakedness, he pulled on a pair and found that although they were a bit loose, they were near enough to the right size for him to be able to wear them.

In the next drawer he found white tube socks. Not wanting to delve too deeply into what he was doing, he went ahead and pulled the socks on, too.

The third and final drawer contained white cotton tee shirts and he slipped one on without a thought.

Beside the dresser, there was a door that he hadn't noticed on his initial inspection. Sliding it aside, he found that it was a closet. He was surprised by the burst of color when he opened the door.

So far, everything in the room had been relentlessly white. But there, hanging in a neat row were seven identical sets of coveralls, all of them a deep, rich blue.

As he took the first one off its hanger, he noticed a number stitched on the upper left breast of the coverall in white letters.

'112'.

He quickly looked through the closet and found that the other six coveralls had the exact same number embroidered on them.

He was automatically put off by the thought of his identity being replaced with a number, but there were too many unknowns for him to allow his indignity to override his curiosity and reject the idea of wearing the coveralls.

He pulled on the coveralls and noted that they seemed to also be the correct size for him, not only around the chest and waist, but also in length.

Once he had them fastened closed, he noticed that in the bottom of the closet there were a pair of brand new lace up boots. They were either actual army boots, or a very close approximation.

Before putting them on, he looked at the bottom of one and noticed a sticker on the arch which indicated the size of the boots. They were *exactly* his size.

His head was pounding and nothing was making any sense. But he was still aware enough to realize that someone had gone to quite a bit of trouble to make sure that he had all the essential clothing.

The door to his room was something that he was vaguely familiar with, a 'pocket door'. The top of the door was on a track and when the door slid aside, it disappeared into a recess in the wall.

There was no knob on his door, just a slight indentation that his fingers could catch, but more importantly, there was no way for him to lock, or even latch it.

As he walked out into the hall and slid the door closed behind him, he noticed that beside the door, the number '112' was on a placard.

His unease ratcheted up another notch as he felt yet another indication of his loss of identity.

He looked up and down the hallway and it was like looking into infinity.

The white sterile hallway seemed to go on forever in both directions.

With no compelling reason to go one way or the other, he turned right and started walking.

After a few minutes of walking, passing one after another of the closed 'pocket' doors with sequentially increasing numbered placards beside each, he detected the sound of voices ahead of him.

He slowed his pace and listened carefully, trying to get a sense of what lay ahead.

The most noticeable thing was the sound of crying, it wasn't a sound like someone had suffered an injury, but more a sound of despair.

Beyond that, he heard the sounds of arguing voices, one of which he took to be male. The sounds were those of frustration more than anger, although in his experience it wasn't a very big leap from one to the other.

Regardless of whatever caution he felt, he nonetheless walked into a room that looked like some sort of a bizarre cafeteria, even though it didn't have food. Or maybe some sort of funky library, except that it didn't have books. It was a white room with stark white tables and single piece molded white plastic chairs.

There were about a dozen people in the room.

Two things stood out to him before anything else. First, not everyone in the room was wearing blue coveralls, like he was. Nearly half of them were wearing green. Second, there were over twice as many girls as boys.

That was another curious thing, everyone in the... room, was a teenager, like himself. There weren't any children and there weren't any adults.

"What the FUCK is going on?!" One of the girls in green screamed in frustration, causing him to recoil in surprise.

"Calm down. There's got to be a logical explanation." A boy beside her soothed.

"Really? REALLY?! Because if there's an explanation for all of this, I'd like to hear it!" The girl exploded.

"Actually, so would I." The boy beside her admitted.

Another step into the room caused a few of those in attendance to turn and look at him.

"What's going on?" A girl's voice asked from behind him, causing him to jump.

"I don't know. I just woke up."

"Me, too." The girl, also dressed in blue, said quietly and seemed to be on the verge of tears.

"My name's Joseph. Maybe if we put our heads together we can figure this out." He said in a gentle tone and did his best to smile, to put her at ease.

"Thanks. I'm Zarah." The girl responded, and it was then that Joseph noticed the number 105 embroidered on her upper left chest.

"It's nice to meet you, Sarah. What do you remember from before you woke up here?"

"My name is Zarah, with a 'Z'." She sternly corrected.

"Okay. Sorry." Joseph said immediately, then asked again, "What do you remember?"

"I was at school. There was a group of us who were selected for a special trip to the state capitol. There were three of us. We got into the van and... I don't remember what happened next. Things kind of get foggy after that."

"Yeah. Same here. But for me, we were supposed to be going to New York so that we could meet with Lisa Randall."

"Who?"

"She's a theoretical physicist." Joseph said, then explained, "You know all those standardized tests that we have to take? Well, they said that I have an aptitude for physics, so they wanted to do stuff to encourage my interest."

"Wait. That's kind of what they said to me, too. Except that they wanted to encourage my interest in group dynamics and social engineering... or something like that. All I know is that it sounded really creepy when they said it."

"It's even creepier now that we're here... wherever *here* is." Joseph said slowly, then a stray thought came to mind and he cautiously asked, "You aren't from Decatur High, are you?"

"Decatur? No. I go to Red Lake. Where's Decatur?"

"In Benton County..." Joseph said slowly, waiting for any sign of recognition. Finding none, he continued, "...Arkansas."

"Arkansas? Really?"

"Where's Red Lake?" Joseph asked, having a feeling that he wasn't going to like the answer.

"Minnesota."

Joseph looked around the room at all the people yammering or crying and spoke loudly, so he could gain their attention. "Does anyone know where we are or how we got here?"

The voices around the room quieted, and no one seemed to have an answer.

"All I know is that my principal called me to the office to talk about the permission slips for the class trip we were about to take then, the next thing I know, I'm here in Roofieville." One of the Green girls answered.

Joseph slowly nodded, then thought to ask, "Where are you from?"

"Carrollton, Ohio."

As he was about to ask her name, another thought intruded on his mind. He looked around the group to verify his suspicion before saying, "There's only white people here."

"What?" The girl from Carrollton asked with surprise at the seeming non-sequitur.

"It's not a racist thing. But look around. I'm just trying to figure out what we've got in common so maybe I can figure out what we're doing here." Joseph explained, then continued, "It doesn't seem to have anything to do with where we're from, because we seem to be from all over the place. But we're all just about the same age and we're all white."

"So?" Another one of the girls asked indignantly.

"So... I don't know. Why would someone want to kidnap a bunch of teenage white kids from all over the country?"

"Ransom?" One of the green boys speculated.

"From the look of this place, I don't think money's a big worry for whoever's behind this. Besides that, my parents live from paycheck to paycheck. Whoever did this wouldn't get any money out of kidnapping me."

"My parents would probably pay them to keep me." Zarah said under her breath.

"So, why else would they kidnap us, drug us, and bring us here... wherever here is?" Joseph persisted.

"What are your grades like?" One of the girls asked curiously.

"A's mostly, a few B's." Joseph answered, then looked at Zarah inquisitively.

"Yeah. Something like that."

"Does anyone here have lower than a B average?" Joseph called out to the group.

After a moment of near silence, he decided that they had stumbled upon another of the criteria for their selection.

"What's going on?" A girl asked from the doorway.

The fact that she was confused wasn't a surprise. They all were. The fact that she had found her way to their meeting room also didn't set her apart. What *did* set her apart was the fact that she was wearing canary yellow coveralls.

"Where did you come from?" Joseph asked her cautiously.

"Back that way." She said as she pointed behind her to another hallway, opposite the one that Joseph had entered from.

"I mean, you're wearing yellow. Are there more people wearing yellow back that way?"

"Yeah, it was all Greens and Yellows back there and one Orange."

"Orange? How many of us do you think there are?" Joseph asked as his mind whirled.

"Has anyone found any food, yet? That's what the Yellows and Greens are worried about."

"No. But I just woke up a few minutes ago. I didn't even think to look."

"Is everything alright here?" A boy in yellow asked as he emerged from the hallway that the girl had come from.

"Yeah. It's alright. They seem to be calm." The girl confirmed.

"Have you guys figured anything out?" The boy in yellow asked as he looked around.

"Who are you?" Joseph asked slowly as a thousand and one other thoughts raced through his mind.

"I'm Stone and this is Alyssa."

"I'm Joseph and this is Zarah. What's going on back that way?"

"They're all scared half to death and taking it out on each other."

"Did you notice if there were any little kids or adults or anyone who wasn't white, back there?"

"No." Stone answered, then amended, "I mean, yes, I noticed. No, there weren't any."

Joseph nodded, then explained, "That's as far as we've gotten."

"We're all A or B students, too." Zarah interjected.

"Right. We were trying to figure out what we all had in common that might have given someone a reason to do this to us." Joseph explained.

The sound of running footsteps caused everyone to look toward the hallway that Joseph had emerged from.

Two people, a boy wearing black and a girl wearing purple jogged into the room and stopped.

"This is the fourth meeting room that we've found. Black, purple, gray, blue and now, here's green." The girl in purple said as she tried to catch her breath.

"Are they all in a row, or did you have to turn?" Joseph asked slowly, appearing to be on the verge of discovering something.

"We had to turn right at the black and purple room, then we had to turn right again back at the one between the Grays and the Blues. The boy in black responded and watched for Joseph's reaction.

"I'm guessing that since you're here that you didn't see any way out." Zarah said speculatively.

"No. Nothing but numbered doors, and meeting halls like this one." The girl in purple confirmed.

"How about food? Has anyone found food or water?" Stone interjected.

"No. Sorry." The boy in black answered regretfully.

"Attention, Level three residents. Please dress and proceed down the hallway outside your doors to one of the meeting halls. When you arrive, relax and everything will be explained. Please, do not be afraid. Your happiness is important to us." A voice said from all around them.

"Level three? Does that mean that there's two more levels like this one?" Stone asked aloud as he looked to the others for confirmation.

"At least two." Joseph said absently as his mind tried to process all that they had learned so far.

"Let's sit down and see if they're going to tell us what's going on." Zarah said reasonably.

"Yeah." Joseph agreed and walked with Zarah and the two 'runners', to take seats at the nearest table.

"I'm Ryan and this is Kenna." The boy in black said as he sat down.

"I'm Zarah and this is Joseph."

Before they could say more, people started trickling into the room from both hallways. The people from Joseph and Zarah's hallway were all dressed in blue, and everyone emerging from the other hallway was

wearing green. There were about fifteen in total, all looking sleepy and confused. One of the Blue girls was carrying her boots as she scuffed into the room in her sock clad feet.

"Welcome to your new adventure." A man's voice said from all around them, then a panel lit up on one of the white walls to show the word 'Welcome' in bright, cheerful letters. It appeared to be a projection, but Joseph couldn't find a source for it and deduced that it was being projected from behind the smooth white wall which must be semi opaque.

"As some of you are no doubt aware, this great nation of ours is going through some troubling times at the moment. It is for that reason that you have been brought here. The members of Level 3 are some of the best and brightest of the up and coming generation." The man's voice said cheerfully.

"Lucky us." Ryan said under his breath.

"Until the crisis passes, you will be kept safe here, and we will make every effort to see to your needs." The voice continued.

"Where is here?" A girl on the other side of the room called out.

"Since today is your arrival day, there will be no testing. But from tomorrow forward, you will have to earn your food by performing certain tasks. Some of these tasks will be academic exercises, designed to help you reach your full potential, others will be chores to contribute to the well being of your community."

"Wait! If we don't do what they say, they won't feed us?" Kenna asked in surprise.

"Food dispensers are located in the quarters where you awakened. They will only dispense food for the person assigned to those quarters. The

community areas are available for your enjoyment when your tasks for the day have been completed."

"We're going to have to find a way to get out of here." Joseph said quietly to his companions.

"For now, take the opportunity to get to know each other and become familiar with your accommodations. Further updates will be forthcoming. Have a nice day." The unrealistically cheerful voice finished, as the 'Welcome' image disappeared from the wall.

Joseph looked at his companions and quietly said, "From the way you described the layout of this place, I'm imagining a grid with two hallways top and bottom, and two on each side. Those hallways are connected by these meeting rooms, meaning that there would be eight, forming a square. There also might be a ninth room at the center, if we can find out how to get there. If it exists, it might also be the control room for all of this."

"Control. That's the key." Zarah said thoughtfully, "They went to a lot of trouble to drug us and bring us all here, so we know that they're serious about whatever their plan is. But now they have to control us. If we really think this through, there might be a way that we can use their commitment to the project and their expectations to our advantage."

Joseph slowly nodded, then said, "We're rats in a maze."

"Which would suggest observation." Ryan added.

"When that girl asked a question, the guy who was talking didn't answer and seemed not to notice. That could mean that they can't 'hear' us." Kenna said speculatively.

Zarah considered for a moment, then said, "That wasn't a guy. That was a computer."

"How sure are you?" Joseph asked her cautiously.

"I've heard that voice before. It's commercially available for speech synthesis programs."

"So, there's a chance that there's not really an actual person watching us..." Ryan speculated.

Joseph immediately shook his head, then said, "They've gone to too much trouble and dumped too much money into whatever this is to let it drive itself off a cliff. I'm betting that the computer voice is their way of making sure that they don't accidentally give us any clues about who 'they' are or what 'they' *really* have planned for us."

"It's got to be the government. Who else would be able to set something like this up?" Kenna asked as she looked around the group for confirmation.

"It doesn't fit." Joseph said slowly, then continued, "Why would the government build a facility like this to begin with? I'm not saying that they wouldn't kidnap or drug us, but once they had us, they'd just put us in barracks or Quonset huts or something."

"Yeah. And why only white people? That doesn't sound like something that the government would do." Zarah said uncertainly.

"Yeah, ask the Tuskegee Airmen about what the government would do." Kenna said with a knowing look at Zarah.

"Still, it seems like there's some other kind of motivation behind all of this. They said 'the best and the brightest' and 'the up and coming generation'." Joseph said and seemed to be on the verge of figuring something out.

"What have you come up with?" Zarah asked as a chill went up her spine. She couldn't account for the feeling, but had an idea that Joseph might be onto something.

"The end of the world." Joseph whispered as his expression became distant.

"What?" Ryan asked in surprise.

Joseph blinked and seemed to come back to the present before explaining, "Think about it. If a bunch of people... millionaires... were worried about the end of the world, what do you think that they'd do to prepare for it?"

"Build themselves bunkers so that they could take their families there and stay safe while the rest of the world goes to hell." Ryan answered, then looked to Kenna for confirmation.

After a moment to consider, Kenna nodded then asked, "So, what does that have to do with us?"

"You need to think longer term. After our civilization falls, what then? How do they pick up the pieces?" Joseph asked in a leading tone.

"With a bunch of smart kids who've been trained to do what they're told." A voice said from over Joseph's shoulder.

Joseph turned and saw that Stone and Alyssa were both standing there, listening to their conversation.

"What you said, it makes sense." Stone said thoughtfully, then focused on Joseph and continued, "But I think it's more than that. The girls outnumber the guys by quite a bit. Why do you think that is?"

"For breeding." Zarah muttered.

"Not just that, according to what the voice said, they know that we're all smart, that's one of the reasons why we were chosen. I think that not only do they want a bunch of smart people under their control, but they also want our smart kids." Stone said as he looked around the assembled group.

"And the male to female ratio suggests that they mean for each guy to father kids on at least three different girls." Ryan speculated.

"At a time." Kenna added, then continued, "If we were supposed to 'repopulate the earth', or something along those lines, then the need for genetic diversity would require that each man impregnate as many women as possible and that the women bear one child after another in an endless succession until they're no longer capable of childbirth."

Joseph slowly nodded, then asked, "How do you think that they're going to arrange that?"

"Viagra in our food?" Ryan suggested uncertainly.

"Viagra only increases blood flow to the penis, ensuring an erection. It doesn't do anything to stimulate sexual behavior. If their objective is really to get us hot and horny, they'll have to do that by stimulating the libido with an aphrodisiac." Stone said clinically.

"You sure know a lot about this stuff." Ryan said with a curious look askance at him.

"I'm a fifteen year old guy who gets decent grades. That doesn't really draw a lot of admirers. So, if I can't *do* it, I can at least read about it." Stone said unrepentantly.

There was a long moment of silence, until Joseph finally said, "The food dispensers will only provide food for the person assigned to those quarters. That's how they could be sure to give each person the drugs to make them do what they want."

"So when I eat, I might be getting fertility drugs and you might be getting aphrodisiacs?" Zarah asked speculatively.

"Or you might be getting birth control and I might be getting the equivalent of chemical castration, if they decide that we're not a good genetic match." Joseph countered.

Zarah thought about that for a moment, then quietly said, "Which brings us back to control."

"How long do you think they plan on keeping us here?" Alyssa asked the assembled group.

"I don't know." Joseph admitted, then regretfully continued, "But that might have something to do with why they only kidnapped teenagers."

There was a long moment of silence as the group digested the words.

Finally Zarah quietly said, "Oh... *that* long."

"Tammy thinks that this is all some kind of a psychological experiment that they're running on us." One of the Green girls said loudly from the other side of the room.

Zarah looked at Joseph inquiringly as he considered the idea.

"What could they be trying to prove?" Alyssa finally asked.

Zarah noticed that Joseph seemed to be lost in thought. After a moment to consider, she carefully answered, "Actually, they could be trying to prove any number of things about human behavior, group dynamics and the reactions to isolation within homogenous groups of people."

"Isolation? There's almost thirty people in here now. And if Joseph's right about the layout of this place, that might mean that there's about two hundred of us in here." Stone said challengingly.

"Not isolation from each other. More like isolation from the outside world. Think *Lord of the Flies*." Zarah explained.

Joseph slowly nodded, then said, "Actually, they might be right."

Stone looked at Joseph with surprise, then cautiously asked, "So, are you giving up on your end-of-the-world idea?"

"No. But it's best to formulate as many hypotheses as possible, then as things progress, search for evidence to disprove them."

Stone nodded, then cautiously asked, "Okay. What kind of evidence do you have that this is a psychological experiment?"

"What time is it?"

When Joseph didn't get an immediate answer, he continued, "Is it day or night?"

A few of the people surrounding their group were turning and listening to their conversation.

"What day of the week is it? What's the date?"

"That doesn't prove anything." Stone said halfheartedly.

"Why did they strip us naked and remove all our personal belongings? Why wouldn't they let us have our phones or tablets or anything else that might allow us to have some concept of the passage of time?" Joseph persisted.

"To keep us disoriented." Zarah whispered, mostly to herself.

Joseph nodded, then explained, "I can't say for sure that that's the reason behind this, but it seems like they went out of their way to make sure that we were as cutoff as possible from any *concept* of where and when we are."

Kenna slowly nodded, then quietly said, "That *does* sound like some kind of a big mind game."

Despite the number of people in the room, it was silent as everyone seemed to be pondering the possibilities.

Finally, Stone quietly said, "So, either it's the end of the world or they're messing with our heads?"

Zarah shook her head and responded, "There's nothing saying that it couldn't be both."

"That's right. The presence of one doesn't automatically disprove the other." Joseph agreed.

"Okay. But even if that's true, we should still be able to figure out *when* it is. I mean, they knocked us out and brought us here. That couldn't have taken more than a day or two." Ryan said in a somewhat anxious voice.

Joseph nodded, then thought to ask, "What day was it when you were... taken?"

Ryan had to think for a moment, but finally said, "Friday."

"Friday the second or Friday the ninth?" Joseph asked to confirm.

"The second."

"For me it was Monday the fifth." Joseph said, then raised his voice and asked, "Is there anyone here that was taken after Monday, the fifth of November?"

"I was." A girl in blue said from the other end of the table and sounded not to be in the most stable condition.

"What was your name?"

"Brianna."

"What day was it when you were taken, Brianna?"

"Tuesday, the sixth."

"Okay. Can you remember *anything* that happened on Tuesday?" Joseph asked, then explained, "It might give us an idea of what all of this is about."

"Yeah. President Ashwood sent planes and bombs and stuff to try and kill President Bryce."

"Wait. What?!" Joseph yelled.

"Yeah. I think I remember that, too." Alyssa said slowly, then continued, "Mrs. Bryce and one of their kids were shot, trying to get to safety."

"That's right, and it was election day." Brianna quickly added, as an afterthought.

"There was also a big hacking attack." A boy in green with a mop of unruly black hair interjected.

Joseph looked around and found that everyone, all of the nearly thirty people in the room, were listening to their conversation.

"What's your name?" Joseph asked the black haired boy.

"Wade."

"Tell us what you know, Wade."

"Well, I heard about President Bryce. By the way, I also remember hearing that his son, Chris, was probably going to be okay. I think the last thing I heard was that they weren't sure about the President's wife or their unborn baby." Wade said as he struggled to remember.

"Oh, Jesus. No wonder the 'end-of-the-world' alarm went off." Zarah whispered under her breath.

"But there was something else going on. Some kind of huge hacking thing, I think it happened on Monday, but I didn't hear much about it until Tuesday. There was all kinds of stuff about how President Ashwood had lots of people killed who opposed him or disagreed with him... or looked at him funny. I mean *lots*. And not just them, but their families, too. Of course,

the people on the news were saying that it was all just a hoax but... I really don't think that it was." Wade finished anxiously.

Joseph thought about that for a moment, then said, "When the computer voice welcomed us here, it said that this country is going through troubling times and that's why we were brought here. If President Ashwood openly attacked President Bryce and somehow President Bryce was able to spill a bunch of secrets about President Ashwood, then I'd say that bullets and bombs and who knows what else are either going to start flying soon, or already have."

As the others were thinking about that, Wade slowly said, "I actually have no problem believing that, but I still don't get why they brought us here."

"We've had a few ideas about that, but none of them are too nice to think about." Joseph told him.

Wade smirked slightly, then said, "Well, being kidnapped, drugged then dumped in a 1960's vision of the future isn't too nice to think about either."

Joseph looked at their surroundings with wide eyes, then quietly said, "I can't believe that I didn't make the connection."

"I thought it was obvious. This is the same white plastic crap furniture that they had in all those 'just barely in color' sci fi movies from the 60's." Wade said as he gestured at the furniture in question.

When Zarah noticed the change in Joseph's expression, she quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

Joseph seemed to break out of his racing thoughts at the question and responded, "This is a lot worse than what I was thinking. It's looking more and more like we're caught in some rich whacko's doomsday scenario. But to make matters worse, whoever it is has no concept of reality. They've

dumped tons of money into re-creating a 1960's fantasy and trapped us in it."

"What does that mean?"

"I had originally thought that a millionaire or a group of them had set this up so that they could rebuild after the fall of civilization. And I guess that could still be true. But what I hadn't anticipated is that the person planning all of this was an idiot. They watched cheesy old sci fi movies and didn't use them as *inspiration*, but literally re-created the entire scenario."

"So?"

"So! Have you *ever* seen one of those movies with a happy ending? They're all psychological horror movies, ending in gruesome tragedy."

"Actually, I don't really enjoy sci fi movies, I'm more of a reader."

Joseph looked at her with surprise for a moment, then calmed himself before saying, "Okay. It may not be as bad as I'm making it out to be, but it still seems like we've been trapped in someone's re-creation of a bad movie that was a really stupid bad idea to begin with."

"Rich, racist, determined... and stupid. That's a dangerous combination."

Stone muttered, mostly to himself.

Zarah looked at him speculatively, then slowly said, "Maybe there's some way we can make that work for us."

That caught Joseph's interest and he cautiously asked, "How?"

"I don't know, yet. But I doubt that I'm going to come up with any brilliant ideas until after I've had something to eat. I'm starving."

As she said the words, Joseph felt his stomach rumble in agreement. "Food sounds like a really good idea. Let's all go and eat and anyone who's interested in helping us figure out what to do next can meet us back here."

Sounds of agreement were spreading through the room when Ryan said, "We're going to have to jog back to the Purple and Black areas. Do you want us to take them any messages from you?"

"Yeah. If you find anyone who's interested, tell them what we've been able to figure out so far. If any of them have anything to contribute, have them meet us here."

"We'll do that, too." Alyssa said as she stood from the table.

"We'll be back. Don't start without us." Stone said as he also stood.

"You got it." Joseph said with a smile, then looked to Zarah to see if she were ready to go.

"I wonder if they put you in here because of your leadership skills." Zarah said with a smile at him.

"I don't want to make the mistake of giving them too much credit. We've already seen evidence of their flawed reasoning in creating this place to begin with. If the reason for me being here is anything more than the fact that I met their most basic selection criteria, it could be something as stupid as me looking like some 1960's heartthrob that none of us ever heard of before."

"Yeah. It could be that, too." Zarah laughed as they started walking down the hallway.

"This is mine." Joseph said as he stopped at his doorway.

"I'll see you in a few minutes. *Bon appetite.*" Zarah said with a smile, then continued on.

Joseph slid open the door and was once again struck by the unrelenting 'whiteness' of the room.

He made a cursory inspection of the bedroom, not finding anything remotely resembling food waiting for him.

He walked into the bathroom, on the off chance that there might be something waiting for him in there, but the room was completely unchanged from when he'd been in there earlier.

As he walked back into the bedroom, he said aloud, "I thought you said that there'd be food in here."

"Outstanding requirements: Bed not made. Rectify situation to receive nourishment." The computerized voice said from all around him.

"Are you saying that you won't feed me unless I make my bed?" Joseph asked into the air.

"Outstanding requirements: Bed not made. Rectify situation to receive nourishment." The voice repeated.

If Joseph had any doubt about the voice being that of a computer, the exact repetition of the instructions, in word and in inflection, would have been enough to convince him.

He walked to the bed and did a half-assed job of adjusting the cover so that it lay flat.

As he was setting the pillow in place, he heard a movement from just past the foot of the bed.

He turned to see a table and low bench type chair emerging sideways from the wall. At the same time, and at the same slow pace, as though they were all part of the same mechanism, a panel in the wall was sliding aside to reveal something that looked like a milkshake, housed inside a lighted box that was a cube, about twelve inches wide, high and deep.

He cautiously picked up the glass and was surprised to find that it wasn't cold, as he would have expected.

A cautious sniff of the gray creamy looking concoction yielded no aroma. From the appearance, he *might* be able to convince himself that this was a cookies and cream milkshake, except that there was no evidence of cookies... or cream... or anything else, really. It was a sludgy gray liquid.

He thought for a moment about not drinking it, but had the feeling that it might be the only opportunity for him to have anything remotely resembling food in the foreseeable future. Besides that, him not drinking wouldn't punish *them*, whoever they were, to any measurable degree, but it would almost certainly result in suffering on his part.

He brought the clear hard plastic drinking glass to his lips and took a tentative taste.

The *flavor* wasn't unpleasant. In point of fact, it didn't appear to have any flavor at all.

The color was absolutely revolting, reminding him of when he helped his dad empty the collected water out of the shop vacuum in their garage. But he could close his eyes easily enough and not be overly bothered by it.

The *texture*, however, was a completely different matter. From its appearance, Joseph expected the 'sludge' to be somewhat thick, perhaps like a milkshake. But nothing prepared him for the unexpected viscosity of it.

Mucous... snails, slugs and various other gastropods came to mind as the lukewarm wads of gelatinous goo found their way to his stomach.

He very nearly choked, as he quickly placed the glass on the table beside him.

After a few deep breaths, he decided to go ahead and take a seat at the table, since it was so conveniently placed.

It took a few minutes of weighing his options before he screwed up his resolve and forced himself to drink some more.

His original plan had been to drink it down, all in one go, and be done with it. But near the midway point, his plan had to be altered.

He hadn't taken into account just how 'thick' the revolting gray sludge was. No matter how quickly he tried to drink it, it seemed to only go at its own *snail's* pace.

He drew in a few deep, desperate breaths and became aware of his eyes watering.

As he looked at his half-empty glass, another thing came to mind. He was actually starting to feel 'full'.

He nearly convinced himself that he would be able to endure on what he had already been able to force down. But before he could commit to that choice, he once again reminded himself that he was in a situation where he had no concept of time. There was no way of knowing when the next 'meal' would be provided.

After a deep inhale as much to brace himself, as to provide him the oxygen he would need to 'chug' the remaining 'food', Joseph brought the glass to his mouth and fought determinedly to drink it down.

Even so, he nearly ran out of air before the last vestiges of the slimy concoction were finally swallowed.

"Please return the glass to the dispenser receptacle." The computerized voice said in a tone that was a little too cheerful. In fact, to Joseph's ears, it sounded to be almost delighted in its triumph, coercing him into drinking the repulsive semi-gelatinous goo.

It only took a matter of seconds for him to reason that, if he refused, then food might be withheld from him as a consequence.

He stood and placed the glass back into the cube shaped space in the wall, where he had gotten it from.

As soon as he released the glass, the table, bench and panel in the wall started moving in unison.

"*Thank you, have a nice day.*" The computerized voice said cheerfully.

"Blow me." Joseph responded darkly.

Within a minute, the table and bench had retreated and left nothing but a pattern of grooves in the wall, outlining where they had been.

The sound of a knock on the door nearly made Joseph jump out of his skin.

He quickly walked to the door and slid it aside.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?" Zarah asked with a knowing smile.

"That was, without a doubt, the most disgusting thing I've ever put in my mouth." Joseph said as he stepped into the hallway and slid the door closed behind him.

"I've had worse." Zarah said simply, then added, "But not by much."

"You've had worse than that?"

"Yeah. When I was about twelve or thirteen I was starting to get a little 'chunky' so I started drinking 'meal replacement' shakes to try and lose weight. It was just about as gloppy as this stuff, but it was also way too sweet and had really nasty perfumy artificial flavor." Zarah explained as they walked.

"You don't need to lose weight."

"Yeah. As soon as I accepted that I was never going to be a 'supermodel' I went back to eating normal food and everything sorted itself out."

"Well, I don't think weight gain is going to be a problem for us, if that's going to be our only source of nutrition."

"Yeah. That's something else that I was thinking about..."

"Gaining weight?"

"No." Zarah immediately responded, then explained, "Earlier we were trying to figure out what we all had in common. Did you notice that out of everyone in the meeting hall, no one was overweight?"

"No. It never occurred to me."

"The only reason I mentioned it is because, given the rate of obesity in this country, how statistically unlikely do you think it is that we'd end up with a group of people that all fall within the clinical definition of 'normal' weight?"

"You're right. I didn't notice anyone who was particularly thin, either."

"Do you remember if anyone in the meeting hall had glasses? I wasn't looking for it, but if there wasn't, that's another thing that we should probably check on." Zarah said as they walked through the doorway into the meeting hall.

The thought made Joseph uneasy, although he couldn't put his finger on exactly 'why' that was.

"If we're right about their plans for us, I mean, about the breeding thing, then I don't think that it would be too big of a leap in reasoning to assume that the people orchestrating all of this look upon women as primarily having value as 'baby factories'." Zarah added as she led the way to the table and took the seat that she had occupied previously.

Joseph automatically took the seat beside her and noticed that the four other people already in the room automatically moved to take seats with them. The only one of them that he recognized from earlier was Wade.

Joseph considered Zarah's words for a moment, then finally said, "I don't know if there's enough evidence to support that theory, but I haven't seen anything yet to disprove it."

"What are you talking about?" A blond girl in green asked as she turned in her seat.

"Eugenics." Zarah said simply.

Joseph felt a chill run up his spine at the invocation of the word.

"Does that mean that we've been kidnapped by Nazis?" The girl asked with a hitch of fear in her voice.

Zarah seemed to be considering the question carefully before she answered, "I'm not an expert on things like this, but from what little I know about it, eugenics was just one component part of the Nazi agenda."

"What's eugenics?" Wade asked timidly, appearing to be ashamed that he didn't already know.

Zarah flashed him a quick smile, before answering, "Like I said, I'm not an expert. But I came across some things in my grandparents' library that caught my interest and I did a little research. As I understand it, eugenics is the scientific theory about improving a *confined* human population by controlling their breeding to increase the occurrence of the most desirable inheritable characteristics."

Wade thought about that for a moment, then cautiously asked, "And you think that's what's going on here?"

"It's another possibility." Joseph said before Zarah could answer, then explained, "Try thinking about it this way. If someone *were* trying to breed a superior version of humans, what steps would they take?"

Zarah nodded, then continued the thought, "That doesn't mean that that's what's going on here, but in trying to make sense of all of this, we need to consider what their motivations might be."

"I thought you said that you weren't going to start without us." Stone said as he and Alyssa, along with four others dressed in yellow walked into the meeting hall.

Joseph smiled as he said, "We couldn't help ourselves."

Stone grinned at the answer, then asked, "What did we miss?"

"We were just discussing the possibility that we've either been abducted by Nazis or at least, by a group of people wanting to breed their own version of 'The Master Race'."

"Oh, is that all?"

Wade, who had been lost in thought, suddenly asked, "Do you really think that we've been captured by someone wanting to force the evolution of the human race?"

"Evolution isn't really the right term unless we start talking about timescales of tens of thousands of years. I think that 'selective breeding' is more accurate. The goal wouldn't be to produce the next taxonomic species of humans, because that's totally unrealistic. What we're talking about is more along the lines of what they do in breeding horses or dogs to produce thoroughbreds with the most desirable dominant genetic attributes." Zarah carefully explained, then quickly added, "I'm just going on my limited understanding of this. I don't really have any background in genetics or evolutionary science. I've just read some stuff."

"You know a lot more about it than I do. We weren't even allowed to say the 'E' word in my school." Alyssa interjected.

"What have you guys figured out?" A voice asked from behind them.

"Welcome back, Ryan. We're just floating theories, at this point." Joseph said to him pleasantly, then thought to ask, "Is Kenna coming back?"

"Yeah. She stayed behind to talk to the Purples and Grays about what you were talking about before." Ryan said as he walked to the table and took a seat.

"Did the Blacks come up with any new theories?"

"Aliens." Ryan said with a barely restrained grin.

"Wow! I hadn't thought of that one!" Joseph said with a laugh.

"There are a few of the Blacks and Purples who are pretty sure that we're not even on Earth anymore."

Zarah appeared to be more thoughtful than amused by the suggestion.

Finally, she said, "Well, as absurd as it sounds, I can't see any reason to reject it until or unless we have conclusive evidence to prove that it absolutely isn't possible."

Wade was the one to voice what the majority present seemed to be thinking, "Well, except for the obvious... that it *isn't* possible."

"Under ordinary circumstances, I'd agree with you. But given the extraordinary situation that we've found ourselves in, we can't afford to dismiss *any* theory, out of hand."

Joseph considered that for a moment before decisively saying, "Ryan, the next time you talk to the Blacks and Purples, tell them to go ahead and do whatever they can to collect evidence to prove their theory. We're not necessarily 'onboard', but we'd be interested to hear their arguments."

More and more of those present could see the sense of what Joseph was suggesting.

Finally, Stone asked, "Do you want for us to ask the Yellows and Greens back in our room to do the same with the 'Eugenics Theory'?"

Joseph smiled at the suggestion and responded, "Yeah. That sounds like a really good idea. And the Blues and Greens in here can dig in and try to come up with arguments to support the idea that we've been abducted by a group of racist, misogynistic, Nazi millionaires who are a little bit too fond of 1960's sci fi movies."

"What if they started setting this up back in the 1960's or 1970's?" A girl in green asked cautiously. Joseph recognized her as being the one from Ohio who made the 'Roofieville' comment, earlier.

"What was your name?"

"Leah."

Joseph nodded, then said, "You might be right, Leah. There's no way that someone could have set something like this up in a matter of weeks. It's very possible that someone started working on this place decades ago, just waiting for the day when it could be used."

"What have we come up with?" A female voice asked from the hallway.

Joseph turned and smiled when he saw Kenna approaching with a girl dressed in gray coveralls. "Nazis, aliens and demented millionaires. Welcome back, Kenna. Who's this?"

"This is Autumn. She's here to find out what you've come up with so that she can report back to the Grays and Purples."

"Autumn, I'm Joseph and this is Zarah. Whenever you're ready, we can fill you in about our theory regarding the 'Doomsday Millionaires'. In yellow we have Stone and Alyssa, who can fill you in on the 'Nazi Eugenics' theory. Ryan, in black, can fill you in on the 'Alien Abduction' theory that the Blacks and Purples have come up with."

"When they said that you guys were on top of things, I really didn't think that you'd be this well organized. Everyone in our room's been whining about how much we miss our families and stuff like that."

Joseph sympathetically nodded, then quietly said, "All of us will probably be doing that at some point. It's only natural. But right now, we're trying to come up with as many theories as possible about where we are and what they're going to do to us."

"I guess that all of us just automatically assumed that this was something that the government was doing."

"Good. Then, when you go back there, ask them if they'd do their best to come up with as much proof as possible to support that theory. We're working under the assumption that this isn't being done by the government, but I don't think we have any compelling proof of that."

"Yeah. I think that it'll make them feel better to have something to do."

"Jesus God! How many of these things are there?" A girl in red coveralls asked in exasperation as she walked into the room.

"We've been assuming that there are eight meeting halls, but we don't have any proof of that, yet." Joseph answered her, then asked, "Who are you?"

"Randa." The girl said cautiously as she looked around the room at all the people dressed in various colors.

"It's nice to meet you, Randa. I'm Joseph and this is Zarah. We're all just meeting here trying to figure out who did this to us, what their objectives are and what steps we can take to get out."

"We haven't really talked too much about that. We've been working on trying to find a door or a window or a secret passage or anything else to get us out of here."

"Did you have any luck?" Wade asked with excitement at the idea.

"Yes." Randa said immediately, then quietly added, "All of it bad."

Cautious looks flashed around the room and Alyssa finally asked, "What happened?"

"After that little public-address speech in the meeting room, a few of the guys used one of the tables as a battering ram and broke through the wall."

"What did they find?" Wade asked cautiously.

"Another, even more solid, wall." Randa said simply, then continued, "And after that, we were told that we wouldn't be allowed to eat today."

That caught Joseph's attention and he asked, "Who wouldn't be allowed to eat? Just the ones who broke through the wall or all of you?"

"When we went back to our rooms, everyone wearing red or orange was told that due to our unacceptable behavior that we weren't going to be fed. We're going to have to do a whole list of things to 'earn' our food tomorrow."

"That's something that we're going to have to keep in mind. If we take any action, our color groups are likely to be punished for it."

"Another example of control." Zarah muttered.

Joseph nodded at her, then said to the assembly, "That doesn't mean that we won't take any action, but I think that it's going to be important that we be sure that everyone in our color groups is aware of what we're going to do and is willing to accept the consequences before we do it."

"I need to spread the word to the Grays. The way they've been acting, they might try something." Autumn said as she stood.

"We'll go with you." Ryan said, then looked to be sure that Kenna was going to follow.

"If you guys come up with anything good, be sure to send someone down to let us know." Kenna said, looking directly at Joseph.

"Unless anyone has anything else to add, right now, I'm going to go, too." Joseph said decisively.

Zarah looked at him, obviously not expecting that reaction.

When Joseph noticed, he explained, "I need a few minutes to clear my head. I was thinking of taking a long walk to see the rest of this place. I'd like to get a more real sense of where we are and how big this place actually is."

"Could you use some company?" Wade asked with a hopeful smile.

"The more the merrier." Joseph said with a grin at him, then looked at Zarah to see if she were going to join them.

"Are we talking about 'walking' or 'running'?"

"Walking. And we'll probably be making plenty of stops along the way, if we find anyone who wants to talk."

"I'm in."

Joseph turned to look at the others who had gathered and said, "Anyone who wants to go exploring, you're welcome to come along."

After a moment to see that no one had any questions, Joseph and Zarah joined Ryan and Kenna at the entrance to the hallway that led back to his room.

Chapter 2

As they were walking, Zarah asked, "What do you remember about when you were abducted?"

After a moment to think about it, Joseph replied, "Nothing, really. I remember going to the office to get signed out and to get my suitcase. Mr. Scott, the assistant football coach, was my chaperone. He was going to drive us to the airport... except, I don't know if we ever made it there."

"Do you remember eating or drinking anything before everything went fuzzy?"

"No." Joseph said immediately, then after another moment of thought, he clarified, "I'm not saying that I didn't, I'm just saying that I don't remember it. I don't remember feeling drugged or like I was falling asleep or anything. We were in the van and everything was normal, then it's like I sort of remember things happening after that, but I can't remember what they were. It's like there's a fog over my mind when I try to remember."

"Yeah. That's just what it's like for me, too." Zarah said darkly. "I have the feeling that there's a lot more that happened. And just like you, I don't remember feeling drugged or falling asleep. It's funny you said that about your suitcase. We did that, too. Vonette, Lajni and I were all excited about our trip. We were going to be gone overnight and brought our suitcases to school."

"For me it was a visit to PSU to tour their track and field facilities." Wade added in a subdued tone.

"Do you run track?" Joseph asked with interest.

"Yeah. Well, I just started at the beginning of this school year, but the coach was saying that if I kept trying and really stuck with it, that I could be pretty good."

"Did you have your suitcase and permission slips and everything?"

"Yeah. I took my suitcase to school. I had trouble concentrating on school that day because I was so excited about the trip. After my last class, I went to the coaches office and... that's it. I *think* that I got into the school van, at least I feel like I did. But it's all so foggy that I can't be sure."

As they walked into the Blue and Gray meeting hall, everyone who was there stopped talking and looked at the group with surprise.

"We're just walking around, trying to get a feeling for how big this place really is. Are you guys alright?" Joseph asked tentatively at their worried expressions.

"Are you Joseph?" A red haired girl, dressed in blue, asked.

"Yes. And the other Blues are Zarah and Brianna. In Green we have Wade and Tammy. You might already know Autumn, Ryan, Kenna and Randa. At least, I think that they've all passed through here before."

"Yes. Ryan said that you'd figured some things out. Do you know where we are or how to get us out of here?"

"No such luck. We're doing our best to try and reason things out, but we aren't being given a lot of clues." Joseph said regretfully, then asked,

"What's your name?"

"Mary Nicole. What do we do next?"

"Well, like I said, we're just walking around this place to see just how big it is and to see if we can spot any clues to help explain any of this."

"I think that if we don't find something to do pretty soon, we're going to go crazy."

"I tell you what. Right now we're working on trying to prove or disprove a lot of different theories as to why this is happening to us. The Yellows and

Greens are working on the theory that this is some kind of selective breeding program, trying to breed the next generation of super smart people."

Mary Nicole seemed to be horrified at the suggestion, but Joseph carried on, "The Blacks and Purples are working on the 'Alien Abduction' theory, our group, the Blues and Greens, are working on the theory that a bunch of millionaires cooked this up to try and prepare for the end of the world or the fall of civilization."

"Do you really think that could be true?"

"We're going to do our best to collect evidence to either prove or disprove the theory." Joseph calmly answered, then continued, "The Grays and the Purples have sort of assumed that this is all being done by President Ashwood, or at least by someone high up in the government. We've asked Autumn if she'd ask them to look more deeply into that to see if they can come up with any evidence."

Mary Nicole slowly nodded and seemed to be getting over her surprise.

"If you guys would like to help us out, there's another theory that we've been looking at that no one's actively investigating."

"You want us to help you?"

"Yeah. I mean, unless you've got something else going on."

"No. I think we've mostly just been feeling sorry for ourselves and missing our families. What can we do to help?"

"Someone back in our meeting hall suggested that this all might just be some kind of elaborate psychological experiment..." Joseph was beginning to say, but was interrupted.

"That was me!"

Joseph smiled at her, then said, "That's right. Tammy suggested that all of this might be some carefully orchestrated psychological experiment to see how we'd react to this particular scenario. If you guys don't have anything better to do, I was hoping that you might want to get together and see what you can come up with to prove or disprove the theory."

Mary Nicole looked around at the people surrounding her for a moment, then finally said, "Yeah. I've noticed that we've got a pretty smart group here and I think that all of us would like to be doing something more productive than feeling sorry for ourselves."

"If you realize that you're feeling afraid or worried about your families, don't beat yourselves up about it. Feel what you feel and deal with things however you can. But when all that's done, this is something that you can do that will help all of us. No matter whether you prove or disprove your theory, it'll make things easier on everyone to have you taking on this part of the workload."

"I'm going to stay here and fill them in on what you already figured out." Tammy said decisively.

"Thanks, Tammy." Joseph said with a smile at her, then started walking toward the doorway which was at a ninety degree angle from the door that they had entered from.

"So, the Blue Gray room is a corner." Zarah said to Joseph as they walked.

"Yes. And unless I'm mistaken, all the doors along this wall belong to the Grays. We already know that the hallway we were in before was for the Blues."

"And if your theory about the design of this place is right, then the next meeting hall will belong to the Grays and the Purples and it will be a straight walkthrough with no turn."

"Yeah. From the description everyone has given, that sounds right."

"It is. The next room has doors on both ends, just like the room where I found you." Autumn confirmed.

"I feel like we should be doing more." Ryan said as he walked up to Joseph's side.

"I know. If there were something or someone to beat the hell out of and blame for all this it'd probably make us all feel a lot better." Joseph said sympathetically.

"We tried that. It didn't work." Randa muttered.

"I bet that, just for a minute or two, everyone in your meeting hall was cheering and hollering and really hoping that they were about to find a way out." Joseph said to her, speculatively.

"Well, yeah."

"So, even if they *didn't* find a secret elevator or something behind that wall, at least they were able to actually, physically *do* something. And while they were doing it, everyone around them was able to experience a little hope. I think that regardless of the consequences and no matter the futility of the effort, that we're probably going to see more events like what happened with the Reds and the Oranges. No matter how smart we are, we can't deny our human nature. No matter how irrational the action may be, we will *always* fight against our captivity."

Randa smiled, then said, "I'm glad that you're not looking down on us because we acted emotionally rather than thinking it through, first."

"You took action. I have no problem with that. I regret that your groups are being punished because of it, but now we know what will happen if we take overt action against what's being done to us."

"Maybe it will make everyone feel better if I tell them that."

"Autumn, do you want to take the lead? We're in your territory now."

Joseph asked as they approached the entry to the next meeting hall.

"These are the people that Ryan was telling us about." Autumn said as she led the way into the room.

"Do you guys know what's going on?" An older boy asked anxiously. He was dressed in gray and appeared to be about seventeen or eighteen years old.

Joseph stepped forward and said, "We're still trying to sort that out. Most of what we've come up with is educated guesses, and it's possible that any or all of our assumptions are wrong because they're based on 'evidence' that might have been fed to us."

"Okay. I get that. But what have you come up with?"

"First, I'm Joseph, what's your name?"

"Jason... they kind of made me their leader."

"Yeah. I can sympathize." Joseph said with a grin, then continued, "Okay, Jason, so far what we've come up with is that some person, people or organization has arranged for all of us to be abducted. They were somehow able to set things up so that all of us had excused absences so that our friends and families wouldn't think that there was anything wrong until it was way too late for them to investigate what 'really' happened."

"I never even thought of that. I was supposed to be going to some special scout training, out of town..."

"You're a Boy Scout?"

"Yeah. Ever since I was seven."

"That takes a lot of commitment and dedication. No wonder you got to be leader of your group."

"I guess."

"Anyway, we were all drugged, but none of us can remember 'how' we were drugged. I really don't know *anything* about stuff like that, but it seems like we must have been given something that wipes out or 'clouds' short term memory. I think that all of us have the sensation that we did something more than we remember, but no one remembers what it is."

"Yeah."

"So, after we woke up, we went to the meeting halls and started trying to figure things out. In our meeting hall, we tried to discover why we were chosen, what things did we have in common that they could use as selection criteria."

"We're all fourteen or fifteen."

"Yeah, except for you. You're the oldest person that I've seen in here so far."

"Actually, I'm fifteen."

"Oh. I didn't know they made fifteen year olds that big."

"It's the Florida sunshine that does that." Jason said timidly.

"Must be." Joseph chuckled, then continued, "You're right, age is a big one. But we've also noticed that everyone here is white. No one is fat. None of us is in any way handicapped or even wears glasses. All of that doesn't prove anything, but when you consider what our captors' plans might be... it's a little creepy."

"That would also explain why there are so many more girls than guys..."

"Yeah. Like I said, it's all just guesses at this point, but going on what we've seen so far... I don't know what to tell you."

"Back in their meeting room, Joseph was asking if we could help by trying to prove that it's the government that arranged all of this." Autumn said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the hall.

"Yeah. If you don't have anything else that you need to focus on, it would really help us out."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Well, Autumn said that you were working under the assumption that what's happening to us is being done by the government. I, personally, don't think that's the case. I'm not saying that Ashwood wouldn't do something like this, I'm just saying that they wouldn't implement it this effectively. But anyway, if you'll just keep on doing what you're doing and try to find any evidence that the government really *is* behind this, it'll leave the rest of us free to work on other theories."

"What other theories?"

"I can fill him in, if you need to be going." Autumn quickly offered.

"Thanks Autumn. We've got quite a bit of ground to cover, so we probably should."

"Thanks for explaining things, Joe." Jason said with a teasing smile.

"Anytime, Jayce." Joseph responded with an answering grin before turning to leave.

"Oh. My. God! That guy was *cute!*" Zarah said in a whisper as they entered the hallway.

"And I'm not?" Joseph asked as he tried to restrain his smile.

"Oh, you're cute, too. He's just *drop dead* cute."

"I guess I can accept that."

Zarah looked at Joseph carefully. Once she was sure that he wasn't offended, she relaxed as they continued to walk.

"We're heading for the Purple and Black room. Who wants to introduce us to the natives?" Joseph asked with a smile.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Zarah asked from his side.

"I'm not enjoying the situation that we're in, but I'll admit that I'm enjoying walking around and getting to know people. I never really got to do anything like that before." Joseph said with a smile, then noticed that Kenna was looking at him anxiously.

"Remember, these guys are really serious about the alien thing, okay?" Kenna asked quietly.

"I already said that I wasn't going to dismiss the idea. If they can come up with some evidence, I'll consider it as seriously as any of the other theories." Joseph assured her.

Kenna looked at him carefully, seeming to judge his sincerity. Finally she motioned to Ryan to join her as she moved ahead of the group.

Joseph and Zarah glanced at each other, but said nothing more as they continued to walk down the long hallway.

"This is Joseph, he's the guy I told you about from the Blue and Green room. He came with us to see what you've found." Kenna said as they walked into the next meeting room.

The girl at the head of the table was dressed in purple coveralls and wore an expression that told Joseph that she was prepared to defend her beliefs.

"There have been a lot of different theories going around about what has happened to us and who is behind it. If you'd be willing to work with the rest of us, we'd be grateful if you'd gather whatever evidence that you can find to support the idea that we've been abducted by aliens. While you're doing that, we'll be working on other theories, ranging from millionaire nazis to this all being some sort of elaborate psychological experiment." Joseph explained.

The girl blinked with surprise at his forthright presentation and finally said, "We'll do our best to find whatever evidence we can."

"Our meeting room is two hallways up that way and one to the right. If you discover something important, or have any questions for us, just send someone to let us know."

"We will. And you do the same, you know where to find us."

"By my estimation, we're not even halfway through this thing, so we'd better get going."

"Are you saying that you're walking the perimeter of the station?"

"Yes. Even though I can estimate how big this place is in my head, it's not going to seem 'real' until I've actually *seen* it."

"Would you mind if I went along? Now that you've explained it, I think that I'd also like to get a physical sense of our surroundings."

"What was your name?"

"Lisa."

"Well, I'm Joseph, the other Blues are Zarah and Brianna. The Green is Wade. I think you probably know Kenna and Ryan and you might have also met Randa as she was passing through here."

"It's nice to meet all of you. Are we ready to go?"

"Ready when you are." Joseph said with a smile at her, then walked to the door which was at a ninety degree angle to the door that they had entered through.

"Here's my room. Does anyone need to stop for a bathroom break?" Ryan asked as he indicated a door with the number 44 posted beside it.

When no one immediately answered, Joseph said, "I'm surprised that you made it all the way to our meeting room as early as you did. That must have been quite a run."

"To be honest, I was a little bit freaked out and the jogging helped me to calm down." Ryan said, then glanced at Kenna before continuing, "Having someone to talk to helped, too."

"Do you have any idea of what these guys are like, up ahead?"

"No. My door was just a couple down from the meeting hall with the Purples, so I automatically went there."

"We've had several Blacks come to our meeting room, but Randa was the only Red who did more than peek in the door." Lisa added.

"I can understand that. The people in the Red and Black meeting hall kind of gave me the creeps." Randa reluctantly told them.

"Really? What did they do?" Joseph asked curiously.

"Nothing. I mean, it's not like they tried to hurt me or anything. They just gave me the creeps so I got out of there as quickly as I could."

"Well, if you get too uncomfortable, you can go on ahead and we'll meet you at the next meeting hall."

"Actually, I might do that. My room is in the hallway that leads there."

"We'll check out what's going on in the... what is it, Red and Black room?"

"Yeah. Although there were also a few of the Oranges in there when I passed through."

"And we already heard that there was an Orange in the Yellow and Green room, so it's sounding more and more like this place is a giant square."

"Like the base of a pyramid." Lisa added.

Joseph smiled at the words, but remained silent as he continued walking.

"Isn't it wonderful?" A younger looking boy, dressed in black, asked as they entered the next meeting hall.

"What?" Joseph asked cautiously, then noticed Randa's 'told ja so' expression directed at him before she hurried through the other door, on the other side of the room.

"It's the end of days and we've been chosen!".

"Um... yeah."

"Blue and Green? I'd heard about the Yellows, but nobody said anything about Blues and Greens." An older looking boy said as he approached them.

"Yeah. It appears that this place is a big giant square and we're from the exact opposite side. We were just walking around to see if anyone knew how we got here or what was going to happen to us."

"It's just like it says in the bible. In the last days, His chosen will be taken to paradise."

"So... you think this is the rapture? And we're the chosen?"

"Yes. Only the chosen few will be taken, incarnate, to live in paradise forever and ever." The boy said joyfully as the slightly younger boy at his side nodded his agreement.

"Well... from my point of view, *my* presence here disproves your theory. But I really don't know enough about religious things to say much about it. I tell you what, if you *really* believe that this is the rapture, would you see what you can do to come up with some kind of *proof* or *arguments* to convince the people who don't believe?"

"God doesn't give *proof*. You have to have faith." The younger looking boy said earnestly.

"Yeah. Isn't that convenient?" Joseph absently replied, then looked at the older of the two and said, "We've been walking around this place and asking everyone that we've encountered what they think happened to us, and then asking them to do their best to find evidence to either support their argument or disprove it. If you'd like a chance to present whatever argument you can come up with to the rest of the people here, I'll do my best to get the others to listen to you."

After a moment to consider, the older looking boy quietly said, "*This* could be our reason for being here, to get the rest of His chosen to accept His way."

"Good luck with that." Joseph said weakly, then motioned for his companions to accompany him as he walked toward the doorway that led to the Red hallway.

"After seeing how you talked with me, I somehow thought that you'd be a little more... I don't know, telling them what they wanted to hear or

something. I mean, I know that you don't believe in aliens, that much was obvious. But even so, you treated me with as much respect as though I believed just the same as you did." Lisa said thoughtfully as they slowly walked down the hall, away from the Red and Black meeting room.

"There's a big difference between you and them. You looked at the evidence and came to a different conclusion than I did. I can totally respect that. They looked at the same situation and found something to justify the beliefs that they already held, disregarding everything else." Joseph explained.

"If they go through with it and come up with some arguments to support what they're trying to prove, are you going to listen to them?" Wade asked curiously.

"Yes. Of course. While I seriously doubt that they'll find anything remotely resembling *proof* of what they're claiming, it's always possible that they'll come up with something that we've overlooked, because we're approaching the situation with a completely different mindset."

"Still, I can understand why Randa was creeped out by them. I just hope they don't start going door-to-door, wanting to share the 'Good News'."

"Wouldn't that just be our luck? On top of being kidnapped, drugged and stuck inside this white plastic monstrosity, we *also* have to put up with unrelenting evangelicals."

"I think *that* would be even funnier if Lisa's right, and we've really been abducted by aliens." Zarah interjected.

A laugh spread through their little group and even Lisa saw the humor in the suggestion.

Any good cheer that they might have been feeling suddenly left them as they entered the next meeting hall.

There were close to twenty people dressed in red and orange coveralls, mostly girls, sitting at the tables and determinedly not looking at the broken plastic panel in the wall.

"Blue and Green, too?" One of the few boys in the room said when he noticed them.

"Yeah." Joseph confirmed, then asked, "How are you guys doing?"

"You don't have any food, do you?" The boy asked reluctantly, obviously not expecting them to say 'yes'.

"No. But if it's any consolation, what they fed us tasted like it's already been eaten at least once."

The boy considered that for a moment, then broke into an unwilling smile.

"My name is Joseph. We're just walking around this place meeting people and trying to get an idea of how big it really is."

"I'm Korbin. Have you found anything interesting?"

"Yeah. I've met lots of interesting people so far, and most of them have been willing to help me, trying to figure out what's happening to us."

"We're prisoners here. What else do you need to know?"

"We're hoping that if we can figure out *who* kidnapped us, *where* we are and *what* they plan to do with us, that we can come up with some way to escape or call for help or... at least do *something*."

"I did something." Korbin said as he gestured over his shoulder with his thumb, indicating the broken wall. "We all got punished for it."

"Yeah. Randa told us about that. I really wish that I had some food to give you or some other way to help you out. But because you did that, now we

know that they'll withhold food as punishment. It's not just an empty threat."

"Glad I could help."

"Well, I wasn't going to ask, but since you brought up the subject of *help*..."

"What do you want?"

"As we've walked from one meeting hall to the next, we've been talking to people about what they think is really happening and who did this to us."

"Have you talked to the guys back that way, yet?" Korbin asked with a slight smile as he pointed back the way they came.

"Yes. I talked to them. I wasn't impressed."

Korbin nodded, then quietly asked again, "What do you want?"

"We've been asking each group we encounter who they think did this to us and why. Everyone's working on a different theory and trying to find as much evidence as possible to support it. Hopefully, by doing it this way, when we put our heads together we'll be able to figure out something that will help us get out of here."

"What do you want *from me*?" Korbin asked in a voice that indicated he was losing his patience.

"Do you have any theory as to who kidnapped us and why?"

"No." Korbin replied simply, then added, "And I don't care. All I want is to find a way out."

"Fair enough."

Korbin looked at him with surprise at his easy acceptance.

"I'll tell you what. If I find out that anyone has any theories about a way to get out of here, I'll be sure to let you know about it. I've got people

working on trying to *think* us out of this mess. But it's very possible that you might be able to *work* our way out."

After a moment for the words to sink in, Korbin slowly nodded his head.

"And if there's anything that you need, get word to me and I'll do whatever I can to get it for you."

"Do you think you could lay your hands on a jackhammer for me?"

"I haven't found one yet, but I promise, as soon as I do, it's yours."

"I'd appreciate that."

"And there's one thing I can think of right now if you're really serious about trying to get out."

Korbin looked at him with more than a little interest.

"That wall you tried to break through is an outside wall. I have no idea where we are, but there's a good chance that it might be underground..." Joseph trailed off as he glanced at Lisa, then dutifully added, "...or in space."

Korbin's eyes went wide in surprise at that.

"Either way, breaking through an outside wall probably isn't the best way of getting out of here. If you look at the layout of this place, it's a big square. The thing is, so far the center of the square is unaccounted for. So it's possible that there could be a control room or an elevator or something there, if we can just find a way to reach it."

"So, do you think I should have tried breaking through that wall?" Korbin asked as he pointed across the room.

"Maybe... Maybe not. This is a corner, so I don't know if it would get you anywhere. I think it would probably be more likely to get you to the central room or whatever if you broke through the innermost bathroom wall of one

of the rooms." Joseph said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "Of course, that's just a guess! And there might just be a 'door' somewhere. You should probably look for that first."

"We've been looking at the outer wall. I never thought about there being a room in the middle of this place."

"Well, like I said, it's all just a guess. But if anyone comes up with any other guesses that sound like they could pan out, I'll be sure and get them to you. While the rest of us are trying to *think* our way out of here, we're going to be counting on you to *work* our way out."

"Yeah. Thanks." Korbin said as thoughts seemed to be flashing a mile a minute behind his eyes.

"Remember, let me know if you need *anything*."

"Yeah. I'll be waiting on that jackhammer."

"I'll have it to you as quick as I can." Joseph said with a grin, then looked back at his companions to see if they were ready to go.

"Is it okay if I come along?" Randa asked timidly as they started walking toward the door.

Joseph flashed a quick smile at her, then said, "Sure. Just be sure to pay close attention as we go so you can fill Korbin in on what we find."

"I wonder if maybe the Reds might have the right idea." Zarah said as they walked.

"Maybe." Joseph muttered, then continued, "I think that this is one of those instances where we have to try as many things as possible until we find something that works."

"Is there anything you can think of that we can do to get them some food?"

Brianna asked quietly.

"No. I wish that there were, but with the controls they have on our food supply, I really can't think of any way around it."

"When you got your food, did a table and chair slide out of the wall for you?" Zarah asked cautiously.

"Yes."

"If you look at the layout of the room, and assuming that all the rooms are the same, that would mean that there has to be some sort of a cubby hole or crawlspace between rooms."

Joseph thought about that for a moment as they walked and finally said, "You're right. I'd like to look at two rooms that are side-by-side so that we can see if they really *are* all the same, or if every other one is a mirror image. But either way, the furniture that slides out of the wall has to go somewhere when it's retracted."

Intrigued by the suggestion, Wade added, "We should be able to measure from doorway to doorway and get an idea of the distance between them, then measure the width inside each room to find out how much room we're missing."

"Except that we don't have a tape measure, to measure with." Randa interjected.

"You don't need a tape measure, just something of a fixed length. If you can't find anything better, you could tie your coveralls all in a row and use them like a rope to judge the distances." Lisa said thoughtfully.

Joseph looked at her with a smile of surprise. "That's a good idea. Would you mind asking a few of the Purples and Blacks to help you with that?"

"Yeah. I'll do that as soon as I get back." Lisa promised.

"You can use my room, if you can find number 43 or 45 so that we can check theirs out, too." Ryan volunteered.

"What do you want?" A girl, dressed in orange coveralls asked as they approached the doorway to the next meeting hall.

"We're just walking around, talking to people, and trying to get a feeling for how big this place really is." Joseph answered simply.

"*You're* not the majority here."

"As far as I know, there's the same number of each color. There *is* no majority."

The girl turned to face Zarah and said, "*They* can't control *us*, here. *We're* the majority. *We* make the rules, now."

"Shouldn't we all be working together, trying to find a way out of here?" Zarah asked cautiously.

"We're here for a reason. We're going to *prove* that a matriarchal society can operate more reasonably and efficiently than the *male-dominated* society that's kept us in a state of perpetual war throughout recorded history."

"You know what? Why don't you give us some time to think on that. Can we pass through your meeting room?"

"In time you'll realize that we're right. Come back to us when you're ready to join 'The Sisterhood'." The girl said as she stood aside.

"Come on, *boys*." Zarah said with a grin as she led the way.

Joseph, Wade and Ryan were careful to remain close as they walked into the Orange/Yellow meeting hall.

There were about fifteen girls in there, about evenly distributed between Orange and Yellow. All of them watched warily as the small group passed through their room.

"How did *that* happen in just one day?" Wade asked in amazement, once they were well away.

"Talk about *Lord of the Flies*." Joseph said with a shake of his head.

"Maybe they've got the right idea." Zarah said speculatively. "Men have been running things and making a mess of them for a long time now. Maybe it *is* time for women to give it a try."

"Are you thinking of joining 'The Sisterhood'?"

Zarah laughed at the suggestion, then said, "No. But I think it's an interesting idea. Considering where we are and what's been done to us, I think that we have more important things to focus on, at the moment. If we're going to figure this out and find a way out of here, it's going to take all of us working together."

"I agree with them that male-dominated society has produced a variety of phallic weapons of destruction fueled by a cloud of testosterone bloodlust." Lisa said thoughtfully, then added, "But I don't think the answer is to dominate and subjugate the men. We need to learn to work side by side and not even consider which gender someone is."

Joseph nodded, then turned and asked, "What do you think, Randa?".

"I think they're nuts." Randa said simply. "We've been kidnapped. We don't know what they're going to do to us next. The last thing we need is to bring in more drama to cloud our thinking and divert us from what should be our objectives."

"Right. If we can put our heads together and come up with some answers, then maybe we can find a way out of here."

"Or maybe, while you're doing that, Korbin might find a way out." Randa interjected.

"That would work, too."

"It'd really help me if someone could draw me a map of this place." Wade shyly admitted.

Joseph looked at him and regretfully said, "So far, I haven't come across any paper, pens or anything else that we could use to do that. It's possible that later we might have some sort of computer access or something, since the voice said that we'd have to do lessons. But besides that, I can't think of any way that we could do it."

"If you really needed to, we could come up with a crude layout using socks and things to represent the different areas of the... complex." Zarah said helpfully, then quietly added, "We should really come up with a name for it, just to make conversation easier."

"With everyone we've talked to, it seems to me that we're going to have to either have a mass meeting, or at least a summit meeting with representatives from each color group so that we can pool our information and coordinate our efforts." Joseph said thoughtfully, then turned to Zarah and continued, "I think that if we're going to come up with a name, we should do it then, so it will be universally understood."

"There's the next door. Should we be on guard?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"No. This should be Stone and Alyssa's room." Joseph assured him.

"So we're almost back?" Wade asked to confirm.

"Yes. The next meeting room after this one should be ours."

"How are things going?" Joseph asked as he and his group walked in.

"Everyone, these are the people we were telling you about." Alyssa said to the group of people, gathered around the tables.

Joseph noticed that they were nearly equally divided between Yellow and Green and that there was one conspicuous Orange, present. Since the one in Orange happened to be a boy, and considering what he had learned of 'The Sisterhood', he could certainly understand why he chose to share company with the Yellows and Greens.

"I'm terrible with names. I know Joseph and Zarah, but they'll have to tell you who everyone else is." Alyssa finished a bit shyly.

Joseph looked to Zarah and nodded for her to go ahead.

"In Blue we have Brianna. In Green we have Wade. In Purple we have Lisa and Kenna, in Black we have Ryan and in Red is Randa."

"No Oranges?" The orange clad boy amongst them asked with a knowing grin.

"No. We didn't do much more than pass through their area." Joseph said with a smile, then thought to ask, "What was your name?"

"Kenyon."

"So, are you here spying for 'The Sisterhood', or hiding out from them?"

"Hiding out. And the rest of the Orange guys are, too. I think that they all ended up with the Reds."

"So, you're not onboard with the female dominated society that they have planned?"

"Who *voluntarily* becomes a second class citizen?"

"Good point." Joseph said with a nod of agreement, then turned to look at Stone and asked, "Have you been able to come up with anything?"

"We decided to split the work. Half of us are brainstorming to come up with a more comprehensive list of what traits all of us have in common. The other half are working on what traits someone wanting to breed humans for their own purposes might be looking for." Stone explained.

"And when you're done, you'll compare the two lists and see how well they match up." Joseph said with a nod.

"Even if it matches point for point, it won't *prove* anything. But I think it will lend credence to the idea and might possibly give us an insight into their motivations and expectations."

"As soon as we get back to our meeting hall, we'll need to get to work on our theory. I'm glad we did our 'walkabout', but we promised to do something and we need to buckle down and do it."

"How was it? What did you see?" Alyssa asked curiously.

Joseph could tell that everyone in the meeting hall was interested to hear the tale of their travels.

After a glance at Zarah, to see if she wanted to explain, Joseph finally said, "Well, since you're working on the 'Eugenics', you know that we've been asking people to investigate different theories. In our room, we're investigating the theory that one or more millionaires prepared a doomsday bomb shelter so that he or they could wait out the 'end-of-the-world' or the fall of civilization."

Joseph glanced around the room and found that everyone in attendance was paying their full attention.

"In the next room, we asked that they investigate the possibility that all of this is just some elaborate psychological experiment, seeing how we'll react when placed in this situation."

"I hadn't thought of that. It could be, couldn't it?" Kenyon asked thoughtfully.

Joseph smiled at him, then continued, "The next room was Autumn's, where the Grays and Purples meet. Since they were already working under the assumption that this is all something being done by the government, we asked them to pursue that line of reasoning to see if they could come up with any compelling evidence."

"Ashwood wouldn't kidnap us, he'd torture and kill us." One of the Green girls said vehemently.

"And rape." Zarah added.

At Joseph's surprised look, Zarah explained, "President Ashwood has always struck me as being kind of 'rapey'. Do you know what I mean?"

Joseph couldn't contain his smile and said, "I'm pretty sure if you look in the dictionary under 'rapey' you'll see Ashwood's picture."

A few chuckles spread around the room at the comment.

Joseph became serious as he went back to his summary of their 'walkabout'. "After we left the Grays and Purples with the 'Government Conspiracy Theory', we moved on to the next meeting hall where the Purples and Blacks meet. They're investigating the theory that we might have all been abducted by aliens."

"You can't be serious!" Kenyon blurted out.

Joseph looked him in the eyes and said, "If you looked at our situation and came to me with a theory, whether I believed it or not, I'd encourage you to follow it through and try to prove or disprove it. As far as alien

abduction goes... well, I don't think anyone here can deny the 'abduction' side of it. So that's half the battle already won. I'm willing to wait and see what they come up with for the other half. Even if they can't prove to me that it's aliens behind all of this, they might still come up with some evidence or a new theory as to 'who' is doing this to us."

"Yeah. Okay." Kenyon relented, then thought to add, "It's good that you're not automatically rejecting things that you don't believe. It'd be easy to miss something by doing that."

"Well, I guess that leads us to the next room we encountered, the one shared by the Reds and the Blacks." Joseph said reluctantly.

Before Joseph could continue, Kenyon quickly said, "I already told everyone about them. I heard about them before I came here. They're a bunch of religious nutjobs who think this is 'the rapture'."

Joseph nodded his agreement.

"Why did you accept the alien abduction theory and reject the religious one?" Alyssa asked curiously.

"I didn't 'accept' or 'reject' either one. But as far as the religious theory goes, religion by its very nature requires that you believe things with no evidence, and in many cases that you continue to believe 'despite' evidence. If you can't trust that reality is 'real' and you make-yourself-believe, or 'make-believe', what is unreal, then I have no choice but to count anything you say as questionable, at best, because your judgements and decision-making are based outside of *reality*."

Alyssa shrugged, "I just wondered."

"Even so, I invited them to try and come up with a reasonable argument to state their position to the rest of us. I don't think anything will come of it, but I'm willing to hear them out." After a glance at Lisa, to see if she were

offended, Joseph continued, "After that we went to the meeting hall where the Reds and Oranges meet. They used one of the tables in their meeting room as a battering ram to try and break through the wall."

"What did they find?" Kenyon asked excitedly.

As much as Joseph didn't want to quell his enthusiasm, he continued on and reluctantly said, "Another wall. I'd say from the look of it that there were probably some electronics hidden in there, but they were retracted so you couldn't see anything more than some grooves in the white plastic."

When Joseph paused, Randa quietly added, "And because they did that, all the Reds and Oranges were punished. They weren't allowed to eat."

"I didn't have any problem." Kenyon said in confusion.

"They gave you food?" Randa asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Just a little while ago. I held off as long as I could, because I didn't want to have to get past the 'Amazons'. But when I couldn't wait any longer, I went back to my room and was given a tall glass of 'Snail Trail'."

Joseph pondered that for a moment, then speculatively said, "So that must mean that whoever's watching us must have known that Kenyon wasn't involved in the attempt to break through the wall."

"If nothing else, that confirms that we're being observed." Stone said uneasily.

"Right. And not just as groups, but they're aware of what the individuals are doing." Zarah added.

"Which means that they're probably listening to everything we say and know exactly who is in this room with us, right now." Randa said as she looked around anxiously.

"Maybe. But it seems unrealistic that they would be doing that for every single one of two hundred people." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"So they might just be following a few select individuals?" The Green girl from Ohio, Leah, asked.

"Or they might be following different groups. Or maybe just observing what we're doing in our meeting halls." Alyssa speculated.

Joseph looked at his companions, then slowly said, "I think that it's impossible for us to know, at this point. But all of us should pay close attention and see if we can find any other instances where they treat us as individuals rather than as parts of a group."

"I was thinking." Stone said, drawing everyone's attention, "What do you think the chances are that there are some sort of tracking chips or something in the clothes that they gave us to wear?"

"I think that's entirely possible. And since they had us unconscious and at their mercy for an unspecified period of time, it's also possible that they implanted some sort of tracking chip inside of each of us, so it wouldn't matter what clothes we wore."

"Wouldn't we notice that?"

"Not if they used the same kind of chip that they use for dogs, they're small enough that they can be injected. They'd probably do it somewhere that you wouldn't notice like in the middle of your back."

Seeming to be disturbed by the idea, Stone turned to Joseph and asked, "Have you given any more thought to how long they kept us unconscious?"

"Yeah. I've come up with a few things, but I still haven't been able to make it add up."

"Why don't you tell us what you've got? Maybe we can work through it with you?"

Joseph looked at his companions to see if any of them were anxious to keep moving. When none of them gave a reaction, Joseph walked to the table and took a seat across from Stone.

Within a minute, the rest of their group had also taken seats and waited to hear what Joseph had come up with.

"Well, when I woke up, I noticed that I had six needle marks on my arms. From the progress of healing on each of the marks, I'd say that they were probably done at regular intervals."

"So that could mean six days." Stone said thoughtfully.

"Since we don't really have 'days' or 'nights' here, I can't automatically make that assumption. But, for the purposes of what we're doing, let's go ahead and say that it was one a day, so we can move forward."

Stone nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"The other thing I noticed is my whiskers. I know you probably can't see them, but I'm in a habit of keeping them shaved, so I don't look scruffy. When I woke up, it seemed that I had *more* than a week of growth."

"Are you saying that you think it's longer than the 'six days' that we calculated from the injections?"

"Yeah. I've never really tracked the growth of my whiskers, but I'd estimate that it's closer to two weeks."

"Do you think that we've been kept unconscious for two weeks?" Kenna asked with surprise.

"No." Joseph said immediately, then explained, "It doesn't follow. If we were unconscious for two weeks, we'd have to eat, drink and use the bathroom. If they used feeding tubes on us, we'd still be feeling it in our throats. We'd still be feeling the catheters, too. Besides that, there would also be soreness and weakness from muscle atrophy."

"So, what does that mean?" Randa asked cautiously.

"I don't know. That's where it all breaks down."

After a long, silent moment, Lisa hesitantly said, "In some of the alien abduction cases that I've read, the abductees were up and moving around, not really awake, but more like they were sleepwalking. They'd say that it was like they had no control of their bodies."

"As horrifying as that sounds, it *does* seem to fit." Joseph reluctantly admitted.

"That also might tie in with the foggy memories." Wade said thoughtfully, "If they were able to hypnotize us or give us a drug that induces a hypnotic state, they could have *ordered* us to forget everything after a certain point."

"That's a lot more *ifs* and *maybes* than I'm comfortable with." Joseph admitted, then added, "But in the absence of a more *realistic* explanation, I don't think we have any choice but to go with it and do our best to find evidence to either prove or disprove the hypothesis."

"So we might have been up, walking around, just doing what we're told for days or weeks before we finally woke up here?" Leah asked anxiously.

Although Joseph didn't want to confirm it, he quietly conceded, "It's possible."

"Which begs the question, why did they ever let us wake up?" Stone asked reasonably.

Joseph took a deep breath before saying, "If we continue to work under the assumption that we were hypnotized, then the only one of our theories that seems to apply is the psychological experiments."

"But if they implanted hypnotic suggestions, wouldn't they be corrupting their results? I mean, we wouldn't be acting of our own free will. Right?" Zarah asked slowly.

"It would seem so, but people are capable of justifying all kinds of things when there's no one overseeing them. I suppose that we should add 'Mad Scientists' to our list of possible culprits."

"So, do you have any idea of what date it is?" Wade asked cautiously.

Joseph thought about it for a moment, then quietly said, "There's too much that we don't know to come up with any definite number. But taking everything into consideration, my best guess would be that it's sometime in the third week of November."

"Thanksgiving." Zarah said under her breath.

"Well, if they give us a turkey leg instead of another glass of 'Snail Trail' tomorrow, we'll have our answer." Wade said with a teasing glance at Kenyon.

"We'd better get back to our meeting hall and see if there's anyone there waiting for us." Joseph said as he stood.

"Yeah." Stone agreed, then said, "And we'll see if we can come up with any more ideas about the time that we were all blacked out."

"If you guys don't need me, I'm going to stay here, just in case they need to know about something we saw while we were walking around." Wade said quickly.

"Good idea." Joseph said with a grateful smile at him, then started walking toward the door to the hallway, which was at a ninety degree angle from the door that they had entered from.

"None of the theories really fit, do they?" Zarah asked cautiously as they walked.

"No. We seem to be coming up with more questions than answers." Joseph said in a worried tone.

"I think that as long as we still have questions, and we don't give up, that we'll be okay."

Ryan turned to Joseph and cautiously asked, "I don't know if you've thought about it, but if we're supposed to be rebuilding civilization after the fall, what do you think they're going to expect of us?"

"They'd probably be wanting people who understand how things work. They'd want mechanics, engineers, doctors... basically, the people who are essential for keeping a society going."

"Out of everyone we've met, do you think that *any* of them have a talent for *any* of those things?"

"Korbin, maybe. The vibe I get from him is that he's probably got a really good head for engineering."

"But what about the rest? What *possible* contribution do you think that they could make to help a broken society recover?"

"I see what you mean. We don't have the skills, and a lot of the skills that we would need, couldn't easily be *taught* in this environment. Whatever they have planned for us, it must be something else."

"Another question." Zarah said grimly.

"And another seemingly disproven theory." Joseph countered as they approached their meeting room.

"Where have you guys been?" A girl in blue asked suddenly when she saw them.

"We walked around the entire base, just so we could see how big it was."

Joseph answered honestly.

"What did you find? Is there a pool or a weight room?"

"What's your name?"

"Landra." She answered immediately, then asked, "Is there a courtyard or a garden?"

"There's nothing more than what you see right here. It's just a lot of hallways with bedrooms and meeting rooms like this one."

"No. It can't be. There's got to be more." She said in a wavering tone, then dashed out of the room, down the other hallway.

"Denial of reality... I think I know *just* who she can talk to that will make her feel better." Zarah said as she continued to look where the girl had gone.

"We shouldn't encourage anyone to become lost in mythological nonsense." Joseph warned.

"If she can't cope with reality, then she's going to need a crutch. It looks like that's the only one we've got to offer her."

"We *could* send her over to the Amazons." Kenna said in a speculative tone, then added, "If she's feeling fragile, that *could* empower her."

"I'm not sure which would be worse." Joseph said honestly.

"Let me go see if I can find her. Maybe all she needs is someone to talk to about it." Lisa said with a smile at Joseph.

"I think that sounds like the best idea yet."

Ryan turned to Joseph and said, "We'd better be going, too. I have the feeling that there will be a lot of people along the way who'll want to know what we've found."

"Make sure you tell them to let us know if they come up with any new evidence or ideas about what's going on."

"You can count on it." Kenna said with a smile at him.

"Hang on. I'll go, too." Randa said as she hurried to join them.

"I guess we'd better dig in and see if we can sort all of this out." Joseph said as he looked at Brianna and Zarah, to see if they agreed.

"Yeah." Zarah said with a nod, then added, "Without any clocks or being able to see the sun, I'm completely lost as to how long it took us to wander around this place or even how long it's been since we've eaten."

"It's disorienting, I know." Joseph said sympathetically, then added, "But right now, we've just got one thing that we need to be doing, and that's trying to reason out what's happening to us."

Brianna was the first of them to take a seat, joining the four girls who were already sitting in the room.

Joseph and Zarah followed a little more slowly, but settled in to prepare for a long brainstorming session.

Joseph took a moment to collect his thoughts, and finally said, "I guess the first thing we need to work on is our primary task of proving or disproving that all of this is some millionaire's doomsday shelter."

"It might be, but after what we were talking about with the engineers and medi

Chapter 3

"Ouch!"

The throb of a headache pulled him into consciousness.

The light in the room seemed to be uncomfortably bright.

When he was finally able to force his eyes to open, the sight of his 'too white' room greeted him.

He looked around the room and took inventory.

Everything was *exactly* the way that he remembered it.

Getting out of bed, he noted that he was once again naked, although he had no memory of undressing. In fact, he had no memory of returning to his room at all.

Without thought, he automatically walked into the bathroom to relieve himself. It wasn't until he touched his penis that he was jolted out of his thoughts by a slight pain.

He looked down at himself to investigate and found that patches of skin on his penis seemed to be rubbed raw.

Even stranger was the fact that the areas of irritation seemed to be more or less regularly occurring vertical stripes.

He quickly finished his business, then walked to the bathroom mirror to see if he could spot anything else that was out of the ordinary.

He looked carefully at his face and noticed that he appeared to be clean shaven. There wasn't a hint of a whisker anywhere in evidence.

On impulse, he looked in the cabinet under the sink and found that there was nothing stored in there, most notably, no shaving supplies.

As he slowly stood, he reluctantly looked at his arms and wasn't surprised to find three prominent injection sites on his left arm. Just as before, they seemed to be in various stages of healing. He looked carefully at his right arm to find that all those injection sites had nearly healed.

He looked at himself in the mirror, trying to detect anything else that was out of the ordinary, but couldn't find anything.

He *did* notice that he didn't seem to look nearly as tired as he did the last time.

After putting on boxer shorts, socks and a tee shirt, he walked to the closet to get a pair of coveralls to wear.

He took one down from the hanger and was just putting it on when something caught his eye.

As he pulled up the coveralls and started fastening them, he did a quick count to find five. He was wearing the sixth pair.

When he had looked in the closet the last time, there had been seven.

So, it appeared that the coveralls that he had been wearing before had been taken off and left somewhere else.

The culmination of his findings made him feel extremely uneasy, so he quickly put on his boots and laced them up.

When he arrived in the meeting hall, he found that no one else was there.

The room was as bright, white and sterile as ever, but he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something different about it.

In some indefinable way, it seemed more *sinister*.

"Oh, good. I'm glad you're here." Zarah said as she walked into the room from the hallway.

"How are you?"

"I'm not really sure. The last thing I remember is being in here, talking to you, then I woke up in my bed."

"Me, too." Joseph confirmed.

"*They* did something to us, didn't they?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have any idea what?"

"Before I answer, there's something that I need to ask you. It may seem kind of... *wrong*. But, I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

"It's okay. Go ahead and ask."

"Let me start out by saying that where I come from, they teach 'abstinence only' in place of sex education. So, I think I know about stuff, but... well, if I'm wrong about something, that's why."

"It's okay."

"When a girl is pregnant... how does she know?" Joseph carefully asked, then quickly explained, "I mean, I know about missing periods and stuff, but is there something... do you feel sick or... anything?"

"I've had sex education classes, but I don't remember them ever going into too much detail about anything like that. It was more about preventing pregnancy and stopping the transmission of disease."

Joseph slowly nodded as he waited for her to share what she knew.

"From what I've heard, there's a lot of things that *can* happen, but it's almost impossible to predict what *will* happen. Every case is different and there are a lot of different ways that it can go."

"So, just speaking hypothetically, what if while we were knocked out, they... you know... impregnated you. How long would it be before you knew it?"

"Do you think they did that?"

"That's what I'm asking you, if you'd have any way of telling." Joseph quickly responded, then calmed himself a little before continuing, "All I know is that, while I was asleep, they... messed with me... down there."

"Messed with you? How?"

"I don't really know what they did, but I'm kind of rubbed raw. If I were going to guess, I'd say that they used some kind of a machine to... you know..."

"Stimulate you?"

"Milk me."

"It happened again, didn't it?" Brianna asked as she walked into the room.

Zarah turned and cautiously asked, "What do you mean?"

"Us just doing things, living our lives, then all of a sudden, waking up somewhere else and not knowing how we got there."

"Oh, yeah... that. Yes. That's what happened to us, too."

"Is everyone here alright?" Mary Nicole asked as she walked into the room at a determined pace.

Although he had to force himself to speak, Joseph answered, "Yes. I think so."

"I went to our meeting room and no one else was there, so I decided to try in here before I started knocking on doors."

"Yeah. So far, we're it."

"Is something wrong?"

After a moment to seriously consider the question, Joseph quietly said,

"Yeah. I think there may be."

Mary Nicole looked at him curiously, as if willing him to continue.

Joseph turned to Brianna and quietly asked, "Is there any way you could do me a *huge* favor?"

"What is it?"

"Would you mind going for a walk and inviting people to come back here for a meeting?"

"Everyone?"

"No. No. Not everyone. But, maybe, one or two people from each group... that is, if they're interested. Something weird is happening and I think it's really important that we get together and compare notes before it happens again."

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll go with you." Mary Nicole said with a smile at Brianna.

"Okay. But it might take a while." Brianna cautiously warned.

Joseph nodded that he understood then said, "Time has no meaning, anymore. It will take as long as it takes."

That being said, Brianna then walked with Mary Nicole toward the Blue hallway.

"Are you okay?" Zarah asked with concern.

"No." Joseph said simply, then explained, "Knowing that they did... that, to me. It feels so wrong. Being kidnapped, drugged, stripped naked... all of that I could deal with. But knowing that they did sexual things to me... and I don't even really know for sure what they did..."

"Just like you said to someone yesterday, feel what you're feeling and don't beat yourself up about it. Deal with it however you can."

"I'll be alright. And my way of dealing with it is to try and figure out what's going on so that we can take steps to stop it."

"This sucks!" A male voice barked from the Green hallway.

"No argument here." Joseph said with a smile when he saw Wade and Tammy approaching.

"I *really* wish I could have five minutes alone with whoever's doing this to us." Wade said aggressively.

In fact, the level of aggression made Joseph look at Wade with concern and ask, "Are you alright?"

Wade opened his mouth to respond, but then seemed to change his mind. All he ended up saying was a noncommittal, "Yeah."

"Brianna and Mary Nicole are walking around the station to invite people back here so we can try to figure out what happened since yesterday." Zarah explained to the newcomers.

"I'd be willing to bet that it wasn't literally 'yesterday', but I know what you mean." Joseph added.

"Did you have more beard growth?" Zarah asked as she looked carefully at his chin.

"No. They must have overheard us talking about that, because when I woke up, I was clean shaven. But I've got three fresh injection sites on my left arm in various stages of healing. So, based on that, I'd guess that we were 'out' for about a week."

"So, do you think it's December, now?"

"I really don't know. The longer we're in here, the less confidence I have in my estimates. But if I had to pick what date I *think* it is, I'd say... Tuesday, November 27th."

"What do you think they did to us while we were 'out'?" Wade asked in an uncharacteristically subdued tone.

Joseph looked at him for a moment, then quietly asked, "Would you help me with something?"

"What?"

"Come on. I'll tell you on the way."

"Oh... Okay."

"This should only take a couple minutes. We'll be right back." Joseph said to Zarah and the few other Blues and Greens that had wandered in while they had been talking.

"What did you need help with?" Wade asked Joseph cautiously as they walked.

"Honestly, I just need to talk to somebody. Tag, you're it."

Wade's expression didn't change as he looked at Joseph with concern.

When his little joke didn't garner a response, Joseph kept walking for another minute until they reached room 112.

After closing the door, Joseph turned to Wade and quietly said, "I don't know for sure what they did to me while I was 'out', but whatever it was left me raw."

Joseph was surprised by Wade's expression. He couldn't tell if Wade were trying to hold back tears or rage.

"You don't have to say anything, but I just need to know if I'm the only one that it happened to. Did they do that to you, too? Just shake your head, 'Yes' or 'No?'"

It took a moment, but Wade finally reluctantly nodded.

Although his logical mind warned him against the action, it was already too late.

As soon as Wade had made the admission, Joseph wrapped him in a comforting hug.

For about half a minute, Wade stood stiffly as Joseph held him. But finally something within him seemed to give way and he brought his arms up to return the hug.

"I'm sorry, Wade. I'm sorry they did stuff to you. I promise that if there were any way that I could stop it, I would."

Given the situation that they were in, Joseph was aware that his promises and assurances were mostly meaningless, but the sympathy and caring beneath the words weren't.

At some unspoken cue, they released each other, remaining silent.

"I thought if I told you, that you'd say that I should be happy about it because it meant that I 'scored' or something."

"Even if we had 'scored', it was something done *to us* without our knowledge or consent. That's never alright. But considering the abrasion pattern, what was done to us had to have been done by some sort of a machine. And considering the marks that were left and how raw I feel, it couldn't have been pleasurable."

Wade wouldn't meet his eyes and seemed to be thinking over his words.

Joseph silently waited, not wanting to do anything to make Wade feel that he was being rushed.

Finally, Wade looked at Joseph and quietly said, "I guess I'd be more pissed off if I'd been doing something that I enjoyed and wasn't allowed to remember it."

"You know, we're probably not the only ones that this happened to."

"Yeah."

"Do you think that you're up to helping me with the ones who can't deal with it?"

"I can't deal with it."

"Me neither. But I think that together, maybe we can."

"Why is this happening to us?" Wade asked as he let the last vestiges of his public 'persona' fall away to reveal the vulnerable person who was inside.

"I think that someone, somewhere, had a plan. To them, we're just a Blue and a Green. They don't think of us as people. If they ever think of us as individuals at all, then I'm subject 112 and you're subject 130. But if whoever was doing this had one shred of humanity, we wouldn't be in here to begin with."

"But what about the end of the world? I mean, isn't it possible that they're doing all of this believing that they're doing the right thing?"

"No."

Wade looked at him with surprise, not so much at his answer as the level of conviction behind it.

"If Leah's right and this whole thing was started back in the 1960's or 70's, then it's possible that they were thinking about 'people' and preserving 'human dignity', back then. But, over the years, those concepts dropped out of the equation, leaving this nightmarish parody of its original self."

"Did you always talk smart, like this?"

"No. Not always. I dumb it down most of the time."

"Good. 'Cause if you didn't, I bet you'd get your ass kicked a lot."

"Yeah. *That's* what taught me to dumb it down."

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence between them, then Wade cautiously said, "Thanks."

"Yeah."

By the time they returned to the meeting hall, there were nearly twenty people, mostly Blues and Greens, in attendance.

"Did we miss anything?" Joseph asked Zarah as he approached.

"Not really. People are still kind of straggling in, but it's a different mood from yesterday. It's a lot darker."

"Would you be alright if I took off for a few more minutes? There's something I need to check on."

"You call a meeting and then take off and expect me to handle it? Is that what's happening here?"

After a moment to consider, Joseph said, "Yeah." Then motioned for Zarah and Wade to move closer so that he could whisper, "I just want to walk down and check on Jason. I'll be right back."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Wade asked quietly.

"Actually, I was hoping that you might check on Kenyon."

"What about Stone?"

"He's got Alyssa to fall back on. I'm not sure if Jason or Kenyon have anyone that they're close to, like that."

"Do you remember Kenyon's number?"

"Yeah. One eighty."

"So, you're afraid that the same thing happened to them..." Zarah trailed off and looked at Joseph with question.

"Yeah. That's *exactly* what I'm afraid of. And if it *did* happen to them, then they might need some help dealing with it."

"And about that thing that you and I were talking about..."

"Keep your eyes open for any signs. That's all I can tell you." Joseph told her, then started walking toward the Blue hallway.

Just as he did, Wade walked with determination toward the Green one.

Joseph walked purposefully down the hallway and was intending on walking through the Blue and Gray meeting room, but as soon as he entered, a girl dressed in gray quickly asked, "Have you seen Mary Nicole?"

"Yes. She's walking around the station, inviting people to a meeting in the Blue and Green meeting room."

"Oh! Good! When we woke up, she wasn't here and she wasn't in her room."

"I guess she was one of the first ones to wake up, so she walked down to our room to see if we were up yet."

"As long as she's alright. She's the only one keeping us all together."

"She's fine. I'm sure she'll be back here right after the meeting. And you can go to the Blue and Green meeting hall if you want to talk to her before that."

"Thank you."

"I need to get back there, too. But I have something to do first." Joseph finished with a note of apology in his voice, then started walking again.

When Joseph arrived in the Gray and Purple meeting hall, he could immediately tell that there was a problem. "Is Jason here?"

"He's in his room. Something's wrong." A girl, dressed in purple, said anxiously. Although they hadn't been introduced, he remembered seeing her on his last visit.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. He won't talk to us."

"Well, maybe he'll talk to me. I don't remember his number. Do you know where his room is?"

"His number is seventy eight, it's back that way." She said as she pointed to the hallway he had just come from, then asked, "Do you know what's wrong with him?"

"Maybe. Let me see what I can do."

After a knock on the closed door, Joseph quietly said, "Jayce, it's Joe. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"I need some time alone."

"If the same thing happened to you that happened to me, it helps to talk to someone about it."

The door suddenly slid open to reveal the much larger teen with fresh tears in his eyes.

"Are you alright?" Some reflex within Joseph asked automatically because one look at Jason clearly told him that he wasn't.

"What did they do to you?" Jason asked as he backed into the room, clearing the way for Joseph to enter.

"I don't know for sure what they did, but whatever it was, my dick is still raw from it."

"Mine, too." Jason reluctantly admitted, then quietly asked, "But what about... the other?"

"What other?"

Jason turned away and, for a moment, it seemed as though he wasn't going to answer.

"I woke up and it felt like there was something inserted in my..." Jason trailed off, then finally muttered, "There wasn't, but *something* was done to me. I can still feel it."

Joseph suddenly realized what Jason meant and quietly said, "No. As far as I know, they didn't mess with me, back there."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Jayce. I didn't know. Me and at least one other guy that I know of got... milked, I guess. We were both rubbed raw. That's why I wanted to

come down here and see how you were doing. If they did that to you, too, I wanted to be sure that you knew that you weren't alone."

"I don't know what happened. I was in the meeting room, then the next thing I knew, I was waking up here."

"Yeah. I think that happened to all of us."

"But none of the others of you were... violated?"

"I've only talked to one other guy. It's possible that there were others. But even if they didn't rape my ass, I was violated."

"Please don't say that."

"Okay." Joseph waited for a moment, then quietly said, "Tell me what I can do to help you deal with it."

There was a long silence, then Jason quietly responded, "Nothing."

"You know, the Grays and Purples made you their leader. They care about you and are worried about you."

"I didn't ask to be the leader. It's just because I'm bigger and look older than they are."

"But what if there's someone who is smaller and looks younger that had this done to him? How is he going to cope? Who does he have to go to?"

Jason didn't answer, but Joseph could tell that he had heard.

"I have to get back to the Blue and Green room. Brianna's walking around the station, inviting people to a meeting there so that we can discuss what's been done to us. Maybe that way we can get enough pieces of the puzzle to start making sense of this."

Jason looked up at Joseph with watery eyes and quietly asked, "You came here just to check on me?"

"Yeah. Us reluctant leaders have to watch out for each other. I mean, who else have we got?"

Jason slowly nodded that he had heard.

"Would it freak you out too bad if I hugged you?"

"Why?"

"I just know that when I was trying to come to terms with what was done to me, it seemed to help."

"And now, you want to help me in the same way?"

"Yeah. I mean, if you think it'll help. I know some of what you're feeling and I'll understand if you don't want to be touched."

Jason took the two steps to close the distance between them and pulled Joseph into his arms.

"Just remember, you're not alone. We've got some really good guys here if you need to talk or even if you want to 'not talk' and just hang out."

"'Not talking' sounds pretty good, right now."

"I've got to get back for the meeting. You can go with me and we can 'not talk' for a while afterward. Or, if you'd rather, you can stop by later."

"You said earlier that I've got some people who are worried about me. I think that I'd better take care of them before I can take time to 'not talk'."

Jason said regretfully as he released Joseph from the hug and stepped back.

"Okay. But if you run into anyone else who was... you know..." Joseph couldn't bring himself to say it again, but forced himself to continue on, "...and if he needs someone to talk to or anything, I'll be willing to help however I can."

"Thank you, Joseph. If it's more than I can handle, I'll remember."

"You know, I've always hated it when people called me 'Joe'. I've been fighting against it my whole life. But for some reason it sounds right when you say it."

"Okay, Joe." Jason said with a weak smile, then added, "You'd better go to your meeting."

"Remember, Jayce, if you want to stop by and 'not talk', you've got an open invitation."

"Yes. I'll remember."

The trip back to the Blue and Green meeting hall was uneventful. He saw a few people along the way and exchanged courteous greetings with them, but didn't stop to talk with anyone.

"Did I miss anything?" Joseph asked as he walked up to Zarah.

"Thank God you're back!" Zarah said in a rush, then turned and called out, "Tammy, he's back."

"What's wrong?"

"Go with her." Zarah said as she pointed at the girl in green approaching.

"What's going on, Tammy?" Joseph asked as he hurried to meet her halfway.

"Wade caught me in the Yellow and Green room and told me to get you as soon as you got back."

"What's wrong?" Joseph asked as he hurried with her into the Green hallway.

"I don't know. He went down to the Orange hallway, I guess checking on that guy from yesterday. A little bit later he came back and asked me if I'd wait for you and take you to him."

"Did he tell you what he needed me for?"

They didn't even slow down as they passed through the Yellow and Green room.

"He didn't say anything except for me to get you and not to go into the room when I brought you back."

"I guess I'll find out when we get there."

"Let Wade know that I'm going to be hanging out in the hallway, just in case he needs for me to go get something... or someone." Tammy said as they approached the Yellow and Orange meeting room.

"What are you!..." A girl began to say when she saw Joseph as they approached, but when she realized that they were going to run right past her, she simply stepped aside and let them.

"There it is, he's in there."

Joseph fought to catch his breath as he walked up to the closed door and knocked.

"It's Joseph. Can I come in?"

"Yeah. But be sure to close the door behind you." A distant voice called in return.

Joseph glanced back at Tammy uncertainly, then opened the sliding door.

"I'm glad you're here. We can't stop this bleeding." Wade said anxiously.

"Bleeding? What happened?" Joseph asked as he hurried through the bedroom and into the bathroom.

"I woke up in a pool of blood and it won't stop." Kenyon said in a voice that trembled with fear.

Joseph quickly evaluated the situation and could see evidence that they had been using toilet paper to try and sop up the blood.

He walked to the sink and turned it on, then took down the white hand towel beside it.

After getting the towel thoroughly soaked in cool water, Joseph wrung it out slightly, then walked to Kenyon who was standing in the shower stall.

"This is going to be a little bit cold, but it should help to stop the bleeding." Joseph said as he knelt down and used the towel not only to slow the bleeding, but also to release some of the bits of shredded toilet paper that were caught in the wound.

"It's good that you told me to check on him. He might have bled to death in his sleep." Wade said nervously.

"Actually, it probably would have stopped on it's own, long before that." Joseph said carefully as he turned the towel over so that he could continue to bathe the wound in cool water.

"How are you doing, Kenyon?" Wade asked quietly.

"It's a little cold, to tell you the truth, but thanks for helping me." Kenyon said with a tremble in his voice.

"Wade, would you rinse this out and bring it back to me?" Joseph asked as he handed the towel to him.

"Yeah."

"Now, let's see what's going on here." Joseph said as he looked closely at Kenyon's penis to try and discover the source of so much blood.

At first glance it appeared that Kenyon had the same vertical patches of raw flesh that Joseph did, but upon closer inspection, Joseph found that

along one side of each of the raw patches were deep gashes, which were still bleeding, although less than before.

"Here." Wade said quietly, over his shoulder.

"Thanks." Joseph said as he accepted the soaking wet towel, then started to bathe Kenyon's penis again.

A gasp from Kenyon caused him to look up.

"Five minutes ago, I would have told you that things couldn't possibly get any weirder. But now I'm in your bathroom... on my knees..."

"Yeah. I'd ask you to stop, but it seems to be working."

"Can you tell what happened? It was so bloody, I couldn't tell where all that blood was coming from." Wade said as he looked on helplessly.

"That's because there isn't just one injury. He's got six or eight deep vertical cuts the length of his penis." Joseph said as he continued his ministrations, trying to be as gentle as possible.

"Do you think that when they were doing what they did to us, that he got caught in the machine or something?" Wade asked as he waited for something to do.

"Since I don't know what type of machine they used or how it works, I can only guess. If there's some kind of a size adjustment, then someone must have set it to the wrong size. Or, I guess it's possible that his girth is just too big for the machine on its maximum setting. He *does* have a meaty one." Joseph said as he cautiously took the towel away to see if the bleeding had stopped.

"Well, not at the moment. But cold water will do that." Kenyon said shyly.

"Even now, it's an impressive size." Joseph said simply, then handed the towel back to Wade as he said, "It looks like it's stopped."

"We don't have any bandages or anything for him. What should we do now?"

"I guess you could rip up some tee shirts." Kenyon said as he watched what Joseph was doing.

"Give me a second." Joseph said as he stood.

Wade and Kenyon watched as Joseph walked into the bedroom.

Joseph looked around the room and his focus stopped on the spot in the wall that the computer voice had called the 'food receptacle'.

"Listen. I know that you like to pretend that you're not watching and listening, but this is serious. Kenyon needs some kind of antibiotic spray or ointment and he's going to need some bandages to keep his wounds from getting dirty." Joseph said reasonably.

He waited for a moment, but when nothing happened, he continued, "Your people did this to him. It's not his fault and it wasn't because of any decision that he made."

"What are we supposed to do when one of us has an illness or injury? Huh? Are we just supposed to get infections and die from preventable diseases because you want to pretend that you aren't watching and recording everything that we say and do?" Joseph asked angrily as he waited for some sign that someone was listening.

A few long minutes passed as Joseph waited, refusing to believe that *they* weren't aware of what was happening.

Suddenly, without warning, the table and chair began to emerge from the wall at the same time the 'dispenser receptacle' opened. Inside, Joseph found a roll of gauze, surgical tape, small round ended scissors and a tube of antiseptic ointment.

"Thank you." Joseph said as he collected the items.

Wade and Kenyon stared in awe at what Joseph had just done.

"Are you going to need help with this, or have you got it?" Joseph asked as he placed the items on the countertop beside the bathroom sink.

"Oh, yeah. You've got that meeting, don't you?" Wade asked, then quickly added, "We've got this. Go on."

"Be sure to let me know if you need anything." Joseph said earnestly.

"Yeah. Thanks." Kenyon said sincerely.

"Sure." Joseph answered with a smile, then thought to ask, "Do you need for Tammy to keep waiting outside for anything?"

"No. I think that we'll be okay now that the bleeding's stopped." Wade assured him.

"Alright. I'll be in the Blue and Green meeting hall if you guys need anything."

When Joseph stepped out into the hallway, he was surprised to find not only Tammy, but also Brianna, Mary Nicole, Randa, Lisa, Autumn and a few people that he didn't immediately recognize, standing and waiting for him.

"Tammy said that you were taking care of an emergency." Lisa explained.

"Yeah." Joseph said quietly and glanced at his hands to see if they had any blood on them.

"Is it anything we can help with?" Brianna asked cautiously.

"No. They've got it under control now." Joseph assured them, then thought to ask, "Are you ready to go?"

"Do I need to stay here, in case they need me?" Tammy asked uncertainly.

"No. The crisis is past. But thanks for coming to get me. It helped a lot." Joseph said with a quick smile at her, then started walking.

"Tanner's missing." A boy in red said urgently.

Joseph looked at him and realized that he was the older of the two boys that he had spoken with in the Red and Black meeting room.

"What do you mean 'missing'?"

"When we woke up, he wasn't in his room. From the look of it, his bed hasn't been slept in."

"What's your name?"

"I'm Jude. You talked with Tanner and me yesterday."

Joseph remembered the younger looking boy and felt immediate concern for him.

"Has anyone else noticed anyone missing?" Joseph asked as he looked at the group who were walking with him.

"No. But the way people come and go in the meeting rooms, there could be people missing and we wouldn't notice." Lisa said frankly.

"We may need to do something about that." Joseph said as they approached the Yellow and Orange meeting room.

As they continued to walk, Joseph turned to Jude and quietly said, "There are some things going on. I'll tell everyone about that in the meeting and we can decide what we're going to do about it, then."

"But Tanner's missing! We've looked everywhere!"

"We're missing someone, too." A girl's voice said from ahead of them.

Joseph was surprised to see that it was a girl dressed in orange, obviously one of the Amazons.

He was about to ask about it, but realized who they were talking to and looked to Lisa to take over for him.

Understanding what he was asking, Lisa immediately said, "Tell us what happened."

"Yesterday, we were having a meeting, then the next thing that any of us knew, we were all naked in our own beds. When we all got together in here, we noticed that Kimberly wasn't with us."

"What color is she?" Lisa asked curiously.

Joseph was surprised by the question, because he was sure that he wouldn't have thought to ask that. He didn't know if it were relevant or not, but it was possible that it might turn out to be significant.

"She's a Yellow."

"We're all going to the Blue and Green room. If you want to send someone along, we're all going to compare notes about what's happened to us and see if we can come up with any answers." Lisa said in a very calm and professional tone.

The girl glanced at the male members of the group appraisingly for a moment before cautiously saying, "I'll go."

"What was your name?" Lisa asked simply.

"Valerie."

"I'm Lisa. You can meet the others along the way." She said, then started to walk.

"Where are you going?" A girl in orange called out when she noticed that Valerie was leaving with the group.

"I'm going to see if I can find some answers. I'll be back soon." She said decisively as she continued to walk.

Joseph looked around at the others, but didn't say a word as he followed along.

The girls talked to Valerie and filled her in on who everyone was and what they were doing as the group walked down the hallway toward the Yellow and Green meeting hall.

As they walked in, Joseph broke away from the group and walked immediately to Stone.

"How are you?"

"I'm feeling a little tender, to be honest."

"I think that most, if not all the guys, are feeling that right now."

"Really? Do you think they did that to every guy here?"

"Maybe. At least everyone I've asked about it so far." Joseph said quietly, then thought to ask, "Do you think that this might somehow play into the eugenics theory?"

"Yeah. Actually, Alyssa and I have been talking..." Stone started to say when they were interrupted.

"Are you ready to go?" Brianna asked as she approached.

"Yeah. We should get this started before we all black out and wake up in our rooms again." Joseph responded.

As they started walking toward the Green hallway, Stone turned to Joseph and quietly asked, "Are we each going to tell about what we've been able to figure out so far?"

"Yeah. I thought that would be the best way to brief everyone at once."

"Were you able to come up with any support for your theory?"

"Not really." Joseph admitted, then added, "But it didn't help that just when Zarah and I started talking about it, we blacked out."

"Maybe we could suggest a five minute warning, or something."

"I don't think it'd help."

When they arrived in the Blue and Green meeting hall, the room was nearly filled to capacity. Every color was represented although, some more heavily than others.

Joseph waved at Ryan and Kenna, then automatically went to Zarah and quietly asked, "Is everything alright here?"

"Yeah. We've just got a lot of anxious people with a lot of questions."

"Unfortunately, I don't have many answers, just more questions."

"I guess you'd better break the news to them."

"Do you have anything you want to say about what we talked about?"

"Yeah. Even if we don't know anything for sure, they need to at least be aware of the possibility."

Joseph nodded, then stepped back. He moved to stand in front of the wall that was between the two doors.

"Everyone! If you'll quiet down for just a few minutes, we're going to tell you what we know about what's going on, and what theories that we've been able to come up with. When everyone has had a chance to talk, you can ask questions or talk to us individually." Joseph said loudly.

The murmur of voices quieted as everyone in attendance waited for what he was going to say.

"I know that I haven't met some of you, I'm Joseph Harrison. Before we tell you about our theories, I need to tell you about what happened this morning. When I woke up, I found that I had several patches of raw skin on my... um, penis. From the pattern of the markings, it looks like I must have been hooked up to some kind of machine.

"At the time, it was shocking to me, and I had a sense of violation that was really difficult to deal with. But it turns out that I was lucky. Please don't ask for details, out of respect for the feelings of others, but you need to know that beyond that violation, I am aware of someone who, during the last blackout, had his genitals mutilated and another one who was anally penetrated."

A grim silence fell over the room at the announcement.

"Please, when you go back to your own areas, let your people know what happened so that if something happened to them, they'll know that they're not alone. It can be hard to deal with, so be gentle with them." Joseph urged as he looked around the room.

As much as he wanted to continue on a bit longer, to let people know just how traumatic it could be, he instead motioned to Zarah to step forward.

"I'm Zarah Holland." She said timidly, then realized that the people at the back of the room probably couldn't hear her and continued more loudly.

"After Joseph had discovered what had been done to him during the last blackout, he asked me a few questions. If they did that to the guys, then what will they do... or have they *done*, to the girls?"

A few nervous whispers went around the room at the question.

"When we're blacked out, we're helpless. The fact of the matter is, that any or all of us could be impregnated, without our knowledge or consent."

The whispering voices quieted and everyone waited for her next words.

"Before that happens, I think it's important that we look at this situation and ask ourselves some questions. How will you feel if you find out that you're pregnant, and you don't know who the father is? I mean, what if you really don't have *any* clue? How will you deal with that?"

"Considering the way things are, there's also the possibility that conception could occur outside the body, in a test tube, and the embryo could be implanted later. That would mean that you couldn't *really* know if you were even the biological mother of the baby that you were carrying."

The atmosphere was nothing short of complete shock at the suggestion.

"Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you were able to accept that. Do you think that we'd be expected to raise a child here? I mean, look at this place. It isn't fit for a bunch of teenagers, much less newborns and infants."

Before anyone could formulate a response to that, she jumped right into her next scenario. "So, will the babies that we carry and bring to term be taken from us and raised somewhere else, by other parents? What happens to our children? What happens to us? After that will we just be waiting for the next blackout so that we can be impregnated again?"

Joseph noticed that there were a few of the girls who were on the verge of tears imagining what Zarah was proposing.

"I don't know if any of that's going to happen. But looking at the situation we're in, I think it's best that we decide how we feel about things before they start happening to us again." Zarah said frankly, then stepped aside as she motioned for Joseph to take her place.

"As many of you know, I've been walking around and asking people to come up with ideas about where we are, why we're here and what we can do about it. I think all of us are ready to hear what they've come up with." Joseph announced, then turned to Stone and asked, "Are you ready?"

"No." Stone said with a smile as he stepped forward to take Joseph's place.

He seemed to be about to speak, but instead motioned to someone to join him.

"Everyone, I'm Stone Parkinson and this is Alyssa Sanders. Joseph asked us to see what we could reason out about the theory that we were brought here as some kind of a eugenics project to breed humans with the most desirable characteristics." Stone explained, then looked to Alyssa to take over for him.

"Well, after hearing what Zarah had to say, I might actually have some good news for you." Alyssa said with a smile.

Joseph looked at her with surprise at the announcement.

"The thing is, if they went into this intending to 'breed' us, there are certain choices that they would have made differently." Alyssa said in prelude, then paused to give everyone a moment to prepare themselves.

"They would have picked a different age range for the prospective mothers, probably somewhere around the mid to late twenties. If they force us to become pregnant at our ages, it's likely that there will be complications with at least some of the pregnancies that will put both the mothers and their children at unnecessary risk.

"I think Zarah effectively covered most of my other points about this place not being designed with children in mind. If this were supposed to be a facility for that purpose, it would have been built differently."

Stone stepped forward and said, "Considering what Joseph and Zarah have said, I'd say that if this facility is being used for eugenics, then the purpose of this 'level' might be to provide DNA which will be put to use on other levels. Which essentially makes us a neverending sperm fountain and a bottomless egg carton for our captors."

"Thanks, Stone. I was actually feeling optimistic there, for a minute."

Joseph said with a teasing smile.

"Glad I could help." Stone said with a grin, then walked with Alyssa back into the crowd.

"I guess I'll go ahead and tell you about mine, now." Joseph said as he looked around the room. "Here, in this room, we've been working on the theory that this was all done as some demented millionaire's doomsday project to wait out the nuclear winter or the fall of civilization."

He could see that a few of the people in attendance hadn't heard the theory before and were trying to reason it out.

"What we've come up with is, to rebuild a civilization, you need to have certain essential skills. The fact of the matter is, we don't have them. And most of the essential skills that we'll be needing can't be taught very well by computer. The computer stuff really only works when civilization is up and running.

"If this is all part of some doomsday scenario, then I can't figure out what purpose there would be for bringing us here. With no scientists, engineers or doctors, what are they hoping to accomplish?

"With that being said, I admit that it's possible that there *is* some plan that I just can't figure out. But if it really is the end of the world and they intend for the future of humanity to be an endless repetition of blackouts and gray slime, then they should just save everyone the trouble and let humanity die out."

Joseph looked around the room for a moment, then spotted Mary Nicole and motioned for her to step forward.

She reluctantly took his place and said, "I'm Mary Nicole Anders and Joseph asked me to investigate the possibility that this might all be some kind of a

psychological experiment. Before I go any further, I should tell you that I'm not an expert on this stuff. A bunch of us worked together to try and sort this out.

"It seems like the only purpose in keeping us from knowing the time and date would be to disorient us. Blocking communications and isolating us from news of the outside world would also seem to be tactics to cause us to imagine the worst case scenarios so that they could observe our behavior. Add to that the components of a forced community divided by arbitrarily assigning colors, the denial of adequate food and the absence of any intellectual stimulation, and I think that a compelling argument can be made for this being a scientific study."

Curious and worried looks flashed around the crowd.

"Of course, it also seems that they've gone out of their way to eliminate any sources of joy, peace, fun, happiness, hope, safety or security. The absence of these things would serve to intensify our reactions to the situation that we've found ourselves in.

"When you put all of this together, what you end up with is an exercise in cruelty. With the blackouts, intervention in choice and memory drugs that have been used, it seems that any scientific findings would be corrupt and completely invalid. So, from what we've been able to make of it, if this is a psychological experiment, it's a hopelessly flawed one."

As Mary Nicole stepped away, Joseph took her place and asked, "Is there anyone here to speak for the Gray and Purple area?"

"Yeah." A voice answered from the blue hallway.

Joseph smiled and motioned for Jason to take his place.

"Thanks, Joe." Jason said as he walked to the front. "My name is Jason Klein. Joseph asked me to try and prove that this is all part of some big

government conspiracy. Before I get into that, let me start by saying that we provide nothing. We produce nothing. As far as we've been able to determine, there's absolutely no purpose for this facility's existence."

Joseph felt unease at the statement as he reflected on what Stone had said earlier.

"If you look at how the government operates, in all its various capacities, you notice a few common influences. The ones that we focused on were bureaucrats, penny pinching accountants, and hierarchical accountability. If you want, I can go into examples of how each one behaves in the outside world, and what effects they have on the overall project. But the point I'm trying to make is that so far, we haven't spotted any evidence of any of the three."

Joseph was surprised by Jason's conclusion.

"That's not to say that this isn't something that the government set up. All it would take is someone's pork barrel project and a little cronyism to get it started. Then they just siphon money off of the Veterans Administration or something like that, to keep it going, and eventually everyone forgets about it. But as far as *proving* that this is a government project... I can't."

"Thanks, Jayce." Joseph said as he walked up to Jason's side.

"No problem, Joe." Jason said with a grin, then walked back to the blue hallway, to stand in the doorway.

"Lisa?" Joseph asked with a smile at her.

She was standing front and center in the audience, so she was able to take two steps to be at Joseph's side.

"My name is Lisa Blount. Joseph asked me to investigate the possibility that where we are and what's happened to us is all part of an alien abduction."

A few chuckles went around the room but, in general, the audience as a whole was more respectful than one might expect at such a suggestion.

"I suppose that it's no surprise when I tell you that I've read a lot about alien abductions. It's kind of a hobby of mine. I get lost in wonder at the stories of people encountering a spacecraft and a bright light and feeling themselves become weightless. Of them seeing alien beings, then returning to Earth to tell the tale...

"For me, there was no spaceship. No bright light. There was no weightlessness. No aliens and, so far, no returning home.

"Since I've been here, I haven't seen one single thing that demonstrated advanced technology of any kind. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that I haven't seen anything here that demonstrates *twenty-first* century technology to any measurable degree.

"Do I believe in aliens? Yes. Do I believe that we've been abducted by aliens? No. From everything I've seen, I can only conclude that we've been abducted by cold, callous, primitive humans." Lisa said regretfully, then went back to take her place in the audience.

Joseph looked around and was about to call on Randa, when he spotted a teenage boy in red coveralls looking at him.

"Jude? Would you like to say anything?" Joseph asked uncertainly.

"Yes. Thank you." Jude said timidly as he quickly crossed the room.

"My name is Jude Wicks, and Joseph visited us yesterday and asked if we wanted to come and tell all of you why we believe that we are God's chosen, being taken to paradise." Jude said in a surprisingly clear alto voice.

Cautious looks flashed from person to person at Jude's words.

"If this were the rapture and we were the chosen, then the time for testing would be past. There would be no more trials and tribulations." Jude said sadly, then added more quietly, "And He wouldn't take Tanner away without a reason."

Joseph was surprised to admit to himself that he felt sorry for the boy, not just for the loss of his friend, but also the loss of the religious fantasy that had brought him so much joy.

"And, like Joseph was saying, when I woke up this morning, I had those red marks, too. Our Holy Father wouldn't allow his children to be violated and molested." Jude said as he seemed to be fighting back tears.

"I take it he's not Catholic." Stone whispered at Joseph's side.

Joseph had to fight to contain a smile, and gave Stone a gentle elbow in the ribs for the inappropriate remark.

"Yesterday, after Joseph talked to me and Tanner, I knew *exactly* what I was going to say, and I believed every word of it. Today... all I can tell you is that whatever's going on here... it's not from God." Jude said before slowly stepping away from the front.

As Joseph was walking to take his place, he had a sudden change of heart and said, "Jude."

Jude stopped and turned to look at him.

Joseph walked two steps, then pulled Jude into a firm hug.

"We'll do whatever we can to find Tanner, I promise." Joseph said quietly.

"He trusted me." Jude sobbed.

"We'll find him." Joseph assured him, then clapped him once on the back before letting him go.

When Joseph reached the front, he glanced at Randa and asked, "Are you here to speak?"

"Yeah. But it'll just take me a minute." Randa said confidently.

Joseph nodded and gestured for her to proceed.

"I'm Miranda Sutherland, but you can call me Randa. I'm mostly here to listen to what all of you came up with, so I can tell Korbin about it. But since I'm here, I'll go ahead and fill you in on what's happening. Yesterday, we tried to break through a wall. So I guess the big news is that when we woke up this morning, the broken wall was completely fixed. The other thing is that all of us who were told that we couldn't eat last night woke up this morning not feeling hungry. So, right now, Korbin's got search parties going over every inch of the inside wall in our section to try and find a hidden door."

Joseph walked to her side and explained to the assembly, "While the rest of us were working on trying to discover the motivations of our captors, Korbin and his group have been actively searching for a way out."

"By the way, he told me to tell you that he's still waiting on his jackhammer." Randa said with a grin.

"The next one I run across is his. I promise." Joseph said with a smile, then quickly ran through the list of speakers in his mind. Once he was sure that everyone had had an opportunity to present, he looked to Valerie and said, "If you'd like to say anything to all the different groups at once, this is your chance."

Valerie looked at him with thinly veiled distaste for a moment, then walked to stand before the assembly.

"I'm Valerie Simpson. Since everyone's here, I want to explain 'The Sisterhood'. When we first woke up here and found out that there were

three girls for every boy, we thought that this might be our chance to finally prove that a society of women can perform better than a male-dominated society. But I guess we let our anger at the situation we were in get to us and we started treating the guys we encountered badly."

Although Joseph hadn't heard of any instances where they had behaved inappropriately, he could easily believe her.

"For 'The Sisterhood' to hold the guys trapped in here with us responsible for the actions of those who put us in here, would be no different than the men who have held all females responsible for 'Original Sin'."

Joseph slowly nodded that he could accept what she was offering.

"If you come up with a plan and 'The Sisterhood' can help, be sure to let us know." Valerie said as she looked directly at Joseph.

"We will."

Valerie moved closer to him and said in a whisper, "While you're looking for that Tanner guy, please try to find Kimberly, too."

"I promise."

That being said, Valerie walked away from the front and entered the Green hallway.

"That's it! If anyone wants to say anything to the whole group, now's your chance." Joseph said loudly.

He waited a few seconds, and when he received no response, he said, "Then we're done here. Hang around if you want to. I've got someone to 'not talk' to right now."

Jason wasn't able to contain his smile as Joseph approached.

"Did I miss anything?" Joseph asked curiously.

"I didn't catch the first of what you said, but everything that I heard sounded right."

"We didn't really come up with any answers, but maybe we got the questions out to a few more people. Anyway, I don't think it hurt anything." Joseph said as he turned and looked at the crowd of people, milling around and talking.

"I think this probably helped a lot more than you know."

"I'm here if you..." Joseph began to say when the computerized voice filled the room. *"Attention, Level three residents. Today, you will have to earn your food by performing certain tasks. Some of these tasks will be academic exercises, designed to help you reach your full potential, others will be chores to contribute to the well being of your community. Your happiness is important to us."*

"I gotta go. Mommy's calling me in for dinner." Joseph said with a roll of his eyes.

"Food dispensers are located in the quarters where you awakened. They will only dispense food for the person assigned to those quarters. The community areas are available for your enjoyment when your tasks for the day have been completed."

"Yeah. I'm actually curious about what these *academic exercises* are." Jason said honestly.

"Further updates will be forthcoming. Have a nice day."

"The sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish." Joseph said as he started walking down the blue hallway.

"Do you want to stop by the Gray Purple room, after?" Jason asked casually as they walked.

"Sure, but I won't be able to stay too long. I'm sure that someone's going to want to talk to me in the Blue Green room."

"Yeah. It's a reluctant leader thing. I understand."

They walked in silence for a moment before Joseph quietly asked, "You alright?"

"Honestly, no. But I'm better than I was."

"Good." Joseph said with a smile, then pointed as he continued, "This is mine. One twelve. Remember that you can stop by if you ever want to talk or 'not talk' or something."

"I'll remember. Thanks."

"Okay. I'm here. Tell me what I have to do." Joseph said as he looked around his room.

He waited for a moment, but nothing happened.

"Academic exercises." He tried, but got no better result.

He thought for a moment longer, then cautiously tried, "Food?"

"*Outstanding requirements: Bed not made. Rectify situation.*" The computer said in what seemed to Joseph to be a smug voice.

Rather than argue, he walked to the bed and spread it up, even worse than the last time.

"*Outstanding requirements: Academic exercises not complete. Rectify situation to receive nourishment.*"

"I hate you, you know that, don't you?" Joseph said as he watched the table and bench slide out from the wall, unlike the previous day, the 'dispenser receptacle' didn't open.

He didn't know what he was supposed to do, but reasoned that since the table had slid out, that he was probably supposed to sit down.

As soon as he sat, a projection lit up on the wall opposite him.

"Ass activated learning." Joseph muttered, then his jaw dropped when he recognized the lesson before him.

'Chemistry Logistics, Lesson 79.1'

It was EXACTLY the same lesson that he had left unfinished during the last class he attended on his last day at school.

Chapter 4

As much of a pain as school work normally was, doing it via a video projection on his wall, using only verbal commands for input, was far worse.

It took him an unreasonable amount of time to discover the basic commands that the computer would recognize, such as 'page' and 'solve'. The entire process was frustrating and Joseph could feel his stomach gurgling, demanding its next meal.

He had finished his chemistry work earlier, along with some rather dry English. Now he was struggling with United States History lessons.

Back in his school, doing the very same lessons had been a simple matter of memorization and regurgitation. No thought required. However, in this new environment, he was paying closer attention to the things that he was being expected to learn.

Many of them were wrong.

Not only could he detect flaws in logic and blatant misrepresentations of people's motives, but also some out and out lies.

As he thought back over the 'facts' that he had been taught in school, he realized that non-white, non-male, non-Christians barely existed in their fallacious version of history. If they were ever mentioned in passing, it was as incompetent villains, easily conquered, or powerless wretches that needed to be 'saved' by way of the white man's boundless generosity.

A knock on his door caused him to jump.

He got up from the bench a bit stiffly and absently wondered just how long he had been sitting there. Of course, such speculation was pointless, since it was impossible to develop any concept of time in their current setting.

As he slid open the door, he was greeted by Kenyon's smiling face.

"Hey. How's it going?" Kenyon asked happily.

"I'm still doing my 'academic exercises'. Are you finished with yours?" Joseph asked as he backed into his room, allowing Kenyon entry.

"Yeah. After you left for your meeting, Wade stayed with me and helped me get bandaged up. After that, I didn't feel like walking or anything, so I got an early start on my lessons. I just finished a little bit ago."

"Did you notice if you had *exactly* the same lessons that you were doing at your old school, before you came here?"

"Yeah. How long do you think that they were watching us before the kidnapping?"

"I keep going back to the 'standardized tests'. It seems that they must have used those to compile a list of potential candidates. Then, somehow they investigated each one of us to whittle down the list to only white, physically 'acceptable' subjects for their experiment."

"Did you ever do those 'physical assessments' in gym class where they calculated everyone's BMI?"

"Yeah. I hadn't thought about that. And now that I *do* think about it, I also remember my parents complaining about the school requiring a *complete* medical history to get me enrolled. They couldn't understand why the school needed that information."

"So, do you think that all of this has something to do with the schools?"

"I don't know. It seems as likely as not that the schools were 'used' to collect the information and screen potential candidates, but I don't see this being a part of their 'agenda'. There's probably someone high up who makes the requirements who's in on it, but I doubt that very many, if any, of the people at the local level are involved."

Kenyon shook his head, then said, "They had to have someone local to arrange for us to be picked up, drugged and transported. There's no way they could have secretly made all those arrangements from the top. And they couldn't have made those arrangements in time without a network of people already working for them."

Joseph thought about that for a moment, then quietly said, "You're right."

Kenyon smiled with satisfaction.

"I need to finish my 'academic exercises' and drink my 'snail trail'. Then we can go and pitch this idea to the others in the Blue and Green room, to see what they think about it." Joseph said as he went back to his bench.

As soon as his butt hit the seat, the projection on the wall reappeared, just as he had left it.

Joseph read through the question on the wall, then noticed a movement. He turned to see Kenyon stripping his bed and remaking it properly.

"Thanks." Joseph said with a smile at him.

"*Uncoded response: Please restate.*" The computer said in its ever cheerful voice.

"I wasn't talking to you." Joseph growled at the wall.

"*Uncoded response: Please restate.*" The computer repeated.

Joseph took a deep breath, then carefully formulated his response to the question on the screen before starting his answer with the *proper* code word, 'Solve'.

He was surprised to find that when he finished answering the question, the 'food receptacle' opened, revealing his revolting gray sludge.

"I don't know if I'd call this a reward or a punishment." Joseph said as he picked up the glass and placed it on the table before him.

He waited for a moment, to see if the computer were going to chastise him, but apparently it stopped listening to his every word as soon as the 'academic exercises' were over.

"Mine tasted different, today." Kenyon said from his place seated on Joseph's bed.

If it weren't for the empty gnawing in his stomach, Joseph would have found some excuse not to drink the sludge. But he was *just* hungry enough that he wasn't able to put it off.

His first drink was as much a struggle as it had been the time before. When he came up for air, he realized what Kenyon meant about the flavor being different.

He could detect the slightest hint of something, not an herb, but more like a spice. It made him think of baked goods, and reminded him of nutmeg or maybe a very mild cinnamon.

"Can you taste it?" Kenyon asked curiously.

"Yeah. I don't know what that is." Joseph said before dutifully taking his next drink.

"Me neither." Kenyon agreed, then continued, "I don't think it made it taste *better*. But it kind of made me take my mind off the 'goop' a little."

Joseph came up for air again, and said, "Yeah."

As Joseph went in for his third and final drink, Kenyon quietly said, "The real reason I came over here is because I wanted to thank you."

Joseph wanted to respond, but was having difficulty getting his last mouthful of 'goop' to go down.

"I mean, I appreciate what Wade did, but he told me that you're the one who asked him to go and check on me." Kenyon explained.

Joseph took in a long, deep breath.

"Please return the glass to the dispenser receptacle." The computer said in an upbeat and cheerful tone, which made Joseph want to punch something.

"Fuck you." Joseph growled as he leaned forward and placed the empty glass into its little recess.

Nothing happened for a moment, then Joseph remembered how it worked. As soon as he stood, the bench, table and the door of the 'food receptacle' all moved in unison.

"Have a nice day." The computer said, sounding inordinately pleased with itself.

"Blow me." Joseph snarled at the computer reflexively.

When he turned, he was surprised to find Kenyon standing, only inches away.

Before he could react, Kenyon swooped in and wrapped him in a hug and began to kiss him.

Joseph was frozen in shock, trying to get his mind to comprehend what was happening.

As suddenly as the kiss had begun, it ended and Kenyon released him.

"Sorry." Kenyon muttered regretfully.

"What was that all about?" Joseph asked cautiously as he fought to keep a sudden adrenaline rush from overwhelming him.

"I... I don't know. I just felt like I had to."

"Because I helped you?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe. I just feel something. I don't know..."

"Maybe you should not do that again until you *do* know."

"You don't hate me for doing that, do you?"

"No. I just wasn't expecting to get jumped."

"I didn't mean to. It just kind of happened." Kenyon said nervously and seemed to be fighting back tears of humiliation.

"Just so we're clear on something, I'm rubbed raw. So even if I wanted to, and I'm not saying that I do, there's no way that anything's going to happen."

Kenyon slightly nodded, then said, "Mine's in a sling."

Joseph broke into a reluctant smile at that, then said, "Good point."

Kenyon seemed to be lost in his thoughts as several conflicting emotions made their way into his expression.

"Are you okay?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"I'm not gay." Kenyon said in confusion.

"Well, I'd say that you're not *exactly* straight, either. Not after doing that."

"I never even *looked* at guys before, and now all I want to do is kiss you and hold you in my arms."

"We've been abducted, drugged, and stuck in some demented scientist's genetics experiment. I think that would cause anyone's emotions to go a little janky."

Kenyon slowly nodded.

"And just so you know, I didn't *hate* it. That was a nice kiss. It might have been even better if I'd been expecting it."

"Do you want to?"

"Not now. Let's give both of us time to calm down and figure out what we *really* feel before we do anything else."

"I'll try. But I can't think clearly, right now." Kenyon said as he fought to contain his boiling emotions.

"Maybe that's the plan." Joseph said in sudden realization.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on. We need to talk to the others." Joseph said decisively, then led the way out of the room.

As they approached the Blue and Green meeting hall, they heard voices taunting and cheering.

Walking in, they saw two girls, one dressed in blue, the other in gray, alternating between fistfighting and wrestling, while others stood around the edge of the room, egging them on.

"Stop this! Are you two crazy?" Joseph called out as he immediately ran to try to break them up.

It took a moment for Kenyon to realize what he was seeing, but when he saw Joseph spring into action, he was only a step behind.

It took a moment for the two boys to pull the girls apart, but once they were finally separated, Joseph asked the girl in blue that he was restraining, "What caused this?"

"She's a Gray! She doesn't have any right to come in here! This is *our* room!" The Blue girl venomously spat.

"This is a lab experiment. We're their rats. The only reason for us to be wearing these colors is to divide us to make us do *exactly* what you're doing right now." Joseph urged the struggling girl to understand.

When the words finally seemed to sink in, she stopped her struggle.

"Are you okay?" Joseph asked her with concern.

"Yeah." The girl said slowly, then cautiously said, "I'm not like this. I don't get angry at people over stupid things."

Joseph glanced at Kenyon, then calmly said, "I think that they've put something in our food to heighten our emotional states. I guess that we were behaving too calmly, so they decided to 'stir the pot'."

"I'm sorry... whoever you are. He's right. I got mad for no good reason." The girl in blue said repentantly to her opponent.

"I shouldn't have reacted the way I did. When I noticed that you were angry with me, I responded with anger. I didn't even realize it." The girl in gray said thoughtfully.

Kenyon reluctantly released the girl in gray a moment before Joseph released the other.

The girls could obviously feel the stares of everyone in the room on them, waiting for their next actions.

"Sorry." The girl in blue finally said.

"Me, too." The girl in gray said timidly.

"Joseph." Kenyon said in nearly a whisper.

The puzzled look on his face made Joseph follow his gaze. As he looked around the room, he saw what Kenyon was seeing. It appeared that everyone in the room was either holding on to, or standing very near, one other person.

"It's also possible that they've given us something in our food to encourage us to form attachments to each other." Joseph speculated.

A few of the people looked around the room in surprise as they understood what he was saying.

"You guys, could you try to keep each other from doing things that you might regret when this drug wears off? They want us to be their guinea pigs and lab rats. Instead, let's show them how *humans* behave." Joseph said firmly.

"You sound like you're going somewhere." Kenyon said cautiously.

"I am. And I'd appreciate it if you'd go with me."

"Right now, I'd follow you to the ends of the earth."

"We may already be there." Joseph said as he started walking toward the Green hallway.

"Where are we going?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"Right here." Joseph said simply, then knocked on door number one thirty.

"Come in!" A voice immediately responded from inside.

Joseph slid open the door and saw that Wade was sitting on the bench in front of his projected schoolwork.

"How are you doing?" Joseph asked with concern as he led the way into the room.

"Okay. I guess. Hey, Kenyon. How are you?"

"I'll have to get back to you on that."

"Uncoded response: Please restate." The computer said insistently.

"If you stand up, it will stop listening for your response." Joseph told him simply.

Wade immediately stood, then said, "Thanks. I thought I was never going to figure out how to answer the questions."

"An instructional video would have been nice. Then again, seeing how long it took us to figure out the basic instructions might have been part of the overall experiment."

"So, what brings you guys here?"

"There's a chance that they might have added something to our... 'Snail Trail' to heighten our emotions or lower our inhibitions or something. I just wanted to check on you and make sure that you were alright."

"Have you checked on Jason, yet?"

"No. Your room was closer."

"I haven't drank my 'Snail Trail', yet. So I'm fine. Go and check on him."

"It seems that your choices are to drink it and be drugged or not drink it and starve. Whatever you decide to do, it's your choice. But if you decide to drink it, then you might think about being around someone that you trust, to help keep you from doing anything that you might regret."

"Got it. Go on."

Joseph nodded, then looked to see if Kenyon were ready to go.

"Yeah." Kenyon whispered, then led the way out.

"What's got you bothered?" Kenyon asked curiously as they walked back toward the Blue and Green meeting hall.

"I can just feel my mind starting to cloud over and I feel like my nerves are on edge."

"Don't worry, I'll stick with you to make sure that you don't lose control."

"Thanks. It makes me feel better to know that I'm not going to unintentionally hurt someone."

"Yeah. If you start to lose control, I'll just kiss you until you're back in your right mind."

After a pause, Joseph simply said, "Noted."

The Blue and Green room had about a dozen people in there, but all of them seemed to be paired off and talking quietly to each other.

The Blue and Gray room was deserted.

As they approached the Gray and Purple room, Joseph glanced at Jason's door and found that it was slid open.

"Jason? Are you here?" Joseph asked cautiously as they approached the doorway.

"Joseph? Can you help me?"

Joseph and Kenyon walked into the room to find Jason backed into the bathroom, trying to fend off the advances of three girls, two in purple and one in gray.

"LISTEN!" Joseph bellowed.

Once he had their attention, he continued in a more reasonable voice, "They spiked our food. I don't know what they gave us, but it's their drugs that are making you act like this."

"No it's..." One of the girls began to protest.

"Just think about how you'd feel if someone were trying to touch you without your permission. *That's* what you're doing to Jason."

The three girls looked at each other with confusion and none of them could force themselves to look Jason in the eyes.

Joseph could tell that he was getting through to them, so he continued, "We're all away from our homes and our families, and now we're here in this new situation, and on top of everything else, they're giving us drugs to make us lose control of ourselves. Don't let them win."

"I'm sorry." One of the girls muttered, then edged around Joseph, toward the door.

"It helps if you're with someone you can trust. You three take care of each other."

"Thanks." The last girl said as she scooted past him.

"Thank you." Jason said as he wilted with relief.

"Joseph's always got our backs." Kenyon said with a smile of admiration at him.

"I think you're right." Jason said with a grin at Joseph.

"Before we go any further, there are some things that you need to know."

Jason looked at Joseph with concern at the statement.

"What I was saying about our food being drugged, it's true. I can feel myself on the edge of losing control and wanting to act on every impulse."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Have you had your dinner, yet?"

"I was just finishing it off when Karen and the other two showed up."

"Then you don't have long. Make sure that you're with someone you can trust to help you. When this stuff kicks in, every random thing that crosses your mind sounds like a good idea. If you don't stay right on top of it, you'll probably end up doing things that you'll regret later."

"And that's what's happening to you, right now?"

"Yes."

"I don't know who to trust... besides you. You're the only one who's been there for me when I needed someone."

"I need to walk the station. Not only will it help to work some of this crap out of my system and help me to clear my head, but we also need to spread the word to people so that they won't do too many stupid things that they'll regret tomorrow. You can go with us, if you want."

"If I'm about to lose my self-control, then I *should* go with you. Otherwise, I might not try to fight off the next group of admirers who come to visit."

"And taking advantage of them while they're in that drug induced state would be *bad*. No matter how much the drugs might want to convince you otherwise, it would still be *wrong*."

"Sorry, Joseph." Kenyon quietly muttered.

"It's okay, Kenyon. You've been given retroactive permission. You're off the hook." Joseph said with a grin in his direction, then thought to say, "Jason, I don't think you've met Kenyon, our escapee from the 'Amazon Zone'."

"I was wondering about the orange coveralls."

"Yeah. From what Wade told me, when we first woke up today, Joseph asked Wade to check on me while he went to check on you."

Jason looked at Joseph with a broad smile of gratitude.

"I like you Jason, and unless you're willing to find out how much, I think we should be going, *right now*." Joseph said in a tightly controlled voice.

"You mean that *you*?..."

"Since you're so tall, I'd like to climb you and then kiss you like crazy when I get to the top."

"Yeah. We'd better go." Kenyon said quietly, then looked to Jason and said, "You can come with us, if you want. We're probably going to find a lot of people doing stuff they'd only dreamed of before today."

"Yes. I don't like the idea of being here on my own. Especially since I'm not sure that I'd be able to trust myself."

"That's the whole idea of this. We'll keep each other from doing things that we'll regret." Joseph said and Jason noticed that Joseph seemed to have a fine sheen of sweat forming on his upper lip.

"Either that, or we'll all feel guilty about it together in the morning." Kenyon said before turning to walk out the door.

Joseph looked to Jason and quietly said, "I can't imagine what you're feeling after what happened to you in the blackout. But I'll do whatever I can to keep anyone from hurting you."

"Since I'm so big, people don't usually worry about my feelings."

"I do."

They walked the few steps from Jason's room into the Purple and Gray meeting room and found several girls and one boy separated into pairs, and one threesome, all kissing and in the first stages of getting undressed.

"Everyone! You need to listen to me!" Jason said in a commanding voice.

Joseph felt his knees get weak at the raw power and sensuality that Jason exuded.

"The food that you've been given has been drugged. You're not behaving rationally."

A few of the participants looked up from what they were doing, but were soon drawn back into their loveplay.

"Try to think about what you're doing. Is this what you really want? Are you going to regret it tomorrow?"

"This is what I've always wanted." One of the girls in purple said before returning to her partner, a girl in gray.

"Okay. But remember that if any of you want to talk to me later about what happened, I'll do my best to help you however I can."

"You can help me now." A voice called from the other doorway.

Joseph was surprised to see Autumn stalk up to Jason and start to kiss him.

Due to their difference in height, she caught him mostly on the neck and a little bit on the chin. But she certainly gave it an admirable effort.

"Autumn, you wouldn't want someone walking up to you like that and kissing you that way without your permission, would you?" Joseph asked her reasonably.

"If it was Jason, I would."

"Autumn, try to think past the drugs. They're forcing you to do things that you don't really want to do."

"They're forcing me to do *exactly* what I want to do. This is what I've wanted to do since the first time I saw Jason."

As Jason tried to keep her at arm's length, he quietly said, "Autumn, I like you very much. But you don't know me. All you know about me is what your eyes tell you. When this is all over, if you want to get to know *me*, if you want to find out who I am inside, then we can spend time together. But there's no way that I'd take advantage of you when you're not in a state of mind to make a rational decision."

"Come on, just a little?" Autumn pouted.

"No." Jason said firmly, then continued more gently, "I hope that when this has worn off, that you'll appreciate that I respected you enough not to take advantage of you."

"I don't want your respect! I want you to love me!" Autumn said angrily.

"This, what you're doing right now... not helping." Kenyon told her simply.

Jason separated himself from Autumn and watched her carefully, to be sure that she wasn't going to attack again.

When Joseph was certain that Autumn was convinced, he quietly said, "We need to get moving. There's not much more we can do here."

As they began to walk, Jason absently said, "I was a goofy looking kid."

"Really? I can't imagine that." Joseph said honestly.

"I was put into a foster home when I was about seven. The people that I call my mom and dad... they're paid to take care of us. It's their job. They treat me okay, but I was never really... loved."

"I can't imagine how that was for you."

"I was a little underweight and small for my age. Then, last year, I started to grow like crazy. Along with that, people started noticing me and telling me how handsome I was. I didn't know how to handle it."

Before he could say more, a girl, dressed in black coveralls, came running toward them leaping in long slow strides.

All three boys stood and watched, not knowing what, if anything, they were supposed to do in response.

When she was a few feet away from them, she stopped and somehow managed to do a little pirouette, in her army boots, then took off, leaping in long slow strides down the rest of the hallway.

"You don't see that everyday." Kenyon finally said.

"We might now." Jason said as he continued to watch after her for a moment longer.

"Kenyon, is there anyone that you were wanting to check on, while we're walking around?" Joseph thought to ask.

"No. The Yellow Greens were all fine when I passed through there. You and Wade were the only other ones I knew."

"Kenyon? That's an unusual name." Jason said slowly.

"It's my last name. My first name is Richard, just like about a third of all the guys in my grade at school. It was just easier for everyone to call me by my last name."

Jason nodded, then said, "The same thing happened to me. There are a lot of Jasons, so I've been called Jason K since I was in grade school."

"What about you, Joseph?"

"Guys, I may need to go back to my room. I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

"What's wrong?" Jason asked with concern.

"I feel like I'm about to crawl out of my skin!"

"Tell me what I can do to help you." Kenyon said gently.

"Don't say that! If you say that, I might tell you what I *really* want you to do and then... I can't!"

"I don't understand. What does he need?" Jason asked cautiously.

"I think I know." Kenyon said quietly, then explained, "It's kind of like Autumn, he wants to kiss you and have you love him."

"I'll be fine." Joseph said as he fought to get himself back under control.

"Do you think that when we're not under the influence of these drugs that he has those same feelings toward me?" Jason asked cautiously.

"No. I understand what he's feeling because I feel the same thing for him. I didn't feel this before... or, at least I didn't think about it for more than a second or two, if I did." Kenyon tried to explain.

"I'm sorry, Kenyon. You can kiss me if you still want to. I'm sorry I didn't let you before." Joseph rushed to say.

"Yeah. I might if it weren't for that speech you gave about 'respect'. I want to still be your friend tomorrow."

Joseph nodded slowly as he struggled to keep his mind on what they were saying.

"Don't mind us! Just passing through!" Joseph said as he shielded his eyes from the mass of naked people, writhing on the floor and table in the Purple and Black room.

"You don't need to rush away! Stay awhile." A familiar voice called in return.

Joseph forced himself to stop in the doorway to the Black hallway long enough to say, "They put a drug in our food to make us... lose inhibitions, I guess. It may be a little too late to be telling you this, but don't do anything you'll regret."

"Oh! I won't!" Lisa responded, then broke into a fit of giggles.

Although he didn't want to, Joseph couldn't seem to keep himself from looking back into the room. By his estimate, there were at least fifteen naked girls. At his first and only glance, he didn't see any indication of boys, but he wasn't about to hang around and look to be sure.

"If the rest of the rooms are like that, we should probably turn back." Jason said uncomfortably.

Joseph thought that the fact that the tips of Jason's ears blushed was just adorable. "No. Whether or not they listen, everyone deserves to be told what's going on."

"Yeah. That's only right."

Joseph stopped in his tracks, then said, "We need to check on Ryan, while we're here."

"The guy in black who's always running back and forth?" Jason asked to be sure.

"Yes. His room is right there."

"I love you, Joseph." Kenyon said in a hopeless, helpless voice.

The words stopped Joseph in his tracks.

Joseph stood still, frozen in place for a moment, then looked Kenyon in the eyes and said, "If you tell me that tomorrow, I might believe you."

Kenyon slowly nodded his understanding.

Joseph walked to Kenyon and gently placed a hand on the back of his head before asking, "Is it alright?"

"Yeah."

Joseph smiled slightly, then pulled Kenyon into a kiss, guiding him exactly where he wanted him to go.

Although Jason knew that there was a reason that he shouldn't be looking, he found that he couldn't look away.

The kiss didn't last too long. But it said what they both wanted it to say.

"I'll still love you tomorrow. I just don't know if I'll be able to admit it."

Kenyon said quietly.

"We'll find out, then. And if you can't... that's okay. I don't think it's the drugs talking when I say that I don't think that I'll regret this."

Kenyon smiled at the response, then followed as Joseph walked up to the closed door and knocked.

"Ryan, it's Joseph. Are you okay?"

"Kinda busy, right now." Ryan called in return.

"I just wanted to let you know that they added drugs to our food to lower our inhibitions and make us act on our impulses. Be careful that you don't do anything that you'll regret."

"We won't." Kenna's voice called in response.

Joseph's eyes went wide, then he said a brief, "Have fun."

"We will!" Both Ryan and Kenna answered, then broke into joyous giggles.

"Jason, are you okay? You're kinda quiet." Joseph asked cautiously.

"I think I'm feeling the drug. I'm feeling... I want to hold someone. I just don't know who." Jason said anxiously.

"Hold, like hugging and stuff like that?"

"Yes. And I've never kissed... anyone."

"I've seen at least *four* girls kissing you so far, and that's just today."

"That was *them* kissing *me*. That even happened before I was brought here. But I've never been in a circumstance where I felt a level of affection where I wanted to initiate a kiss... until now. I want to do that. I want to feel that. But I don't know with who."

"I think we have a volunteer." Kenyon said as he made a show of pointing at Joseph.

"No, Kenyon. I kissed *you*. I wouldn't betray you like that."

"I wasn't asking you to." Jason said quickly.

"Just go ahead and give the big guy a hug. I've got no problem with that. In fact, if he needs one later, I may hug him, too."

"Okay." Joseph said decisively, "If you want a hug, we can do that whenever you're ready. It only means as much as we say it does. It's not a gay thing or a lover thing unless we both agree that it is, right?"

"I'm not sure... What if I like it?"

"Then you're *human*. Hugging isn't a gay or straight thing."

Jason looked to Kenyon and quietly asked, "You're okay with this?"

"Keep your hands where I can see them." Kenyon said with playful sternness.

"I will." Jason assured him, then leaned in and gave Joseph a gentle, almost ethereal hug.

Joseph had no idea that someone so big could be so gentle.

As Jason's hand slipped from the small of Joseph's back, Kenyon said, "Hey! Watch the hands!"

Jason flashed him a pleading expression and Kenyon wilted in resignation.

"Okay. Just don't go too far." Kenyon reluctantly agreed.

Jason then simultaneously moved in to give Joseph a deep kiss, but also moved his hand down to firmly cup Jason's left butt cheek.

After a moment, Kenyon quietly said, "Um... guys..."

Jason seemed to realize what he was doing and slowly began to release Joseph.

"Wow." Joseph whispered.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No." Joseph said quietly, then added, "Whenever you find who you love, for real, I think that they'll be a very lucky person."

"I enjoyed that. But I feel as though I shouldn't have."

"They gave you drugs and you did things you wouldn't have done otherwise. That's it. Don't get all caught up in what it means, because it doesn't mean anything."

"It meant something to me."

"Me too! I'm sorry I said it that way! I just wanted you to know that the whole gay and straight thing... this doesn't have anything to do with that. You can still find a girl and fall in love and all of that and never look back on this as anything except something that you did when you were drugged against your will."

"It means more to me than that."

"Right. It means a lot to me, too. It just doesn't necessarily mean *that*."

After a moment to consider, Jason slowly nodded his head in agreement.

"Good. We need to keep going if we're going to let everyone know before someone gets hurt."

"Sodomites! Heathens! God will have His VENGEANCE upon thee!" was being called out as they walked toward the Red and Black room.

"I should have known." Joseph said with a sigh.

The sight that greeted them as they walked through the door was still somehow unexpected.

Various teenagers, both male and female, were either nude or in the process of getting that way while feverishly humping and grinding against each other.

Standing before them fully dressed and staring disapprovingly, was Jude.

"You got a minute?" Joseph asked as he approached.

"They won't listen."

"When we got our last meal, there was a drug in the food. It makes people act on their desires."

"We're in hell."

"We're in a facility, being experimented on. Now we're being drugged... for some reason. Maybe it's just for their amusement. I really don't know. But we're here and we've got to deal with it."

"Sounds like hell to me." Kenyon muttered under his breath.

"I don't know what it is that I'm supposed to do." Jude said helplessly.

"I don't know either." Joseph admitted, then continued, "But keep in mind that these people aren't *evil* or *wicked*. They were drugged without their knowledge or consent. *They're* not the bad guys."

Jude slowly nodded, signifying at least some level of understanding.

"And I think that tomorrow, when the drug wears off, you're probably going to have some very guilty and confused people who are going to need someone to help them deal with the things they did while they were under the influence. They won't need someone blaming them and making them feel worse."

"Look at that!" Kenyon said suddenly.

Joseph reflexively looked where Kenyon was pointing and very nearly lost his 'Snail Trail' at the sight.

After a moment to choke down his distaste, he carefully said, "I never, in a million years, would have thought of *that*. But I suppose that *technically*, it could be counted as sex."

"Thank you." Jude said quietly, drawing Joseph's attention.

"For what?"

"For reminding me that my people will need me to be there for them. I have sinned in pride, believing that I was better than they are because I didn't succumb to my forbidden desires."

"Did you already drink your dinner?"

"No. I am fasting while I offer up prayers of protection for Tanner."

"Jason, Kenyon, come here. We've got a job."

"But did you *see* that?!" Kenyon asked with wide eyes.

"Yes. But this, first." Joseph said firmly.

Jason and Kenyon finally tore their amazed gazes away from the impending orgy and looked at Joseph expectantly.

"Jude, I don't know how much good this will do, but if you think it'll help, we'll pray for Tanner with you."

"Thank you."

"Will you lead the prayer?"

"Please join hands."

Joseph looked around to be sure that Jason and Kenyon weren't peeking at the sexual gymnastics on the other side of the room.

"Dear God, we implore you to intercede on behalf of your innocent son, Tanner. Please protect him and bring him back to us safely."

"Kimberly, too." Joseph quietly added.

"We ask that you remove from power, those who have captured us and deliver us from their evil hands. Protect us, O Lord."

"And please don't let anyone get hurt." Jason added in a low voice.

Joseph gave Jason's hand a squeeze of support.

"In Jesus' holy name we pray, Amen."

"Amen." Joseph said in a whisper.

"Thank you, Joseph. I just wish that there were more that I could do for my brothers and sisters who have been overcome."

"Try telling them that they've been drugged. That what they're feeling isn't real, it's a chemically induced state that our captors have inflicted on them. That *might* snap a few of them out of it."

"And afterward, remember to tell them that they are still good people. Just because they were drugged into giving into carnal desires doesn't

mean that they've been corrupted by Satan. Corruption is a choice, and that choice was denied them. This wasn't something that they did, this was something that was done *to* them." Jason said firmly.

"I understand." Jude said calmly, then added, "I had better get to work. It looks like I'm going to have a lot to do."

"If you need any help, I'm in Blue Green, Jason's in Gray Purple and Kenyon's usually in Yellow Green. If there's anything we can do to help, let us know." Joseph offered sincerely.

"I will. Thank you." Jude said quietly, then walked away.

As Joseph was about to leave, he noticed Kenyon staring at the orgy, once again.

"If you want to stay and play... I won't stop you." Joseph said quietly.

"No! It's not that! They're just doing things that I never even *thought of* before!" Kenyon said disbelievingly.

"Yeah. From what I hear, when Christians let loose, they're like that." Joseph said as he started toward the door.

"Over there. That looks like it's *gotta* hurt." Jason whispered as he pointed.

"Yeah." Kenyon agreed before also turning to leave.

"Do you think that maybe they're doing this so that all the girls will get pregnant?" Jason asked Joseph as they walked away from the Red and Black room.

"I honestly don't know."

"Do you have any theories?" Kenyon asked curiously.

"I have tons of them, but none of them fit with the scenario that we're looking at."

"With all the drugging and the blackouts, couldn't they have just given us the drug before we woke up this morning?" Jason asked carefully.

"I don't see any reason why they couldn't." Joseph admitted.

"So, the sporadic way that people were overcome at different times, and some, like Jude, not at all, might have been a desirable outcome?" Jason slowly deduced.

"Possibly. Joseph said thoughtfully, trying to get his foggy mind to cooperate.

"But the reason behind giving us the drug at all... I mean, they damaged our penises, then they give us drugs to make us want to have sex... that's just mean." Kenyon said cautiously.

"I think that Stone is the one we need to ask about the drugs." Joseph said, then explained, "He seems to have more knowledge about them than anyone else that I've talked to. He might have some idea of what the *intended* use for a drug like this might be."

"He's probably busy with Alyssa. And if they've had their dinner..." Kenyon trailed off, letting the others fill in the blank.

"Even so, he's probably our best source for information." Joseph said slowly.

"Hold it *right* there!" A girl said as they approached the Orange and Red meeting room.

"We're not here to cause any trouble. We just wanted to talk to Korbin, if he's got a minute." Joseph said carefully.

"Denise. Get Korbin. I need him here." The girl firmly said over her shoulder.

From the determined look in the girl's eyes and the confidence she exuded, Joseph wasn't about to try to do anything to set her off.

"Joseph... and Jason. It's good to see you again. How are you?" Korbin asked pleasantly as he approached, then motioned for them to follow.

"We're fine. This is Kenyon." Joseph said quickly.

"It's nice to meet you, Kenyon. I'm surprised that I haven't seen you around." Korbin said honestly as he walked to one of the meeting tables and took a seat.

Joseph noticed a familiar face and said, "Hi, Randa. How are things going?"

"You mean besides being drugged half out of my head and having to watch out for the Rape Gang? Fine, I guess." Randa said with impressive sarcasm.

"Rape gang?" Joseph asked with concern.

"Yes. They came from the Red and Black room a while ago. We were able to get our people back from them before anything happened, but just knowing that they're out there gives me the creeps." Randa said with anger under her words.

"From what we saw, all the people in the Red and Black room were entertaining themselves pretty well." Kenyon helpfully supplied.

"Still, until this wears off, I'm not taking any chances. Laurina has a third degree black belt in Karate, so I've got her posted at the door. We've got two other people with martial arts training to trade off shifts with her. If we get attacked again, we'll be ready." Korbin said, mostly to Joseph.

"So, I take it that you were able to figure out about the drugs in our food?"

"Yes. I should've seen that coming. Next meal, we're going to have someone eat first and wait to see their reaction before the rest of us have any."

"If you ate dinner, how are you not... violent or lust crazed?"

"The same way you are, I'm guessing. I know that there's a poison inside me that infects my mind and I'm not giving in to it."

"I admire your willpower."

"I'm guessing that you're here because you're walking around the station, warning people about the drug."

"That's right. I'm just glad that you were able to figure it out before your people were overcome by it. The other sections weren't quite so lucky."

"The 'Sisterhood' shouldn't be a problem. I told them what was going on... well, Randa told them. So they were probably able to get on top of things before they went out of control."

"That's good. There have been a couple rooms that were pure orgies. I didn't know what to do except warn them about what was really happening to them and leave them to do whatever they wanted with that knowledge."

"I'm too much of a control freak to be okay with that. When I see something wrong, I want it to be fixed, immediately."

Joseph looked at him curiously at the statement.

"If I don't go and look at it, then I don't react to it. That's most of why I stay right here."

Joseph smiled and said, "It's good that you know yourself that well. Maybe if I looked at my own mind and my own motivations a little more, I could make some wise decisions like that, too."

"Don't change what works." Kenyon said to him firmly.

Joseph smiled at the words, then thought to ask, "Before we go, is there anything we can do for you guys?"

"I'm still waiting on that jackhammer."

"It must have been lost in the mail." Joseph said with a grin, then asked again, "Can you think of anything that we can do for you, from over on the other side?"

After a moment to consider, Korbin slowly said, "Yeah."

Joseph waited with anticipation.

"Would you mind spreading the word that as soon as the 'drug crisis' has passed, that we're probably going to start sending search parties into the other areas to inspect the inner wall, to see if they can find an entrance to the middle?"

"Sure. I'd be happy to tell everyone."

"That's all I got. Our wall's fixed and we haven't been able to find so much as a crease in the inner wall in this section."

"I'll see you again on my next walkabout. Let me know if you need anything." Joseph said as he stood, then quickly added before Korbin could say it, "I'll reorder the jackhammer and get it to you as quick as I can."

"Right." Korbin said with a smile.

As Joseph walked to the door that led to the Orange hallway, Jason and Kenyon automatically followed.

As the trio walked away from the Orange and Red room, Joseph quietly said, "I think that Korbin is an amazing leader. He takes good care of his people and understands himself."

"Yes. And he seems to have embraced the concept of being a leader, something that I'm still struggling with." Jason said quietly.

"What's wrong, Jayce?"

"I feel like I should be in the Gray and Purple meeting room, watching over my people."

"It would be nice if you could do that, but you know as well as we do that it wouldn't work out that way. It wouldn't be safe for you there. You're just too damned cute."

"They've been warned, so all you can really do is let them work the drug out of their systems, then help them to pick up the pieces." Kenyon explained then pointed as he said, "There's my room. Do you guys need anything while we're here?"

"Actually, I'm thirsty. Do you think that there's any way to get a glass of water from the computer?" Jason asked cautiously.

Joseph was surprised by the question and admitted, "I haven't tried. But if you can't, you could cup your hands under the faucet in the bathroom sink."

Kenyon led the way to his door and slid it open.

"It's your room, so why don't you try asking?" Joseph asked as he followed Kenyon into the room.

Kenyon walked to where the 'food receptacle' was located and said, "Water."

Much to their surprise, the food receptacle panel opened to reveal a glass, the same as their 'dinner' glass, filled with water.

"Here you go." Kenyon said as he picked up the glass and handed it to Jason.

"Thank you." Jason said gratefully, then took a tentative sip.

"How is it?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Lukewarm." Jason said before taking another drink.

"I noticed that the people in charge of this place don't seem to have any concept of refrigeration."

"Are you thirsty?" Kenyon asked Joseph quietly.

Something about the tone of Kenyon's voice made Joseph look at him consideringly.

"I think I'll wait until I get back to my room." Joseph said as he stepped forward and pulled Kenyon into a gentle hug.

"What are you doing that for?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"You looked like you needed it." Joseph said simply, then quietly added, "And so did I."

"Please return the glass to the dispenser receptacle." The computer said in its ever cheerful and upbeat tone.

Joseph turned to see that Jason had finished drinking his glass of water.

"It's watching. It knows when you're done drinking." Kenyon said quietly.

"Yeah. But that doesn't even make the top ten list of creepy things about this place." Joseph said as he reluctantly released Kenyon from the hug.

Jason edged past Kenyon and Joseph to place the empty glass back into the 'dispenser receptacle'.

As soon as he did, the panel began to close and the computer voice said, *"Have a nice day."*

"If we don't need anything else here, let's get moving." Joseph said decisively.

"Let me check something." Kenyon said as he walked to his bed and pulled back the blanket.

The sight of the dried bloody mess on the stark white sheets was disturbing, to say the least.

"I just wanted to see if they'd somehow change the sheets or something while I was gone." Kenyon said as he moved the blanket back into place.

"What happened?" Jason asked in horror at the sight.

"You know how the rest of us were rubbed raw during the blackout, Kenyon was mutilated." Joseph explained.

"It's not too bad, now. But when Wade knocked on my door and woke me up and I found myself covered in blood, it was a big shock. Then, we couldn't get the bleeding to stop or even figure out where the blood was coming from. It wasn't until Joseph got here and helped us to sort things out that I was able to think rationally about anything." Kenyon shyly admitted.

"When I woke, I found that I had been anally penetrated during our 'blackout'." Jason said quietly.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm sorry as hell that they did that to you."

"I'm sorry for you, too."

"Are you guys ready?" Joseph asked cautiously.

He didn't want to interrupt their 'moment' but he didn't know if either were going to say anything more.

Jason walked to Kenyon and gave him a gentle squeeze around the shoulders as he said, "Yeah."

All three were cautious as they walked into the Yellow and Orange meeting hall, now also known as the 'Amazon Zone'.

The sight that greeted them was beyond bizarre.

All the tables and chairs had been pushed against one wall. About twenty girls were all evenly spaced on the floor across the room, holding exactly the same pose, propped on one knee with the other leg extended in the air behind them.

"Do you have any news about Kimberly?" One of the girls asked and broke ranks to stand.

"No. I'm sorry. Kimberly and Tanner are both still missing." Joseph said regretfully.

"We were walking around letting everyone know that our food had been drugged." Jason added helpfully.

"Yes. Randa told us. It turns out that Madison's mom is a yoga instructor and Madison's been doing yoga all her life, so when we found out that we were drugged, we got everyone together and started going through yoga routines. It seems to help." Valerie explained.

"Good. The Orange and Red room seems to be handling it fairly well, too. Everyone else, not so much." Joseph said honestly.

"If they keep doing this to us, maybe we can get some of our people to learn enough to teach yoga classes in the other areas."

"Right now, it wouldn't be safe for them. But maybe once we've dealt with the aftermath of today, people will be in their right minds enough to want to fight against the effects of the drugs."

Valerie nodded her agreement.

"We need to be going. We've got one more stop to make, then we will have warned everyone."

"There's no way out of this, is there?" Valerie asked in an uncharacteristically emotional desperate voice.

"Not yet. But we need to be alert and aware in case they slip up."

Valerie had a momentary look of confusion, which morphed into resolve.

"Yes. And right now that means not letting their drugs control us." Valerie said decisively, then walked back to her place on the floor and assumed the pose of all those surrounding her.

Joseph tilted his head in the direction of the Yellow hallway, then started walking.

"I never expected *that*." Kenyon said honestly.

"Neither did I. But I guess I allowed my disagreement with their matriarchal philosophy to influence my estimation of their reaction to the situation." Joseph said consideringly.

"Are you feeling better? I mean, do you feel like the drug is wearing off?"

After a moment to consider, Joseph slowly answered, "Yes. At least a little, but not entirely."

"I was just wondering because you're sounding all brainy again, like you usually do."

"If it bothers you, I could try to dumb it down."

"Don't you dare! I like it!" Kenyon yelled.

"Would you two stop flirting? We've got a job to do." Jason scolded playfully.

"Whatever you say, Jayce." Joseph said with a wink in his direction.

Kenyon rolled his eyes, but didn't comment.

Walking into the Yellow and Green room, they were surprised to find several people, sitting and talking quietly amongst themselves.

Since Stone and Alyssa were present, Joseph led the way to talk to them.

"Is everyone alright here?" Joseph asked with concern.

"Yes. For the most part. Wade let us know what was going on before anyone was 'overcome'." Alyssa said carefully.

"What do you mean, 'for the most part'?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Some were affected more strongly than others, or just didn't have a lot of willpower to begin with. We made sure that they knew what was happening to them and allowed them to make their own decisions." Stone answered, and didn't seem to be too happy with the resolution that they had come up with.

"We had to do basically the same thing with a few of the rooms that we passed through. We let them know what was happening and let them know that we'd be available to help them pick up the pieces when the drugs wear off."

"Just when I think that this chamber of horrors can't get any worse, they violate us in even more egregious ways."

"Stone, don't let the drugs influence your behavior. Right now, they're making you angry." Alyssa warned him.

"No. I'm already angry. The drugs are just preventing me from keeping it to myself." Stone said past clenched teeth.

"Do you have any idea about what kind of drug they might have given us, or what it's normally used for?" Joseph asked carefully.

"It's probably some kind of antidepressant, or at least that's *one* of the drugs being used. I can't really narrow it down any more than that."

"I suppose it doesn't matter. I just thought that if we knew what the drug was *supposed* to do, we might have a better idea of what they were trying to prove, or what was expected of us."

"I'd guess that the drug or drugs did *exactly* what they were intended to do. They broke us out of ourselves and forced us to deal with others, whether that be benevolently or aggressively. In doing that, they forced us to form 'families' or 'tribes'. For this experiment of theirs to continue for an extended period of time, we're going to need that social safety net." Alyssa said thoughtfully.

"I need to get back to the Blue and Green room to see what's going on there."

"Zarah sent Brianna over to check on us a little while ago. It sounds like she has things under control."

"Good. I feel bad for leaving them, like I did. But I felt that it was more important to spread the word, so that people would know what's being done to us."

"I think you did the right thing. Thanks to you telling Wade what was happening, we were able to at least make informed decisions." Stone said simply.

"Where is Wade? How is he doing?"

"The last thing he said to us was that he was going back to his room. He hadn't decided if he was going to take the drug or go hungry."

"We'll check on him on the way."

"Let us know if there's anything we can do to help." Alyssa said quietly.

"Just keep on trying to come up with theories and explanations. Even with all we've done so far, I still can't get a sense of what their plan for us is."

"I know what you mean. As soon as something starts making logical sense, they turn around and do something to defeat their own efforts." Stone said gravely.

Joseph nodded, then looked at his companions to see if they were ready to go.

"I'm going to go check on Wade, then I'll be back to fill you in on what we found in the other rooms. Maybe it'll help." Kenyon said to Stone and Alyssa.

"Yes. It might." Stone said with a smile at him.

As Joseph, Jason and Kenyon walked toward the door to the Green hallway, they looked back and noticed the somber mood of the room that they were leaving.

"Who do you think is handling this the best?" Joseph asked thoughtfully as they walked.

"I don't know. I mean, Korbin seems to have things under control, but I'm not sure that would work for everyone. It's perfect for his way of dealing with things, but I don't see myself being able to maintain control of the Grays and Purples like that." Jason said speculatively.

"I think the Amazons are probably the happiest. They all look like they're in a really tranquil place, but I don't know how much good that's doing with actually 'dealing' with what's being done to us. It just sort of defeats the effects of the drugs." Kenyon added helpfully.

"Yeah. Stone and Alyssa's group don't seem happy. It's like they're fighting the antidepressants with depression. I'm not sure that's the most productive way of handling things." Joseph said, then pointed at Wade's closed door.

"Wade? Are you home?" Joseph asked after knocking.

A moment later, the door slid aside as Wade said, "This isn't anything like home."

"True." Joseph conceded, then asked, "How are you doing?"

"I haven't taken the drug, if that's what you're asking."

"Are you going to be alright?"

"I've decided to hold off as long as I can."

"Just let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

"I'm going to hold off until the next blackout, if I can. But if I can't, I was thinking that maybe you guys could help me... get through it."

"Yes. Of course we'll help, however we can."

"I'm going back to the Yellow and Green room. You can come and get me whenever you're ready." Kenyon offered.

"Thanks, I'll do that." Wade said gratefully.

"We're going to the Blue and Green room now. Do you want to come along?" Joseph asked with a smile.

"Actually, I think I'll go with Kenyon. I think that I've had enough of being alone for a while."

"Just let us know if there's anything that we can do."

"Yeah. Thanks."

As Joseph turned to leave the room, Kenyon quickly asked, "Can I have one for the road?"

Joseph smiled at the question then, without hesitation walked up to Kenyon and pulled him into a long kiss filled with loving (drug induced) emotion.

"If that's what this drug does to you, it might not be so bad." Wade said to Jason in a whisper.

"It's caused many people to do many things that they will no doubt regret later. It seems that only a few have been able to get it right." Jason responded quietly.

When the kiss finally ended, Joseph looked into Kenyon's eyes and said, "You know where to find me if you need me."

"I *will* find you." Kenyon said as a vow, then added, "And I *will* need you."

Joseph smiled at the response, then reluctantly led the way out of Wade's room.

Chapter 5

As Jason and Joseph walked into the Blue and Green meeting hall, Joseph was relieved to see that Zarah was overseeing things and that the ten or so other people in attendance were quietly talking amongst themselves and behaving in a respectable manner.

"How are things going here?" Joseph asked as he approached.

"I think that once people started to get word that they had been drugged, they started to attempt to control their behavior to some degree. We've heard some disturbing things from the other sections, but so far everything here has been alright."

"Did you hear anything about the Gray and Purple area?" Jason asked with concern.

"Nothing specific. It sounded like things were out of control in there for a little while, but eventually people settled down."

"Good. I need to go and check on them."

"Jayce, I want you to promise me that if at any point you feel that you're in danger, that you'll come right back here."

"I will."

"And, the same if you start feeling like you're going to lose control."

"I promise."

"I'm here whenever you need me. Remember that."

Jason broke into a heart stopping smile, then said, "You're my white knight, my Prince Charming, always arriving in the nick of time to rescue me and vanquish my enemies."

"Let's not put that to the test. At the first sign of trouble, come right back here."

"I will." Jason said warmly, then leaned in to give Joseph a gentle ghost of a kiss.

Joseph had several conflicting emotions: he wanted to deepen the kiss, he wanted to take Jason back to his room and have his way with him. But another part of him didn't want the evidence of their relationship to be on display for everyone to see.

As Jason stood back up, Joseph saw the blush rising up his cheeks as he realized what he had just done. Joseph couldn't help but think that it was absolutely adorable.

"I'll see you later, Joe."

"Later, Jayce."

After watching Jason walk away, Joseph turned to see Zarah looking at him with a surprised expression.

"Problem?"

"No. Not at all." Zarah immediately responded, then gestured to her right and said, "You remember Leah, don't you?"

"She came up with the name 'Roofieville'."

"Yes. Well... we've... um..."

"Good." Joseph said easily, then looked to Leah and continued, "I'm glad that someone was here to help Zarah deal with things."

Joseph then turned to Zarah and said, "I was worried about leaving without talking to you first, but I thought that people needed to know what was going on before someone got seriously hurt."

"I think you did the right thing."

"Has anything else happened while I've been doing my 'walkabout'?"

"Not really. I talked with a few of the other girls about... you know, the possibility that our captors are going to impregnate us... The thing is, with as long as we 'seem' to have been here, it's strange that no one I've talked to has had their period."

"Well, to be honest, we've only been awake and alert for a total of about fifteen hours out of... however long we've been here; three weeks, maybe."

"That's true." Zarah conceded, then continued, "But I think it's worth keeping an eye on."

"Would you mind taking care of that? I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to girls that I don't even know about their 'monthlies'."

Zarah laughed and Leah smiled at his expression, then Zarah said, "It's not something that I would typically talk about, either. But I can understand what you're saying."

"Thanks." Joseph said with relief, then looked around the room curiously.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking that if we're trapped in here, that the people who took us must have some kind of a plan."

Zarah nodded that it sounded reasonable.

"So, what are we supposed to be doing right now?"

"Besides each other?"

"They've eliminated any possible communication with the outside. There aren't any movies, video games, music or books to read. We can't even do

extra school work because the computer doles it out a few lessons at a time, then stops."

"Well, I guess if you want to give them a whole lot of credit for thinking this through, then I'd say that they're forcing us to form couples, groups and communities to help us deal with the boredom."

"But you don't think that?"

"No. If you were in a lab, would you worry about providing entertainment for your lab rats? Would you worry about their emotional wellbeing?"

"Maybe now I would." Joseph said under his breath, then continued in a normal voice, "But I can see what you're saying. When we try and rationalize their motives, we can't get things to add up. So it's entirely possible that many of the choices that were made didn't have any great motivation behind them. They just chose what was easiest for them and didn't bother to even consider the consequences to us."

"Yeah. If you step back and look at the whole thing, I think you could make a pretty good argument for that."

After sitting silently for several minutes, Zarah quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

"I thought that the drug was wearing off, but now I don't think that it is."

"What do you need to do to deal with it?"

"Maybe to scream and hit something." Joseph said uncertainly, then looked at her and added, "It's a guy thing."

"No. It's not *just* a guy thing. I think girls just have a better track record at resisting the urge."

"I keep getting these silly stray thoughts that don't connect to each other."

"Feel free to go ahead and share them. It's got to be more entertaining than anything else that's going on right now."

"I wouldn't bet on that." Joseph said with a smile at her, then said more distantly, "Just now I was thinking about how public media demonizes intelligence. It seems to glorify the most nonproductive behaviors and belittle and denigrate the skills and character traits that are essential to maintaining a productive society."

"*That's a silly stray thought?*" Leah asked dubiously.

"Yeah. It doesn't have anything to do with us being in here. It just kind of popped into my head."

Zarah smiled at his response, then explained, "I think what she's saying is that your silly stray thought is more in depth and thought out than things that we've been agonizing over."

Joseph shrugged noncommittally.

"The main thing I've been thinking about the last hour or so, is about my parents." Zarah admitted quietly.

"I've been thinking about mine, too." Joseph quickly assured her.

"Really? I guess by the way you tend to analyze things, I didn't think that you would focus on something like that."

"I didn't say that I wasn't analyzing."

Zarah slowly nodded, encouraging him to share.

"Well. I guess the first thing is, my dad loves his son, who just happens to be me. I didn't think about it for a long time, but over the years I've gotten the sense that he has this image in his mind of who his son is, and I'm a placeholder, performing the role more or less to his expectations, but not

actually being the person that he imagines me to be. As long as I don't stray too far from his vision, he mostly ignores me and I can do what I want."

"What about your mom?" Zarah asked in a whisper, prompting him to continue.

"She has her own role to perform. When we're in the same place, we say the lines that we're expected to say and do what we're expected to do, but we never break out of character with each other. In a sense, I don't know her. She's a stranger to me. I only know the part that she plays. If she left and someone else took her place and played the same role, it wouldn't change a thing. The theater would continue uninterrupted."

"Wow. That's grim."

"Isn't it that way for everyone?"

"I'll have to think on that. I really don't know."

"I guess it doesn't matter in here. Now I've taken on a new role, so I have to go through the motions of being one of the leaders. I have no choice but to play the part to the best of my ability."

"What if you don't. What if you're just yourself?"

"You mean be the actor behind the role? I don't know who that is. All I've ever been is the role that I've portrayed. I don't know how to be anything else. If I were to disregard the expectations of others, then I would be lost. The cues of what others expect of me are the only guideposts telling me what I'm supposed to do next. They're my director, feeding me clues about what's expected in the next scene."

"What about Jason? Do you feel that you're doing what he expects of you?"

"No. But my character is reacting to him in the way that his character needs him to. I guess that I feel *something* for him, but the situation that we're in dictates my reaction and what I *can* do."

"What do you want to do?"

"That's the big question, isn't it? There's a part of me that just wants to reject everything that's been done to us and cocoon myself in the sensation of loving and being loved... just let the rest of this drama play out without me and spend every minute of every day kissing and hugging and loving."

"Why don't you?"

"That's not my role. Whether I choose to accept the expectations of others or not, they're still there. And to make matters worse, the same thing applies to Jason. My character in this situation is drawn to his. What happens when those roles are gone? Who are we when it's just the two of us? Will we have anything to say to each other? When everything else is removed, will we have any reason to be together at all?"

"If you look at things that way, then do you think that there's any chance that you'll ever find someone to be your real self with? Do you think that you'll ever find true love?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure that such a thing really exists. It's possible that the entire concept is just a marketing ploy to sell greeting cards and shiny jewelry."

"How likely do you think that all of this, what you're telling me, is a side effect of the drugs?"

"I don't think that there's any doubt about that. Every day of my life is spent 'in character'. I've never dared to break out of the role, because it might interfere with my performance. Without my role, there's nothing left. I'll have no part to play in my own life. I'm nothing."

Kenna rushed into the room at full speed. When she spotted Joseph, she quickly said, "Some of the Reds and Blacks have started bothering Lisa and

her group in the Purple and Black room. She's getting a little afraid of how they're acting. Do you think you could help?"

"Yeah. I should have known that something like this was going to happen. Religion controls people with fear and shame, so naturally when fear and shame are chemically suppressed, they won't have any concept of how to behave." Joseph said as he stood and walked to join Kenna at the door.

Zarah and Leah exchanged a cautious look at the way Joseph had flawlessly slipped back into 'character'.

As Joseph and Kenna walked into the Purple and Gray meeting room, Joseph saw Jason and stopped.

"It sounds like Lisa's having problems. Could you spare a few minutes to help me sort it out?"

"Kenna filled me in on her way through. I was just waiting on you to come back."

"How are things here?" Joseph asked as the three of them started walking into the next hallway.

"Actually, better than I expected. There are a few people feeling regretful over some of their actions, but I've assured them that everyone understands and it won't be held against them."

"How are *you* doing?"

"To be honest, I'm more confused than I've ever been."

"I can understand that. Do you mind if I make a suggestion?"

"Go ahead."

"I like you, Jason. From my point of view, that's all this is. So don't worry about it."

"But what about Kenyon?"

"He doesn't figure into it, at this point. Decide what you feel and what you can accept, then we can deal with what comes next."

"But what about you? Don't you have to come to some decisions, too?"

"I already have. I know what I want. Now I just have to wait and see what I can have."

As they approached the doorway to the Purple and Black meeting room, Jason stopped and quietly asked, "What do you want?"

"If we both have the courage, I'd like to find out what will happen next between us."

"What about Kenyon? Have you come to a decision about him, too?"

"My feelings for him are different. I'm flattered and honored that he's interested in me. There's a good chance that what he's feeling is infatuation, and that it will pass when the drug wears off. And I suppose that even if his feelings don't change, he might not be able to cope with the stigma of being seen as 'gay'. But if all that works out and he wants to see what's next, I'd be willing to try."

"But you don't love him."

"No." Joseph admitted, then continued, "But I don't love you, either. I like you very much and I'm attracted to you. If we both decide that we want to spend time together and see if we could have something more, then we might be able to find love along the way."

"I don't understand... are you talking about dating me AND Kenyon, both?"

"Until someone comes to me and asks me to date him or her *exclusively*, and I say 'yes', then I'm free to date whoever I'm interested in." Joseph said, then leaned in and quietly added, "Take all the time you need to make a decision that you're comfortable with... just don't wait *too* long."

"So, you're not going to wait for me until the end of time?"

"Not if you don't ask me to." Joseph said with a grin, then glanced at Kenna and nodded that they were ready to go.

"How are you doing, Lisa?" Joseph asked, relieved to see that everyone in the meeting room was dressed.

When Joseph noticed that Ryan was there, he gave a quick smile of recognition in his direction.

"We seem to have gotten it out of our systems. Now if our *neighbors* would just do the same, we could move on." Lisa said with a dark glance at the doorway that led to the Black hallway.

"If you'll tell me what they're doing, I'll go and have a talk with them."

"They just keep coming in here and trying to get us to go with them. When we tell them no, they're really mean and ugly about it and I'm afraid that if we don't do something to curb their interest, that soon they'll get violent."

"Guys or girls?"

"Girls. There was one guy with them, one time. But from the look of him, I'm not sure if it was by his choice."

"I'll see what I can do."

"I'll go with you." Ryan said decisively.

Joseph smiled at him, then headed off.

"By the way, thanks for what you did earlier." Ryan said as they walked.

"What did I do?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"You went to my room and warned me and Kenna about the drugged food. Up to that point, we hadn't realized that we were behaving differently from normal."

"Are you two okay?"

"Yeah. I'm glad it happened..." Ryan began to say, then rethought his words. "Well, I'm not glad that the people who captured us decided to drug us. But I don't have any regrets about what me and Kenna did while we were drugged. It was special and I'm glad *that* happened."

"I know what you mean."

"THE WHORE OF BABYLON SEEKS MORE SUBJECTS!!!" A naked girl said in a booming voice as she approached them in the hallway.

"Where's Jude?" Joseph asked with disdain dripping from his words.

"He has been sacrificed unto our queen!" The girl said triumphantly.

"You killed him?!" Jason asked in shock.

"Take us to Jude." Joseph said firmly.

"The queen will bask in the pleasures of *your* flesh." The girl said with a smirk before darting away ahead of them.

"Do you think that they killed Jude?" Jason asked with concern.

"I think that they're capable of it, but I doubt that they did." Joseph said as he walked with purpose.

The smell of the Red and Black meeting room assaulted them as they approached the doorway.

"Jude! Where are you?" Joseph called out as they walked in.

"He died and has been reborn as my own son." A naked girl smeared with feces and possibly other bodily fluids, said dramatically as she sat in a vulgar pose on one of the plastic chairs, perched on a table.

"Where's Jude?" Joseph demanded.

"Joseph?" A voice called weakly from the corner.

"Jude? Is that you?"

"I tried to tell them. They wouldn't listen."

Joseph was revolted at the sight of Jude, naked and smeared with filth.

"Where's your room? We need to get you cleaned up."

"You may not leave. You have not been dismissed, SLAVE!" The girl demanded.

"You're not a queen. You're a fourteen or fifteen year old girl who was kidnapped by some nutjobs and stuck in this facility. It's not religious. It's not magical. You're a shit covered little girl. That's all you are."

When Joseph saw that 'The Queen' was too shocked to respond, he continued, "I really don't care about you or anyone who *willingly* follows you. But if I find out that you've taken any more slaves or that you've been harassing your neighbors on either side, I will organize a trial and you'll have to stand in front of EVERYONE and answer for EVERYTHING that you've done to yourselves and to each other. Then we will JUDGE you and you will be held RESPONSIBLE for everything that you've done."

Joseph smiled slightly at 'The Queen's' anxious expression. After a moment to let her think that over, he said more quietly, "Or, we can just go."

"Leave!" She commanded.

"Thought so." Joseph muttered, then asked Jude, "Where's your room?"

"Twenty-three." Jude said as he pointed at the door leading to the Red hallway.

Joseph looked behind him to be sure that Jason and Ryan were close behind as they left the meeting hall.

"Get into the shower and I'll get some fresh clothes set out for you. I don't think you want to be touching anything until you've gotten cleaned up."

Joseph said gently.

"You won't leave while I'm in there, will you?" Jude asked with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"No. We'll be right here. You'll be safe." Joseph assured him.

"Thank you." Jude whispered, then hurried into the bathroom.

"Do you think it's going to be safe to leave him here?" Jason asked with some concern while Joseph went to the dresser to start gathering clothes.

"No. I wouldn't want to take that chance." Joseph said honestly, then continued, "Why don't we stop by and see Korbin and ask if Jude can stay there? That way Jude can have easy access to his own room but can still feel safe."

"I wouldn't bet on him feeling safe anywhere, after what's been done to him."

"Maybe the shower will help." Joseph said simply as he walked to the closet to get a fresh pair of red coveralls.

"He can stay in the Gray and Purple section with us, if he needs a place."

"Let's just see how he feels after the shower. We'll do our best to give Jude whatever he needs to feel safe and secure." Joseph said as he walked to the bathroom door and knocked lightly.

"Jude! I'm going to come in for a second to drop off your clean clothes. Is that alright?" Joseph called out.

"Yes. Thank you, Joseph."

Joseph slid the bathroom door aside, then stepped in and closed it behind him before asking, "Do you need to talk about anything?"

"No. Right now I just want to be able to feel clean again."

"I can totally understand that." Joseph said honestly, then continued, "But if you need to talk about anything later, just know that you can come to me and I'll be willing to listen. You don't have to deal with everything on your own."

"Thank you, Joseph. I'll remember."

With that being said, Joseph slid the bathroom door open and stepped back into the bedroom area.

"How is he?" Jason asked with concern.

"Better than I expected." Joseph said honestly.

"What do you plan to do about the rest of those nutjobs in the Red and Black room?" Ryan asked.

"Exactly what I said to them. As long as everyone involved is there by their own choice and they're not harassing their neighbors, I don't plan to do anything about them."

Jason started looking around the room with a puzzled expression.

"What's wrong?" Ryan asked curiously.

"I just realized that this room is backward." Jason said slowly.

"How's that?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"He means that it's the mirror image of his room." Joseph said with a smile.

"It's the reverse of yours and Wade's, too." Jason added.

"That's right. We all have even numbers. Jude has an odd, so he's the reverse of the rest of us."

"Why would they alternate?" Jason asked thoughtfully.

"I suppose to match up the crawl spaces between the rooms."

"Crawl spaces?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"Yes. The bench and table have to go somewhere when they're retracted. There has to be an open space on the other side of this wall for them to go."

"So, we could break through that wall and gain access to the crawl space?" Ryan asked to confirm.

"Probably, yes. But before you get your hopes up, I doubt very seriously that the crawl space leads anywhere that you'd want to go. I can't see the designers of this place leaving such an obvious escape route."

"So, if you broke through, all you'd really end up doing is getting punished with starvation for trying." Jason added thoughtfully.

"I'm not saying that we won't do it at some point, just for a lack of anything better to do. But I don't see any urgency to trying it out because it's most likely going to be wasted effort."

All three turned when the bathroom door opened.

Joseph gave a reassuring smile, then asked, "Feeling better?"

"Yes. Thank you." Jude said gratefully.

"We were thinking that, if you wanted, we could ask Korbin if you'd be allowed to stay in his area where you'll be safe."

"Oh. I thought I'd just go with you."

"You can go with us if you like. There's no problem with that. It's just that when you need to eat or go to sleep, you'll have a longer trip to get back here."

"I don't mind some extra walking. Besides, right now, I think that I'd rather be among frie..." Jude stopped suddenly and snapped his mouth shut.

"I can't speak for these guys, but you can call me your friend if you want to." Joseph said honestly, then added, "I may not believe in all the same things that you do, but as long as we can agree to disagree about that stuff, I have no problem with you."

"Thank you."

"Count me in on that, too." Jason said with a smile at Jude.

Jude returned the smile and nodded his acceptance.

"Yeah. I'm in." Ryan said with a grin.

"The meeting room I'm usually in is about as far from here as it's possible to get. If you'd like something closer, we can take you to Jason's. You'll be safe there." Joseph promised.

Jason gave a single nod of confirmation that he would watch after Jude if he decided to go to the Gray Purple room.

"I'll go with you, if you don't mind." Jude said timidly to Joseph.

"Okay, then I suppose the next big question is, do you think you can face walking back through the Red and Black room or not?"

"I'd rather not, if I don't have to."

"You don't. And it's going to take the same time to get back to *my* meeting room, either way." Joseph said to Jude, then turned to face Ryan and Jason as he said, "If you guys want, you can go back through the Red and Black room, so you don't have to take the long way around."

"I really *should* get back to the Gray and Purple room to check on everyone." Jason said in a conflicted tone.

"And I want to tell Lisa about what you said so she won't be as worried." Ryan added.

"Then it's settled." Joseph said confidently, then asked, "Are we ready to go?"

"Would it be possible..." Jude began to ask, then trailed off.

"What is it, Jude?"

"I don't think that I can continue on any longer without eating. If I were to eat, would you see that I don't disgrace myself?"

"I can't be entirely responsible for your behavior, there's just no way that I can promise that. But I *will* promise to stay with you and remind you that you're under the influence of mind altering drugs and that you'll have to face the consequences of your actions tomorrow."

"Thank you. I will do my best to act in a manner that I can be proud of."

"Do you want for us to hang around?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"No. You guys go ahead and as soon as Jude's done drinking his dinner, we'll head out." Joseph said confidently.

"Okay. Remember to let us know if you need our help with anything." Jason said as he looked into Joseph's eyes.

"Count on it." Joseph said with a smile.

Joseph had a nearly irresistible urge to give Jason a kiss and a hug before he left, but didn't want to take the chance of making Jude feel uncomfortable or unsafe in his presence.

Jason gave Joseph one last longing look before he and Ryan left the room.

"Computer. Food." Jude said simply toward the corner of the room where the food dispenser was located.

The table, bench and food receptacle all moved in unison in response to his command.

"It seems like you really understand how the computer system works."

"The computer has a rudimentary lexicon of verbal commands. From the simplicity of it, I doubt that it can recognize more than ten spoken words in the main menu." Jude said simply, then took a long, slow drink of the repulsive gray sludge.

"I'm guessing that you've studied verbal input programs before."

It took a moment for Jude to finish swallowing, but he finally said, "Yes. When I was about twelve, I got the idea that I'd like to be able to control my home computer verbally. I worked on it for almost a year before I finally accepted that it was a lot easier to just use the mouse and the keyboard."

"I guess that it is." Joseph said with a grin, then waited as Jude took another long drink of his dinner.

After a shiver of revulsion, Jude quietly said, "Thank you for being so understanding."

"I'm just sorry that you had to go through all of that. I should have realized when I was here before that things could have gone that way."

Jude drank down the last of his dinner and fought to swallow it before responding, "I don't know how you could have foreseen their behavior."

"Please return the glass to the dispenser receptacle."

Jude did so, then watched as the door began to close and the table and bench receded into the wall.

"Thank you, have a nice day." The computer said with its ever cheery voice of accomplishment.

"I should have seen it coming because they're a group of people who've been told since conception that they're wicked evil sinners that have been saved by God's grace. They were given a book of laws and told that if they didn't follow those rules, they would be horribly punished for all eternity. So they obeyed the laws, not because they thought they were right, but out of fear. When they were given a drug that took away that fear, every sick perverted thing that they ever considered doing was all of a sudden possible, for the first time in their lives."

"If I may ask, how is that different from the way that someone without faith, like you, behaved?" Jude asked timidly.

"Are you done here?" Joseph asked as he looked around.

"I don't have any shoes." Jude quietly said as he looked down at his sock clad feet.

"There's not much we can do about that, but it's not like we can go outside. You should be fine."

"That's true." Jude responded, then walked to the door.

As they walked away from Jude's room, Joseph said, "Let's see... I guess the best way that I can describe it is that I don't have a list of commandments to follow under penalty of eternal damnation and torture. I try to do the right thing *because* it's the right thing. I try to be kind to people because I'd really like it if people were kind to me. I deal with people honestly and respectfully because it's my hope that people will respond to me by treating me the same way.

"That's not to say that when the drug took effect that it didn't do anything to me. I suddenly became open to things that I'd never seriously considered before. But I didn't have this sudden urge to run amok and do all the wicked things that I'd been forbidden to do all my life."

"Do you think that I might behave that way?" Jude asked anxiously.

"I don't know. But if I notice you doing anything that seems improper I'll try to bring it to your attention. If you keep telling yourself that despite the drug, you're still in control of your actions and responsible for your decisions, then you might be okay."

"I believe that you may be mistaken about Christian concepts of accountability."

"That's possible. It's hard for me to know anything for sure, only seeing it from the outside. But it seems to me that in order to receive God's unconditional love, that there are A LOT of conditions. And from what little I know of it, a lot of the rules contradict each other so that one denomination accepts one thing as being God's absolute truth and another

believes the exact opposite. So what ends up happening is that people end up shopping around for the religion that holds the same beliefs that they do. If they're going to do that anyway, why not just skip the religion thing altogether and live their lives doing what they believe is right?"

"I don't know what to say except that I was taught from early childhood that certain things were true and that I was supposed to believe them without question."

"You mean, like Santa Claus and the tooth fairy?"

"It's not the same."

"Really? You were told a fantastic, impossible story that you were expected to believe despite any and all evidence that it couldn't possibly be true. What's the difference?"

Before Jude could formulate an answer, a voice from ahead of them said, "Go back to your own area. We don't want you here."

"Would you tell Korbin that Joseph is here and would like to speak with him?" Joseph asked hopefully.

"Joseph? Denise mentioned that you had visited before. You may pass."

"Oh! Thank you." Joseph said pleasantly then motioned for Jude to walk with him into the Red and Orange meeting room.

"Joseph! What brings you back here so soon?" Korbin asked with a smile.

"Your neighbors had a little dispute. How are things going in your part of the world?"

"We're still on guard, but nothing new has happened since your last visit. I've decided to hold off on inspecting the inner wall until I can be sure that our people will be safe."

After a look at the people in the room, Joseph cautiously asked, "Where's Randa? Did she go for a walk?"

"No. She volunteered to take a shift guarding the door, so she's trying to take a nap while she's got the chance."

"If your neighbors give you any more problems, let me know. I told them if they bothered you or Lisa that I would initiate action against them."

"We can fight our own battles."

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't fight this one. Given the way they're behaving, they're trying to provoke a fight. If you respond with violence, things will escalate and this will drag on endlessly. What I'd rather see happen is, if they act inappropriately, we stand them up in front of everyone and spell out what they did wrong and why it won't be tolerated. Think of it as public shaming. That way everyone can not only have the rules of behavior spelled out to them, but they'll also be able to witness the consequences of not behaving properly in a polite society."

"Who decides what's 'wrong?'"

"As tempting as it might be to say 'majority rule', it's been proven more than once that a majority of people can be wrong at any given time, especially when emotions are running high. So I guess that it would probably end up being a council consisting of the leaders from each meeting hall."

"I can see the sense in what you're saying, but if they attack us, don't expect us not to react."

"Considering the drugs that we've been given, I'm afraid that what starts as a reasonable reaction might easily end up being vengeful retaliation. Defend yourselves, by all means. But please be very careful about any action you take beyond that. Even if the drugs are in part to blame for our

failure to limit our responses, we still have to be held accountable for any actions that we take. Otherwise, we'll have two hundred people with a free pass to hurt each other however they want."

"I'll try to keep it in mind. That's about all I can promise."

"Good enough."

"I'm sorry that my people caused you trouble. I swear that I did my best to make them see that they weren't acting normally." Jude said timidly.

"Are you their leader?" Korbin asked cautiously.

"Was." Joseph gently corrected. "A girl calling herself 'The Whore of Babylon' seems to be running things now."

Korbin looked from Joseph to Jude and back before speculatively saying, "You rescued him, didn't you?"

"How did you know?"

"From what I've seen of you, it just sounds like something that you'd do." Korbin said with a grin, then looked to Jude and said, "If you're really a leader, then you can't let this keep you down. Take some time to regroup, then rescue your people."

"I don't know if I can."

"Just listen to Joseph, I'm sure that he'll give you good advice about how to make things work out."

"I will."

Joseph smiled at the exchange, then said, "We'd better head back to the Blue Green. You know where to find me if you need anything."

"I'm still waiting on that jackhammer."

Joseph laughed and nodded, then motioned to Jude that he was ready to go.

As they walked, Joseph quietly asked, "How are you feeling, Jude?"

"I don't know. I don't feel any different."

"Well, I guess that it doesn't really do anything noticeable when it kicks in. Just try to be aware that if you have an impulse to do something, you may be more inclined to act on it than you would normally."

"The only thing on my mind right now is worry for Tanner. Where could he be? What might they be doing to him?"

"I wish that I had some answers for you, Jude. But it's possible that after the next blackout that he'll be returned to us. If that happens, then it might end up being the best thing for him because he didn't have to witness people that he cared about and trusted behaving badly and disappointing him."

"What do you think is *really* happening to us?"

"Well, if you go on what the computer revealed to us in the meeting halls as being based on fact and add to that the few things that people remember from before they were abducted, then I'd say that whatever this is started out as a 'Doomsday' project, to help humanity survive a world war or other apocalyptic event."

"So we've been abducted so that we could be *saved*?"

"I think that maybe that was the original intent of this place, when it was first conceived."

"But you think that someone took that original benevolent idea and corrupted it for their own purposes?"

"No. If someone came in later and repurposed the project to conform to some new, nefarious plan, then everything in here wouldn't seem to be working at crossed purposes. If there were *one* person or *one* vision in play, then we'd be moving toward some *goal*."

"And you don't see that happening here?"

Joseph noticed that they were walking into the 'Amazon' meeting room. The yoga lesson was apparently over, but there were a fair number of girls sitting at the tables and watching as they passed through.

As they walked into the Yellow hallway, Joseph continued their conversation, "If they weren't concerned with our comfort or emotional well being at some point in the process, then the fundamental design of this place would be drastically different. It would have been far more efficient if they had constructed communal bathrooms, shower facilities and dining halls. They could have far more easily housed us in a warehouse type area with bunk beds. Giving us individual rooms and individualized lesson plans... it tells me that at some point in the process they were actually concerned with preserving human dignity."

"So, what do you think happened?"

"Nothing big. Year after year, this project existed but was never activated. As political parties gained and lost power and as social attitudes evolved and changed, modifications were made to the original plan. Things were added and removed, all in accordance with the beliefs of the person who happened to be in charge at the time."

"How long do you think that this has been going on?"

"It's hard to say when the original 'idea' came about. But from the implementation of the plan, I'd have to go with Wade's assessment of it being early to mid 1960's. Since it doesn't matter, for the sake of discussion I'm going to assume 1962, so that makes it an even fifty years."

"So, for fifty years, each person coming into the project has brought with them their own bias and vision of its purpose?"

"Right. And with each 'generation', the purpose became more and more distorted from its original vision. Because we were given individual rooms, I'm making the assumption that at some point they were trying to provide a 'comfortable' place for us to wait out the devastation on the surface. Then, at some point later someone realized that since they had a captive population under their control, that it might be *interesting* to catalog their reactions to the 'End of the World' scenario. Someone following that may have looked at their suggestion and taken it to another level, perhaps by adding the drugs."

"And if those decisions were made by someone at a desk, in an office somewhere, they might not have known that what they were doing was *real*. They might have been looking at all of this as some kind of a theoretical scenario."

"I hadn't thought of that. One of the things that I couldn't seem to reconcile was that a person would have to be fundamentally and irredeemably evil to conceive some of the aspects of this. But if someone at a desk were given the outline of this project and asked to 'update' or 'streamline' it, as part of their normal job, then it is possible that they might think that it was a hypothetical situation and that their recommendations would never actually be implemented in reality somewhere."

"So it might be likened to when someone is playing those violent video games. A person might commit horrendous, unspeakable atrocities in the game in order to accomplish their goals, because they know that the game is a fantasy and no one is actually being hurt."

"Yes. I think that's an excellent example."

"I feel something."

"What does it feel like?"

"Quiet."

"But it's not a bad feeling, is it?"

"No. I don't think so. It just seems strange. I usually have this tension inside me, like a giant knot of anxiety always gnawing at me. All of a sudden, I don't feel that. I don't know... it's so different, so unfamiliar. I don't know how to *be* this way."

"Don't worry, Jude. I'm here. I've got you. I won't let anything bad happen."

"I think that maybe that's it. From inside it, I couldn't see... but I'm always feeling like something bad's about to happen. There's a constant gloom over everything around me because I'm always worried. But now... everything seems *brighter*."

"Then enjoy it. Maybe when this wears off, you'll be able to look back on this and realize that you don't *have to* feel that way all the time."

As Jude and Joseph walked into the Yellow and Green meeting room, Joseph spotted Stone and Alyssa and automatically approached them.

"How are things going?" Joseph asked casually.

"You're walking around again?" Stone asked with some surprise.

"Yeah. I had something that I had to deal with on the other side and Jude decided to come back with me."

"Alyssa's come up with an idea about the Eugenics and... well, if she's right, this could get really bad."

"Should I leave so that you can discuss things?" Jude asked quietly.

"As far as I'm concerned, you're the rightful leader of the Red and Black room. So you should be involved in any discussion that we have about the different theories. Besides that, on the walk here you've already proven to me that you've got really good reasoning skills. You might be able to spot something that the rest of us aren't seeing." Joseph explained gently.

Stone looked at Jude consideringly, seeming to reevaluate him, taking Joseph's assessment into account.

"So, Alyssa, what have you come up with?" Joseph asked with interest.

"Do you remember what Stone said about the neverending sperm fountain and the bottomless egg carton?"

"Of course, it was one of the high points of the meeting."

"We have a pretty good indication that they were collecting sperm, there seems to be no other reason for them to have done what they did to you. But that begs the question, what do they have in store for the girls?"

"I guess that it would stand to reason that they are going to want to harvest your eggs."

"Do you know how that's done?"

"I honestly don't have a clue."

"Neither do I." Alyssa admitted, then continued, "All that I know is that it's not as easy as reaching under a chicken."

Joseph nodded that he could easily accept her assessment.

"They're going to have to stimulate egg production, I don't know if that can be done through our food or if they're going to have to knock us out and give us injections for that."

"Which they might have done during the last blackout."

"Right. And while we were out, they might have also done something to jigger our menstrual cycles so that we'd all ovulate at basically the same time."

"Considering that there have been two blackouts, I can see that being a distinct possibility."

"I really don't know enough about things like this to give more than an educated guess... well, not *that* educated. Let's just call it a guess."

"You're doing fine. Given our limited information, I think that you're doing a pretty good job of reasoning things out."

"You see, the thing is, when it's time for them to 'harvest'... it could be bad. Not only are we going to have to deal with the feelings of sexual violation but there's certainly going to be discomfort, and most likely some pain."

"I don't know if there's anything that we can do to prepare everyone for that."

"It's not just that." Stone interjected.

"What else?" Joseph asked cautiously, although he was pretty sure that he really didn't want to know.

"I know that it would tear us all up if that happened to one of the girls. And I know that all of us would do everything that we could to help her cope with it. But what happens when it's ONE HUNDRED FIFTY girls going through that *at the same time*?" Stone asked slowly.

Joseph's eyes went wide in horror at the prospect.

"There's no telling how long we'll be kept blacked out while that's going on. But I'd say that it's probably a pretty safe bet that about the time that we're all awake again and having to deal with that, then our periods will come along." Alyssa added gravely.

"All at once." Joseph whispered.

"One hundred fifty." Stone said as a reminder, in case anyone had forgotten.

"I was right." Jude said into the silence that followed. When the others looked at him inquisitively, he explained, "We *are* in hell."

Joseph smiled at him, then turned to Stone and asked, "How likely do you think it is that this scenario could happen?"

"If we hadn't had our dicks chewed up during the last blackout, I wouldn't think that it was very likely at all. But I feel safe in saying that it's obvious that our sperm *was* collected. Let's be real, that gunk is kinda useless unless you've got some eggs to put it with."

"True."

Alyssa nodded her agreement, then added, "The only other reason I can think of why they would have collected sperm would be for embryonic implantation or forced impregnation, which I think we did a pretty good job of disproving at the last meeting."

"Maybe..." Joseph said slowly, then added, "But the technology here seems to be about ten or so years behind. So, just because we know that something's possible in the outside world doesn't mean that they have the equipment or skills to do it here."

"How's it going, Joseph?" A voice called cheerily.

Joseph turned and smiled when he spotted Wade and Kenyon walking into the room.

"Hey, guys. We still don't have it all figured out, but we're working on it." Joseph assured them.

"Yeah. I guess we should be doing that, too. But we took a little break, instead." Kenyon admitted.

"It's okay. You don't have to be on duty twenty-four seven."

"Which is good, because we don't have any concept of twenty-four or seven in here."

"True." Joseph said with a smile, then continued, "Well, I suppose that we'd better head back to the Blue Green so that Zarah doesn't feel like I left her holding the bag."

"I don't think she thinks that." Wade interjected.

"Maybe not. But I *have* left her holding the bag with little or no explanation a few times already. She might have things that she wants to do or she might just want to take a break."

Kenyon looked Joseph in the eyes as he quietly asked, "So, are you just going to hang out in the Blue and Green room for a while?"

"That's the plan. I suppose that I'm just marking time until the next blackout..." Joseph trailed off as a sudden realization struck him.

"...Since we don't have anything else to do." Alyssa supplied with a nod.

Joseph snapped himself out of his racing thoughts and said, "If any of you want to stop by and visit, you know where to find me."

"We may be over in a few minutes. Right now we're just going to talk about you behind your back with Stone and Alyssa." Wade said with a grin.

"Have fun." Joseph chuckled, then led the way to the Green hallway, with Jude following a step behind.

"How are you doing, Jude?" Joseph asked as they walked.

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but I feel better than I ever have before."

"There's no need to feel ashamed. The drugs we were given were originally developed to correct a legitimate psychological condition. Maybe you just happen to have that condition to some degree and the drugs are having a beneficial effect on you."

"It seems wrong that others are suffering while I'm feeling... wonderful."

"It is what it is. If you're worried about the suffering of others, then find ways to help them. But there's no reason for you to be miserable. It doesn't help anyone."

"That makes sense. Thank you, Joseph. You've helped me more than I could have wished and given me some good advice."

"Even though I'm a godless heathen?"

"You said earlier that we could agree to disagree on certain things. If you still feel that way, then I can accept that you have a different perspective."

"Works for me."

"I have heard that there is a school of thought that ascribes to the notion that there is a creator God, who is the source and reason for everything. But that after He set events into motion He didn't concern himself with the day-to-day operation of things."

"Well, I suppose that if you take things like 'The Big Bang' and the evolutionary process and say that God got the ball rolling and then left things to progress in their own way, then I guess we'd be on the same page with most things. But the problem I have with that theory is that whenever something can be explained with science, then God is removed from the equation. God is only used as an explanation for what we don't or can't possibly know. If you're going to believe something like that, then why not

take God completely out of the equation and just say, 'I don't know'. Science may or may not be able to explain all of it at some point, but for right now, we can only speculate."

"I feel like I 'need' to believe in God."

"Okay." Joseph said easily as he stopped, just outside the Blue and Green meeting hall.

Jude also stopped and looked at him inquiringly.

"Imagine for a moment that I'm right. There's no God and there never has been one. Everything from creation to evolution happened in a natural progression, without any divine intervention. Then, a few thousand years ago some illiterate nomadic people in the desert made up stories to tell each other and from that, a religion was started. If that was the way it really happened, how would things be one bit different today?"

Jude's look became distant as he considered the question.

"You don't need to give me an answer now. I need to talk to Zarah and see how things are going."

"Would you mind if I discuss this with you some more later?"

"I'll look forward to it. In fact, if you come up with a really good answer, you might make me question what I believe."

Jude looked at Joseph with surprise and nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

"Come on." Joseph chuckled as he started to walk again.

"Did I miss anything?" Joseph asked as he entered the meeting hall.

"No. Things seem to be calm, at the moment." Zarah said simply, then asked, "How did things go in the Red and Black room?"

"They've got their own little Sodom and Gomorrah going on down there, but I told them that as long as everyone is there by their own choice and as long as they don't disturb their neighbors, that I'll leave them be."

"Shouldn't you have tried to reason with them and make them understand what the drugs were doing to them?"

"I really don't think that it would have done any good. They were way out of control down there."

"Jude? Right?"

"Yes. Joseph rescued me. He said that it would be alright if I came back here with him." Jude answered timidly.

"Rescued?" Zarah asked with surprise, directing her question mostly toward Joseph.

"Yes. It seems that they thought that slavery was a good idea. That's why I said the part about everyone being their by their own choice."

"Why do I get the feeling that a lot more went on that you're not telling me about?"

"Because you're a brilliant and perceptive person." Joseph said with a smile at her, then added, "But those were the main things that happened. Jude came back here with me where he doesn't have to worry about being enslaved again."

"Well, while you were out, Mary Nicole and Tammy stopped in long enough to update us on their most recent efforts on the 'Psychological Experiment' theory. They don't have any big new discoveries, but they wanted us to know that they're still working on it."

"I didn't really get to talk to Jason or Lisa about their theories, we were all pretty much focused on the Reds and Blacks... the same goes with Korbin.

He's put his plans on hold until he can be reasonably sure that the Reds and Blacks aren't going to attack them again."

"I don't know if you've thought about this, but what are we going to do if their behavior gets to a point where we have to take action? How are we going to deal with a rapist or a murderer?"

"I think that all we can do is try to remind people that they're expected to behave as participating members of a polite society. If they can't or won't conform to the most minimal standards, then we'll have to expel them... basically, shun them."

"I suppose that's better than public flogging."

"I considered that, but there are a few of the Reds and Blacks who might enjoy that a little too much." Joseph said, then quickly turned to Jude and said, "No offense."

"I agree with you. I'm sure that there are some who would derive a nearly sexual delight from witnessing another person's punishment." Jude reluctantly admitted.

"They're really that bad?" Zarah asked cautiously.

Joseph looked at her regretfully and answered, "When we were there, yes. Hopefully, as the drugs wear off, people will begin to see reason and realize what they're doing and fall away from the pack."

"You don't sound too sure." Jude said cautiously.

"I'm not. I'm sorry, Jude. I don't mean to keep stepping on your beliefs, but they really *do* figure into this."

"I understand. Please go ahead."

"I heard this old saying, I really don't know where it comes from. But what it basically says is that good people do good things and bad people do bad things, but to get good people to do bad things requires religion."

There was a long moment of silence that was eventually broken by Leah saying, "You think that when the drug wears off, that they might keep acting that way because they're all fired up with religious fervor?"

"Yes. I couldn't have said it better."

Zarah smiled at Leah with pride.

"What can we do about that?" Jude asked cautiously.

"Present them with an alternative that they can get behind."

"If you're talking about trying to convert them to atheism, I think that you may have an uphill battle with that."

"No. I'm not talking about converting them. I'm talking about providing them a leader that understands what they believe, but can also guide them to behave properly in a social situation with the rest of us."

Jude looked at him uncertainly.

"He's talking about you, Jude." Zarah quietly confided.

"But I already failed at being their leader."

Joseph smiled at the words, then confidently said, "You didn't succumb to their madness. And even though you've taken the drug, you're perfectly rational. Add to that the fact that you share their core beliefs and can talk to them in a language that they understand. I can't imagine who would be better to lead them out of the darkness."

Chapter 6

A long silence fell over the room as Jude considered their words.

No one else seemed to know what to say.

Unable to tolerate the mounting tension any longer, Zarah finally asked, "We're all waiting for the next blackout, aren't we?"

When it seemed that no one else was going to answer, Joseph reluctantly responded, "Since we know it's coming, there doesn't seem to be any point in starting to do anything else."

"This might be another part of their mind game."

Joseph looked at her curiously, prompting her to expound on the statement.

"They've gone out of their way to keep us from knowing the time and date, so it would stand to reason that they wouldn't do *anything* at regular intervals to give us a sense of the passage of time."

"Makes sense." Joseph muttered.

"What should we be doing right now?" Jude asked timidly, reluctant to intrude on their conversation.

After a moment to consider, Joseph answered, "I'm tired of the mind games. We've come up with a lot of theories, but that hasn't gotten us any closer to a way out. Maybe it's time to take a page from Korbin's book. I feel like *doing* something."

"But if you *do* anything, all the Blues might be punished for it." Zarah reminded him.

"I know. But I don't plan on breaking through a wall. I'd just like to check out a few things to try and get a better sense of our boundaries and limitations."

"What do you have in mind?"

"The computer calls us 'Level 3'. While that doesn't necessarily mean that there's a 'Level 2' built right on top of us, I'd still like to do a little exploring to see what's behind those white plastic ceiling panels."

Zarah looked at him speculatively for a moment, then said, "Although I don't watch many sci fi movies, I *have* seen enough to know that we should also check out the ventilation system."

"Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

"You want to do it right now?"

"Sure. Jude, would you mind helping me?"

"I'd be happy to. Just tell me what you need me to do."

Zarah glanced at Leah inquiringly and received a nod.

Joseph speculatively looked at the ceiling for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

Jude followed along, not sure what Joseph had in mind.

"Guys, can you move? I need to borrow this table for a minute." Joseph asked as he approached a group of three girls.

They looked at him strangely for making the request, but moved to another table without complaint.

"Help me move it over by the wall." Joseph said as he took one end.

Jude took the other and helped him relocate the table a few feet.

As soon as the table was in place, Joseph climbed on top of it, then began to press on the semi-opaque panel that let the light pass through.

"Yeah. I think it's working. Would you see if you can lift the other end?"

Joseph asked as he was able to move the stiff sheet of plastic slightly.

Jude slowly climbed onto the table and Joseph noticed that he seemed to be in pain.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm bruised, that's all." Jude said quietly.

"I can get someone else to help me, if this is hurting you."

"No. I think that finding a way out of here would make me feel much better than a few minutes of rest."

"I see your point." Joseph smiled. "Lift."

With their combined effort, they were able to shift the semi opaque white plastic panel a few inches.

"What do you see?" Zarah asked hesitantly.

"A light fixture. Can you hand me a chair?"

Zarah quickly placed one of the plastic chairs on the table beside him.

Joseph scooted it where he wanted it, then climbed on top, so that he could get a better view of what was hidden in the drop ceiling.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone in the room anxiously waited to hear what Joseph had discovered.

"Well?" Zarah finally called out to him.

"If we drop this panel, we'll have access to the fluorescent tube lights, but that's about it. We'd need tools to get past the light fixture. It's metal and seems to be riveted in place."

"So, there's no crawl space?"

"There might be one on the other side of the light fixture, but there's no way to access it from here. The light fixture is fastened to the supporting frame which seems to be pretty solid." Joseph said as he climbed down off the chair.

"So, there's nothing up there that helps us."

"No. All we've got are immovable frames and floating panels that cover the light fixtures. This sort of reconfirms Lisa's point about this place having antiquated technology, but that's about it." Joseph said to Zarah, before looking to Jude and saying, "Help me shift it back."

Jude reached up and together they slid the plastic panel into place.

"Are you going to try another one?" Zarah asked cautiously.

"No. Not in here. I'm sure that they're all the same. But I'd like to take a look at the lighting in the hallway and in one of the bedrooms to see if they left us any passage to what's behind it." Joseph said as he climbed down from the table.

"Before you do that, could you help me find out where they hid the ventilation? Whether we're underground, underwater or in outer space, we still need to breathe. But I don't see any vents anywhere."

Joseph thought for a moment, then slowly said, "I can't remember feeling hot or cold or feeling any kind of a breeze since we've been here."

"Or a blower." Jude quietly added.

Joseph and Zarah turned in unison to look at him.

"Back home, I was always aware of it when the furnace or central air would kick on. It would even wake me out of a sound sleep. I haven't noticed it even once since we've been here." Jude explained.

Joseph slowly nodded, then distantly said, "If this is really a 'doomsday shelter', then it would need to have a closed system to prevent contamination from the outside. That means that the air and water for two hundred people would have to be recycled. I don't have a clue how that's done, but it sounds like it would probably take a lot of equipment and manpower and it would probably make a lot of noise."

"What about the electricity? You don't think they'd have a place like this 'on the grid' do you?" Zarah asked thoughtfully.

"No. I'm sure that they would generate their own power. They went to so much trouble to keep *us* from knowing where this place is, I'm sure they wouldn't have high tension power lines leading anyone who bothered to look, directly to us."

"What about solar, wind or geothermal?" Jude asked cautiously.

"No." Joseph immediately responded, "In just about any other situation, I'd say that any of them would be a wise choice, but in a 'doomsday' scenario, you have to take into account nuclear winter, which means that you couldn't depend on solar power. The size of the wind farm that you'd need to have to generate enough power for this place would be impossible to hide."

"And geothermal?" Zarah asked curiously.

"I don't know enough about it to even guess." Joseph admitted. "But I think it's safe to assume that they found *some* way to generate electricity for us. And from the level of technology that we've witnessed so far, I feel safe in saying that it's probably loud, smelly and requires constant attention from someone to keep it up and running."

"Joseph, you got a minute?" Stone asked as he hurried into the room with Kenyon, Wade and Alyssa following close behind.

"Sure. What's up, guys?" Joseph asked curiously as Zarah, Leah and Jude moved close to be included in the conversation.

"We've just been talking about something that you and I talked about yesterday..." Before Joseph could correct him, Stone quickly added, "...you know what I mean."

Joseph nodded that he did.

"I asked you *why* do you think they ever let us wake up?"

Joseph nodded again.

"I followed what you were saying about why it wasn't possible that we could have been unconscious for that entire time and I agree with you. But seriously, *why* would they let us wake up? If they only want us for our genetic material, why not keep us in whatever drug induced or hypnotic state that they had us in?"

"The only thing I can think of is that it must not be healthy to keep someone under the influence for an extended period of time. From the headache I had when I woke up and how tired I looked, I'd guess that I wasn't getting enough sleep or REM states or something along those lines."

"That *does* seem to fit in with the facts." Wade said thoughtfully.

"So, you believe that our only reason for being here is to provide genetic material for our captors?" Jude asked cautiously as he looked around the group.

"I don't know. I mean, if that were their only motivation, it seems that they could have accomplished their goals a lot more easily than this." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"You would think so." Stone agreed as Wade and Jude nodded in unison.

"So, what have we got? What do we *know*?" Zarah asked in a leading tone.

"They're collecting sperm. We're fairly certain of that." Alyssa said seriously.

After a moment to be sure that she was finished speaking, Joseph carefully added, "When we were welcomed, they as much as admitted that this was a doomsday shelter."

"From everything Mary Nicole has told us, they still don't have any way to prove that this is a psychological experiment, but so far no one has come up with another plausible explanation for why they're keeping us from knowing the time and date." Leah said as she looked around at the other members of the group.

Zarah nodded her confirmation, then said, "The longer we're here, the less it seems like one person's vision and the more this sounds like some black book project started decades ago."

"Jude and I were just discussing that, and that's also pretty much the same conclusion that Jason came to." Joseph added.

Joseph was about to say something, but noticed the speculative look in Zarah's eyes. Everyone in the group seemed to notice and waited for her to voice what she had been able to deduce. "*How* did they kidnap us? I mean, the whole idea of having memory wiping chemicals or hypnotic drugs is 'convenient' when we're trying to explain things, but I don't know if something like that exists in reality. Do you honestly think that they could really do something to *two hundred* teenagers to cause them *all* to forget their kidnappings and have it work perfectly on every single one of them?"

"That's a good question. What are you suggesting?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"I'm sure you figured out, just like I did, that they had to have had *at least* one person embedded at each of our schools for this to have worked the way it did."

Joseph nodded, but before he could speak, Kenyon said, "We were talking about that just a few minutes ago."

After a moment, Zarah continued, "This wasn't a last minute idea. They must have been watching and researching us for a while. Then someone pushed a button and all of a sudden, they grabbed 200 people from all over the country and took us all here?"

Joseph quickly interjected, "And we all just *happened* to be going on a school trip at the same time?"

Leah immediately picked up the thread. "And what about the clothes in our sizes? What about the shoes? The embroidered numbers?"

"What about the schoolwork? They knew *exactly* what school assignments I was working on before I left." Alyssa asked as she looked at the others to confirm that they had experienced the same thing.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone considered what had been said, until Joseph quietly looked at Zarah and admitted. "I see what you're saying, but I don't know what conclusion you're drawing from it."

"I think that this is something that's been going on for a long time." Zarah said frankly.

"How do you mean?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Okay. Let's look at it from the other side." Zarah said carefully. "Sometime in the future, you're going to be abducting two hundred teenagers from all over the country. What can you do now to prepare for that?"

"Build the base. Get trusted operatives in place..." Joseph said uncertainly.

"What about mind control or hypnosis? If you had those tools available all along and you were planning the abduction, how would you use them?" Zarah asked in a leading tone.

"Well, I guess that instead of trying to abduct two hundred teenagers without knowing if the hypnosis or drugs were going to work on them that I'd find a way to test them first and lay the groundwork. Maybe while I'm doing that I'd leave a hypnotic trigger so that they'd 'switch off' when I said a certain phrase or something."

Zarah nodded and quickly said, "That's what I was thinking. Except that it probably wouldn't just be two hundred. You could try it out on hundreds, maybe thousands of kids, so that when the time finally came, you pick out the top two hundred candidates who were most receptive."

"But aren't people going to notice that we're missing?" Stone asked quietly.

"This great country of ours is going through troubling times..." Zarah repeated from memory.

"So, maybe they were waiting on something catastrophic to happen so that they could use it to mask our disappearance." Wade said slowly.

"Or, maybe they orchestrated events to *cause* something catastrophic to happen." Zarah suggested.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone thought that through.

Finally Jude slowly asked, "What if the people who abducted us were also under hypnotic control?"

"Why would you think that?" Zarah asked curiously.

"Because, in an operation of this scale, it would be reasonable to assume that at least a few of their operatives would have second thoughts about participating in something like this. There would also be the possibility of spies or investigative reporters infiltrating the project.

"But if they had already had control over a group of people who would obey them without thought or question, then they could just activate the

operatives, have them activate us, then the operatives could go about their business without remembering any of it." Jude carefully explained.

"Vonette and Lajni were with me when everything went fuzzy. If Mrs. Snope was the one who 'triggered' the hypnotic suggestion, that could mean that they were taken, too. Maybe to a different level."

Before anyone else could jump in, Joseph added, "Or it could mean that they were told what they're supposed to say if anyone asks about what happened to you."

"But what about our parents? Aren't they going to say or do something when we're not back home in a few days?" Jude asked anxiously.

Joseph gave a shrug, "I guess it depends on what story they're told."

"Unless they're in on it, too." Stone suggested.

Joseph looked at him with surprise and asked, "Do you really think so?"

"Well, I don't have any proof, if that's what you're asking, but yes. I really *do* think so."

"It wouldn't surprise me." Zarah muttered.

Joseph's eyes went wide at her reaction, but before he could think of how to respond, Jude said, "If I found out that my parents were unwilling participants in my life, being controlled by an embedded hypnotic suggestion, I think that it would explain a few things."

Joseph's first impulse was to deny that it could be possible, but he found that he couldn't. Although his relationship with his parents wasn't *horrible*, there was no way that he could allow himself to classify it as anything remotely resembling 'close' or 'warm'.

After a long moment of silence, Stone finally asked, "What evidence do we have?"

As Joseph's mind raced, he absently responded, "What difference does it make?"

At the looks of surprise of the others, he continued, "With us being in here, what does it matter if our parents were involved or not?"

"It doesn't, I suppose." Jude said quietly, then continued more strongly, "But I'd still like to know."

"If they were, what would that mean?" Zarah asked cautiously, obviously trying to steer the conversation in a slightly different direction.

Although the difference between '*if* it were true' and '*what if* it were true' was slight, it was enough to bring Joseph some measure of relief.

"Depending on how far back this goes, it *could* be that they only got married because they were ordered to."

"What makes you think that?" Kenyon asked curiously.

"We're all fourteen or fifteen years old. What if every one of our parents were part of the same project fifteen or sixteen years ago and they were all told to get married and have a kid?... Just one kid."

"I'm an only child." Jude said quietly.

"So am I." Stone muttered.

"Yeah." Zarah whispered, then looked at Leah inquiringly.

Leah regretfully nodded her confirmation, and much to Zarah's surprise, so did Alyssa.

"If that's true, then now that we've been... collected, their job is done. They'll probably be free to live their own lives and maybe they'll even forget about us ever existing." Joseph speculated.

"Or they'll self-terminate." Stone offered.

Joseph looked at him inquiringly, silently asking him to elaborate on his reasoning for that conclusion.

"Once your assets have performed their function and outlived their usefulness, you dispose of them before someone else has a chance to use them against you."

"He's right." Zarah confirmed. "Unless they have a further use for them, they're expendable."

After a moment, Joseph reluctantly voiced what many of them were thinking, "The same as us."

Joseph didn't have to look to see who had put an arm around his shoulders. He automatically snaked his arm around Kenyon's waist and returned the hug.

"What are we going to do?" Stone asked into the silence that followed.

Joseph closed his eyes as his mind fought to process all the different theories and the options that were open to them.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw that everyone was looking to him, waiting for an answer.

"I don't know."

At some unspoken cue, they all moved to an unoccupied table and took seats.

Kenyon made sure that he was seated beside Joseph, in case he was needed for moral support.

"Could we stage a hunger strike?" Leah asked into the silence.

"They use starvation as punishment, and besides that, they could just call a 'blackout' and feed us while we're zoned out. They've already proven that.

All we'd end up doing is causing ourselves unnecessary suffering." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"Is there any way that we could defeat the 'trigger'?" Stone asked as he looked around the group.

"Everything I know about hypnosis, I learned from black and white horror movies." Joseph responded, then continued, "We can check around and see if there's anyone who's studied the subject, but that seems like a longshot, at best."

"Still, we'll get the leaders to ask around the other rooms. Even if it's a longshot, it may be the only shot that we've got." Zarah responded.

Joseph nodded his agreement.

"How sure are we about the hypnosis thing; as opposed to some psychochemical agent that deletes short term memory?" Stone asked thoughtfully.

"I'd say over ninety percent sure. I don't see how they could manage a group of two hundred pissed off frightened teenagers without some sort of mind control mechanism." Joseph chimed in.

"Okay, then what about the operatives at our schools and our parents. How sure are we about that?" Stone asked carefully.

"That's harder to be certain of, but I still think that we've got enough compelling evidence to at least consider it to be 'likely'." Joseph added.

Before Stone could move on to his next question, Leah cautiously asked, "What's the point of the psychological experiments? It can't be to collect data. If they're using mind control, then the results would be corrupted and completely useless."

Joseph thought for a moment, then said, "Yes. Mary Nicole came to the same conclusion. All I can think is that maybe the 'hypnosis' or whatever it

is is most effective when we're already feeling a little off balance and uncertain."

"Or, maybe it causes us to feel off balance and putting us in this situation gives us a way of justifying the feeling that we're already having." Stone suggested.

"In the outside world, it would be a lot more difficult to mask a missing chunk of time. We'd have ways of knowing just how long we were out of action..." Joseph was saying when Wade interrupted.

"When I was ten, I had walking pneumonia. I was out of it for a few days and I lost any sense of how long I was confined to that bed."

"Yeah. Something like that happened to me, too." Kenyon said cautiously.

"Something *like* that, or *EXACTLY* that?" Joseph asked seriously.

"Exactly. I remember that I was sick for three or four days, but when I was allowed to get out of bed, it had been a week." Kenyon quietly admitted.

"That's right." Zarah interrupted, drawing everyone's attention. "Looking back on it, it seems strange. If I was so sick that I was delirious and slipping in and out of consciousness, why didn't they take me to a hospital?"

"The funny thing for me is that when the pneumonia was finally over, I felt fine. I didn't feel as though I'd been sick at all." Leah said distantly.

"That's right. I remember that. I had a regular appetite and I didn't feel weak or anything. I didn't even have a cough." Wade added.

"Did ALL of us have that same experience?" Joseph asked as he looked around the table.

All in attendance either verbally answered or nodded in the affirmative.

As he looked around, Joseph noticed that their group had doubled in size and that Brianna had joined them at some point during their discussion.

"I wonder what other things we've all had happen to us. I mean, did everyone have a dog named Prince who died when they were thirteen?" Stone asked as he looked around.

"Mine was named Princess." Zarah quietly admitted.

"King." Joseph muttered.

From around the table the names Duke, Duchess, Queenie and Ferdinand were all mentioned.

Joseph thought for a moment and finally said, "Which suggests that certain formative experiences in our lives might have been 'staged' to turn us into the people we are today."

"They did all of that for some sperm and eggs?" Alyssa asked disbelievingly.

"No. I don't think so." When he saw that everyone in attendance was listening to him, he said more loudly, "I don't think we're the end of the process. We're not the culmination of the project. I think that we're just one step along the way to whatever their final goal is. There's probably a lot more going on, a lot more 'projects' or 'levels' that we'll never know about and couldn't even guess at, because it has little or nothing to do with our part in the overall plan."

Wade started shaking his head, "There's something I don't understand. Why would they do the pneumonia thing and the dog thing if they're just going to pop us in here and milk us until we die? What was the point of all of that?"

"Maybe that was 'Plan A' and this is 'Plan B'."

"So it's possible that they had a whole other destiny planned out for us, but when something went wrong... or maybe went right, they hit the button, we were abducted and brought here?" Jude asked to confirm his understanding.

"Yes." Joseph speculated. "Maybe they were waiting for something like what happened with President Ashwood and President Bryce. Instead of doing to us like they did to our parents and telling us to go out into the world and get married to a compatible person and have a kid, they brought us here where they could have direct access to the genetic material that they've been cultivating, so that they could advance to the next phase."

"With the male to female ratio being what it is, I don't see how that would work." Brianna offered timidly.

"That's just in here. It seems reasonable to assume that they have a lot more people on the outside that they can command."

"Do you think that they would decide who we ended up with?" Kenyon asked from Joseph's side.

"They'd have to. If they're really trying to breed thoroughbreds, they'd have to be sure that each of the donors had the most desirable characteristics and that the proper couples paired up."

"Then, what about us? I know what I'm feeling, and it's something that I've never felt before. If they're controlling my choices and telling me what to do, then why am I feeling this for you?" Kenyon asked anxiously.

Before Joseph could respond, Zarah said, "That's a really good question. I don't see how what I'm feeling for Leah could provide any possible benefit for their 'project'. It seems reasonable to assume that they'd want me to fixate on one of the guys."

Kenyon looked at Joseph and anxiously asked, "Do you think that they're intentionally making us gay for some reason?"

Joseph looked around the table, then suddenly said, "Stone, I'm sorry to put you on the spot like this, but it could be important. Gay or straight? Choose."

"Straight." Stone answered without hesitation.

"I thought so." Joseph said with a nod, then turned to Kenyon and said, "I don't think that they're making anyone gay or straight. What I think is happening is that they're not bothering to suppress our natural inclinations anymore. In here, they don't need you to be straight. They're going to get what they want, regardless."

"So, do you think that I'm really gay?"

"You're a person, Kenyon. You're feeling attraction to another person. That's it. The gay and straight labels don't really serve any purpose. In our current situation, I don't see that it matters."

After a moment of silence, Stone carefully asked, "So what you're saying is that outside, we were being told to act a certain way, so that we'd be well placed to get married and start families. But now that we're here, they're not bothering with that?"

"Why should they? We're at their mercy... assuming that they have any. Why would they go to the trouble?"

Jude looked to Joseph and asked, "So, even though we're trapped, in a sense, we're allowed to be free for the first time."

"Not entirely. I'm sure that every time we black out that we're being given imperatives and compulsions to make it easier for them to manage us. But as far as our 'feelings' go, it seems to be beneath their consideration."

Joseph said thoughtfully, then noticed that Leah seemed to be fighting to stay awake.

A look around the group confirmed that she wasn't the only one.

Finally Joseph gravely said, "As much as I hate to give up one minute of consciousness in this place, the fact of the matter is that I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Everyone, please be thinking of other things that we can try

out, to escape this place. We're not hostages, we're livestock. There's no happy ending coming if we just put up with it and 'wait'."

"Can I go with you?" Kenyon asked from Joseph's side.

"Of course." Joseph said with a smile at him, then turned to Jude and asked, "Do you want to come along?"

"You said that you're going to bed..." Jude trailed off warily.

Joseph laughed, then said, "I'll end up in bed. But first I'm going to go and talk with Jason for a minute. I'm guessing that you're not going to feel comfortable in your own room tonight, so maybe if we all put our heads together, we can come up with another place for you to stay."

"Oh! Yes, thank you." Jude said timidly.

"Good night, everyone." Joseph said as he started walking toward the door to the blue hallway.

As the group walked into the Blue Gray meeting room, Joseph smiled and said, "Tammy! I didn't know you were down here."

"Yeah. We've been brainstorming about the psychological experiments theory."

"We just had a talk in the other room and it was suggested that the hypnosis or drugs that have been used on us might either cause a sort of disorientation that would be less noticeable if we weren't aware of the time and date, or that the drugs might work *more effectively* if we were kept unaware. I don't know if that helps you at all, but I think that's all that we came up with that relates to what you're working on."

Mary Nicole seemed to consider for a moment, then said, "We'll need to discuss the merits of that idea."

"Good. While you're doing that, I'm going to get some sleep." Joseph finished with a smile.

"Pleasant dreams." Mary Nicole said warmly.

"I wouldn't bet on it." Joseph chuckled, then led the way out of the meeting hall.

As they walked down the long hallway, Jude quietly said, "If everyone is going to bed, I could sleep in one of the meeting rooms."

"I don't want to sleep alone." Joseph responded seriously.

Jude looked at him with surprise at what he might be suggesting.

Joseph noticed, but continued undeterred, "Unless I miss my guess, there are going to be other people who are feeling the same way that I do. All we have to do is find a couple who are spending the night together and ask them if you can use the other person's room."

"I'd let you use mine, except that there's blood all over my sheets." Kenyon added.

"Don't worry. You won't have to stay there." Joseph assured him.

Jude and Kenyon shared a look, but didn't ask Joseph what plan he had cooking in that mind of his.

"How are things going in here?" Joseph asked as they walked into the Gray and Purple meeting room.

"We're just beating our heads against a brick wall. We don't have enough pieces of the puzzle to be certain of anything." Jason said with frustration.

"How are you doing, Autumn? Feeling any better?" Joseph asked gently.

"Yeah. Sorry about before."

"As long as Jason's cool, there's no problem."

"We're good." Jason said with a quick smile in her direction.

Joseph focused his attention on Jason and said, "Well, Jayce, I was hoping that you could help us with something."

"Sure, Joe, what can I do for you?"

"Kenyon and Jude both need places to sleep. I was just wondering if you knew of anyone that might be sharing a bed with someone else that we could ask if we could borrow their unused room."

"After what happened today, I'm sure that there are a few people sharing. But I honestly don't know who they are." Jason slowly answered, then looked at Autumn inquisitively.

She slowly shook her head.

"I guess we could start knocking on doors, if we need to." Joseph said reluctantly.

Jason seemed to have an idea, so everyone waited to see what he would come up with.

Finally, Jason turned his attention to Kenyon and Jude and asked, "Would you two mind sharing a bed?"

"It wouldn't be my first choice." Kenyon answered honestly, then looked to Jude and hurried to say, "No offense, Jude. But there's only one person that I want to share a bed with right now, and it's not you."

Jude smiled at his bumbling explanation and responded, "You're not the person that I would want to share a bed with, either."

"If you're dead set against it, we can do like Joseph said and start knocking on doors. But if you're willing to put up with it for tonight, Joseph could

stay in my room with me, and you two could stay in Joseph's room." Jason offered.

Kenyon looked at Joseph regretfully before saying, "You and Jason are going to be a thing, huh?"

Before Joseph could formulate a response, Jason said, "I don't think there's any way we could do this that everyone would be happy with it. But the reason I want to spend the night with Joseph is because he's the only one here that I feel 'safe' with. After everything that's happened, I really need that. I hope that you can understand."

"Yeah." Kenyon reluctantly admitted, then continued, "And I wouldn't have any problem feeling safe with Jude. I guess I was just thinking with my dick."

Joseph pulled Kenyon into his arms and quietly said, "I like you, Kenyon. I know that you *want* me, but Jason *needs* me. I don't know if I'll feel anything different for either one of you in the morning, but I'd really like to find out."

"Are you in love?" Kenyon whispered.

"No. But this feels like the right thing to do."

"Do you think that there's any chance that someday sleeping with me will feel like the right thing to do?"

"Yes. There's a very good chance of that." Joseph said gently before releasing Kenyon from the hug.

"I'm sorry, Kenyon." Jason said, at a loss for what more to say.

"It's okay, Big Guy. You need to feel safe. I get that. But just so there's no misunderstanding, I love him, too. I'm not giving up."

"Understood."

"Are you ready for bed?" Joseph asked Jason quietly.

"Yes. I've been fighting to stay awake."

Joseph nodded, "Waiting for the blackout. Just like the rest of us."

"Jude, are you okay with this?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"Yes. Like you, this isn't my first choice, but I'm not upset."

"Are you wanting to sleep with Joseph, too?"

Jude chuckled at the suggestion, then quietly admitted, "No. Tanner."

Since Jason's room was so close to the Gray and Purple meeting room, Joseph and Jason stopped at Jason's door and watched as Kenyon and Jude walked away.

"Kenyon loves you. I feel really bad for doing this." Jason said honestly as he opened the door to his room.

"I feel bad about it, too. But I still think that this is the right thing to do." Joseph said as he followed Jason inside.

"Do you love me?"

"Maybe. It's complicated. I want for you to feel safe and for you to know that you can trust me. I feel like I want to hold you and let you know that everything's going to be alright."

"Is everything going to be alright?"

As much as Joseph wanted to tell Jason what he wanted to hear, he felt that it was more important to be honest. "No. I don't think so."

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"If you'll remind me, I'll go through the whole thing with you in the morning about how I reached this conclusion. But what I expect to happen next is

that we're going to be milked for our sperm. The girls are going to have their eggs harvested, and it's probably going to be horrible and maybe even gruesome. That's going to happen again and again until, at some point, our captors will have reached their quota. Then this phase of the project, level 3, will be terminated."

"Do you think that they're going to kill us?!"

"How could they not? How could they *ever* let us go?"

"If they have the means to make us forget, couldn't they just wipe out our memories of this place and release us?"

"Why would they take that chance? What would they gain from it? By letting us go, they would open themselves up to the risk of being exposed. To prevent that, all they'd have to do is poison our food, turn off our air or just stop feeding us and their problem would be solved."

"We've got to get out of here."

"Well, duh." Joseph said with a grin at the understatement.

"Do you have any ideas about how to do that?"

"Not a single one. But I doubt that I'm going to come up with any ideas until I've had some sleep. My brain is slagged."

"Mine, too." Jason admitted, then cautiously asked, "How do you want to do this?"

"I usually shower before bed... I should have thought to bring a change of clothes."

"If you go right now, you could probably get your clothes before Kenyon and Jude have fallen asleep."

"Yeah. I'll be right back."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. If you want to go ahead and shower while I'm gone, I'll let myself in when I get back."

"Okay. But when you come in, please say something so that I'll know that it's you."

Joseph could see the anxiety in his eyes.

"Or, you could come with me to get some clothes and then we could take our showers when we get back."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all."

After knocking on the closed door, Joseph quietly asked, "Can I come in? It's Joseph."

The door slid open to reveal Kenyon wearing a tee shirt and boxer shorts.

"We were just getting ready for bed. What's up?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"I was wanting to take a shower and realized that all my clothes were here." Joseph said shyly.

"Oh. Okay. Jude's taking a shower, now. Come on in." Kenyon said as he backed into the room.

"Another one?"

"I bet it's going to take more than a few showers for him to feel clean again."

"Good point. I just need my clothes, then we'll be out of here."

Kenyon looked at Jason and asked, "Are you here to protect him from me?"

"No." Joseph said, "He's here so that *I* can protect *him*."

Kenyon saw the twinge in Jason's expression and quietly said, "Sorry, Jason. I don't mean to be a dick. Sometimes I just am."

"No. You have nothing to apologize for."

"You know, if we had a bigger bed, there'd be a really easy solution to this." Joseph said as he joined them at the door with a bundle of clothes gathered in his arms.

"Are you talking about having an orgy?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"No. More of a sleepover. It's not about sex, it's about all of us feeling safe and being around the people that we enjoy spending time with."

"I suppose that it's a moot point since the bed's so small." Jason said hesitantly.

"Joseph, would you mind if I pulled the mattress off your bed?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"No. I don't mind at all. What are you thinking?"

"Jason, would you grab the other end?" Kenyon asked as he took hold of the mattress at the foot of the bed.

"Yeah. Where are we putting it?"

"On the floor, right here."

Jason helped him place the mattress on the floor, which effectively blocked the walkway from the entry door to the bathroom door.

"It fits perfectly." Kenyon said happily.

After a moment, Jason timidly admitted, "I don't get it."

"If we get the mattress from your room and bring it in here, the two mattresses should fit snugly side by side and make a suitable place for four people to sleep." Joseph explained.

"Do you want to?"

"There's safety in numbers." Joseph said with a smile at him, then glanced at Kenyon before saying, "And this way, no one gets left out."

"Do you think that Jude will be alright with this?" Kenyon asked with a glance toward the closed bathroom door.

"I think that as long as we present it to him as a 'sleepover' and not an 'orgy', that he'll probably be able to live with it."

"Yeah. You're probably right."

"What happened?" Jude asked as he walked into the bedroom wearing a tee shirt and boxer shorts.

"Joseph and Jason came over to get some clothes." Kenyon explained.

"And they took the bed with them?"

"Yeah. They're taking the bed and box springs to Jason's room and bringing Jason's mattress back here." Kenyon said with a smile at Jude's flummoxed expression.

"Why are they doing that?"

"So that we can have a sleepover." At Jude's blank expression, he explained further, "It's for a lot of reasons, but mainly because we'll all be a lot happier and sleep a lot better if we're all able to sleep in the same room."

"What do you expect to happen beyond sleep?"

"There's a chance that someone might get kissed or cuddled at some point during the night, but that's about it."

Jude's expression said that he wanted to believe, but still had his doubts.

Kenyon put his thumbs in the waistband of his boxer shorts and quickly pulled the front down.

Jude caught a glimpse of the bandages and spots of blood before turning away.

"I got tore up in the last blackout. I promise, I'm not going to do *anything* to you." Kenyon said before carefully moving his waistband back into place.

After a moment, Jude quietly said, "It's not that I have anything against you or imagine you to be some kind of monster. I guess it's just the way that I was raised."

"Yeah. Well, if you think about it, they might have been right about some of that. I mean, if they warned you about monsters that would try to capture you and take you away... well. Yeah. But, I'm not a monster, I'm just another captive, like you."

"Is there anything that we need to do to prepare for their return?"

"No. Not that I can think of."

"Would you mind if I sit down until they come back?"

"No. I just didn't want to freak you out by asking if you wanted to sit on the mattress with me."

"Computer: Table." Jude said to the wall where the food dispenser was located.

Immediately, the table and bench began to emerge from the wall.

"I thought that only the person who was assigned to this room could do that."

"The computer will only release food or academic exercises to the person assigned to these quarters. But it only does a verification of identity for

those requests." Jude said then sat down at the table, and calmly said, "Menu."

Kenyon's jaw dropped when he saw the computer menu appear on the wall.

"See? The options in italics are not available for common use."

"How did you get it to do that?"

"I just asked for the menu."

"I asked for the menu back when I first started and it didn't do anything."

"Were you sitting down?"

"No."

"The viewscreen only activates when you're sitting down in front of it."

"Water..." Kenyon said as he started reading the menu aloud, then saw the word on the screen highlight.

"If you say any of these keywords while you're sitting down at the computer, it will take them as commands." Jude said before retrieving the glass of water from the dispenser receptacle and handing it to Kenyon.

"Thanks." Kenyon said absently, then thought to ask, "Why isn't it bitching you out for 'uncoded responses'?"

"That only happens in the... schoolwork... menu." Jude said as he fought to avoid using the actual word.

"Oh, so when it's in... AE mode, then it listens to every word. When it's in this mode, it only listens for the words on this list. But what about when it's not in this mode? What commands can you use at any time?" Kenyon asked curiously, then took a long drink of water.

"If you precede the request with the code word 'computer' then you can use any of these commands. I don't really know enough about how it's

programmed to tell you what other words it's listening for outside of menu mode."

"What's 'Dark'?"

A heartbeat later, he found out.

"Computer: Light."

When the lights came back on, they revealed Jude's grin.

"I guess I should watch what I say when the computer's menu is up."

"Yes. That would probably be best." Jude agreed, then said to the computer, "Computer: Close Menu."

"Thank you, have a nice day."

Kenyon took the last drink of his water, then waited for what he knew would happen next.

"Please return the glass to the dispenser receptacle."

"It really creeps me out when it does that. I feel like it's always watching me." Kenyon admitted shyly as he put the glass where it belonged.

"Thank you, have a nice day."

"I have no doubt that it *is* watching us, listening to us and probably sensing us in other ways that we're not aware of."

Jude and Kenyon turned when they heard the front door open.

"Getting that bed frame into the other room was a challenge." Joseph said as he led the way into the bedroom carrying a mattress, followed closely by Jason.

"Wouldn't it have been better to have the two beds side by side?" Jude asked curiously as he stood.

"That would make it nearly impossible to get through the room to the bathroom. This way we'll all have a comfortable place to sleep, but you can just walk across the mattress when you need to get from one side to the other." Joseph said honestly, then looked at the bench and table curiously.

When Jude followed his gaze, he said, "Computer: Close Table."

As soon as he did, the table and bench began to recede into the wall.

"One of these days you're going to have to show me how you do that."

Jude and Kenyon shared a smile at Joseph's comment.

"I'm going to take my shower now. If you guys are tired, you can go ahead and go to sleep while I'm in there." Joseph announced.

"Do you need any help?" Kenyon asked with a grin.

"No, thanks. I think I've got it." Joseph laughed, then walked into the bathroom.

Jason looked at Kenyon curiously, then said, "You seem to be a lot more comfortable than you were earlier."

"Yeah. I was struggling with the whole 'gay' thing, but Joseph said some stuff that made me feel a lot better about it." Kenyon said honestly as he climbed onto the mattress and pulled the blanket over him.

"What did he say?"

"Basically, he said that if I can find happiness, I should be happy. Don't stress about what doesn't matter."

Jason pondered the words as he climbed onto the mattress, stepping over Kenyon to take the place next to the wall.

"That sounds like good advice for all of us. Being in here, there might not be too many opportunities for happiness." Jason said thoughtfully.

"While I know that that's true, in some ways I'm happier and freer than I've ever been." Jude said from his place on the mattress by the opposite wall.

"You can come over here with us if you want to. We're not going to bite you." Kenyon said playfully.

"I'm fine over here. I think that I'm going to enjoy being here with you, sharing in this experience. But I'm not part of your... relationship."

"I'm not asking you to be. But if you feel like you'd like to come over here and be included in our conversation, it's okay. We won't attack you or think that you're wanting to have sex with us or something like that."

"Maybe later."

Turning his attention back to Jason, Kenyon said, "Back in the Blue and Green room, Joseph and the others were talking about some stuff that you should probably know about."

"Like what?"

"Well, there's a lot of it, so you'd probably better ask Joseph about it so that he can give you the details. But basically, they were thinking that maybe there was a government project a long time ago that might have started all of this. It might have started with our parents or maybe even a generation before that."

"He thinks that our parents are part of this?"

"Yeah. What they were saying was that if they've got the stuff to hypnotize us and mess with our memories and stuff like that, who's to say that they didn't start doing this a long time ago. They selected a bunch of genetically 'acceptable' people, brainwashed them, then told them all to have kids.

"They raised those kids and made sure that they all lived basically the same lives."

"I was raised in a foster home. I doubt that my life was anything like yours."

"Did you have pneumonia, when you were ten years old? And did your parents, or foster parents, not take you to a doctor for it?"

"Yes. That happened."

"Did you have a dog named King or Prince who died when you were thirteen?"

"His name was Rex, but yes."

"Rex means King." Jude supplied helpfully.

"Of course." Kenyon said to him with a grin, then turned back to Jason and said, "That's all the shared experiences that we came up with, but I'm sure that there's probably a lot more."

"So we all had similar life experiences. That *does* seem suspicious."

"Yeah. I got off track. Um, yeah, so I guess the whole mind control thing plays pretty heavily into this. Since all of us had parents and people at school who were in on this, somewhere they did something to hypnotize us so that they could set up a 'trigger' so that we'd switch off whenever we heard it."

"Which would explain the blackouts."

"Yeah. And after that we'd just do what we were told and, you know, end up here."

"Which means that all of this was set up in advance. All the pieces were in place, waiting for someone to set things in motion."

"Yeah. As soon as that happened, the sudden school trips, permission slips and all of that started rolling out and everything else was being put into place to get us here."

"Why? What's so important about us that they'd go to all this trouble?"

"That might be the most disturbing thing about all of this. *We're* probably not all that important. We're guessing that the project that was started with our parents, or maybe *their* parents, was to breed better humans. We're not them. We're just one step in the process."

Jason thought about it for a moment, then shook his head in dismissal as he said, "They wouldn't structure our lives to be the same if they planned on sticking us in here and milking us."

Jude scooted a little closer and said, "Joseph actually had an answer for that. He called it 'Plan A' and 'Plan B'. Plan A, we do just what our parents did and get married when we're instructed to do so. Then we have kids when we're instructed to do so. Then we raise them until they're ready to do the same."

Kenyon nodded, then took over the narrative, "Plan B: some catastrophic event happens that they can use as cover to pull all of us in here, then we're milked until they have everything that they need from our generation, then we die."

"He thinks they're going to kill us?"

"Actually, yes, he had a pretty good argument for that."

Before Kenyon could explain, Jude added, "Try thinking of it as them being able to take a shortcut and bypass an entire generation of their project."

Kenyon nodded, "We don't have to grow up, get married, get pregnant and raise kids. They just extract our sperm and eggs, all at once, then they don't need us anymore."

"But who's going to raise our kids?" Jason asked cautiously.

"Our parents, maybe. Or maybe they have other people under their control to do that." Kenyon answered simply.

"My guess would be 'Level 4'." Joseph said from the bathroom doorway, where he was standing wearing boxer shorts and a tee shirt.

"How likely do you think this is?" Jason asked him anxiously.

"It's another theory that's worth investigating. So far, a lot of it seems to fit, but we're going to have to look into it a lot more."

"Are you going to crawl in here with us, or not?" Kenyon asked playfully.

"Yeah." Joseph said with a grin, then knelt down on the mattress.

"We saved you a spot." Kenyon said as he indicated the space between him and Jason.

"Are you alright, Jude?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think so."

Joseph crawled into the space that had been reserved for him then got under the blanket.

As soon as Joseph was settled into place, he cautiously asked, "Is everyone comfortable?"

"No." Kenyon immediately responded, then said, "Let me try something."

Joseph was hesitant but waited as Kenyon changed position to align along his left side.

"Is that okay? I'm not crowding you, am I?"

"No. That's fine."

"I never slept with anyone before, so I'm not really sure how this works. All I know is that I want to know that you're there."

"It's nice knowing that you're there, too."

"That being the case, is it going to bother you if I *don't* touch you?" Jason asked from his other side.

"No. That won't bother me at all. If I know that you feel safe and comfortable, then I'll be perfectly happy."

After a long silent moment, Kenyon cautiously asked, "So, what do we do now?"

Joseph turned and grinned at him before saying, "Go to sleep."

"I think that's easier said than done."

"Well, I guess we could talk for a few minutes. I've been told that my talking was enough to put anyone to sleep."

"I *love* listening to you talk." Kenyon said firmly. "Out in the world, people babble about nothing for hours at a time. But you talk about *real* things. It fascinates me when you explain how you came to a conclusion, about how you put the pieces together."

"Um... okay. Well... now I don't know what to talk about."

"How about you fill me in on what's going on around the station?" Jason asked hopefully.

"That sounds like a good idea." Joseph said with a smile. "Starting over in the Yellow and Green room... we should really come up with names for the rooms. The color thing is too easy to get mixed up."

"What about 'Eden' for the Yellow and Green room?" Kenyon suggested.

"Eden? Where did you come up with that?"

"Yellow and Green makes me think of sunshine and a garden, so there's that. But also, Eden is the home of the tree of life, which makes me think of family trees and ancestry and genetics... you know."

"Um... okay. Eden it is!" Joseph easily agreed, then continued, "Well, Stone was asking me why we were ever brought to consciousness if they had us hypnotized and completely willing to do anything that they wanted."

"Good question." Jason said with a nod.

"I told him that the hypnosis might not work that way. It might not be possible to keep two hundred people hypnotized indefinitely."

"I don't really know enough about it to know if that would be possible or not."

"In the Blue and Green room... or 'The Bunker', we discussed the fact that the computer as much as admitted that we were brought here in response to some kind of a doomsday threat."

"Troubling times." Kenyon provided.

"The contribution from the Blue and Gray room... what should we call it?" Joseph asked uncertainly.

"The civil war room?" Kenyon quickly suggested.

At the vacant stares in his direction, he weakly added, "...you know, the blues and the grays."

"I think we all got that. But we're not really trying to come up with clever names related to the colors, we're trying to do away with the colors by giving the rooms *meaningful* names." Joseph slowly explained.

"The Pit of Despair." Jude muttered thoughtfully.

"I'll admit that the Blue and Gray room isn't one of the most cheerful places in Roofieville, but it's not *that* bad."

"That's the name of a horrible demented experiment that was done years ago. It was one of those things that makes you question humanity. I'm not saying anything about Mary Nicole, she seems to be perfectly nice. But

she's studying psychological experiments and if that's what we're caught in, then it's being run by the same kind of immoral monster that ran 'The Pit of Despair' experiment." Jude explained.

"Okay. But *you* get to explain it to Mary Nicole."

"I will."

"So, the news from 'The Pit of Despair' was that one reason that they might be preventing us from knowing the time day and date is because it might help their psychological drugs, or whatever, work more effectively by keeping us off balance."

Jason looked at Joseph dubiously, then cautiously said, "It sounds a little far fetched, to me."

"So does being kidnapped, drugged and stuck inside a plastic rat maze."

"Good point."

"I guess that brings us to the Gray Purple."

"You're not calling it something horrible!"

"We're naming the rooms right now. If you have a name for it, that'll be it. The rest of us will go along with it, whatever it is."

"Really?"

"I promise." Joseph said, then crossed his heart to show his conviction.

Jason smiled at the gesture.

"So, do you have a name for it?"

"Yeah. But it's classified." Jason said teasingly.

"Okay, the Gray and Purple area is now officially to be known as 'Classified', the home of government conspiracy theories."

"That's not what I meant. I was just joking."

"Actually, that kinda works." Kenyon said slowly.

"And I *did* promise. I crossed my heart and everything."

"Go ahead." Jason said with a barely restrained grin.

"What you said in the meeting caught some people's attention. Basically, we seem to be existing among the fragments of several projects, and some of them are working against each other. If this were all being done by one person or group of people, it would be working toward some goal. So the conclusion that we've reached is that this started as some government black book project that's switched hands so many times that very few people alive today even know of its existence."

"I can buy that."

"I don't think we really heard anything new from Lisa in 'Area 51'."

"That's perfect!"

"The people in the Black and Red room haven't really been working with us... well, except that we've had their leader with us for a while now and he's been incredibly helpful." Joseph finished with a smile at Jude.

"What are you going to call the Red and Black room?" Jude asked hesitantly.

"It's just like the rest of us, it's your room, so you should have the honor of naming it."

"Babylon?"

"Okay. For as long as the Whore of Babylon is in charge, we'll call it that. But as soon as you're made leader again, we're changing the name."

"To what?"

"Do you remember what you said to me when we first met? You were so happy, so full of joy. You called it 'Paradise'."

"I might have been mistaken about that."

"Jude, when you're back with your people and helping them to improve their lives and deal with their mistakes, you're going to be building something wonderful. You haven't arrived in paradise, but you've been given the opportunity to build it."

"Do you really think it's appropriate?"

"Yeah. I think it fits."

"What have you got for Korbin?" Jason asked curiously.

"I don't know. Something like an autobody shop or an engine room or something like that. Whatever we come up with, it has to emphasize physical work and getting your hands dirty."

"Since there's no cars, I don't think an autobody shop is right. The same thing since there's no engines."

"The Workshop?" Jude asked tentatively.

"Sold! To the young man in red." Joseph said in his best impersonation of an auctioneer, then he added more quietly, "Well, not at the moment, but you know who I mean."

The others chuckled at the statement, then Kenyon cautiously asked,

"What about the sisterhood?"

"You've already named them. Just about everyone calls the Yellow and Orange room 'The Amazon'."

"I'm sure that they're going to *love* that." Kenyon said with a roll of his eyes.

"I don't know, they might. Amazons are considered to be strong, self-sufficient women. I don't see it as being an insult in any way. But if they don't like it, we'll call it something else."

"I know it's a little weird to ask, but can I have a kiss goodnight?" Kenyon asked from Joseph's side.

"Sure." Joseph said, then leaned in to give Kenyon a gentle kiss.

As he backed away, Kenyon asked, "Anyone else want one? Last chance."

After a long silent moment, Jason reluctantly said, "Maybe just one."

Joseph smiled, then turned to his other side and gave Jason a kiss that was every bit as sweet and gentle as the one he had given Kenyon.

When Joseph was finally settled back into his place, nestled between Jason and Kenyon, he quietly said, "I wish we could turn the lights out in here."

Kenyon smiled, then said, "Any wish that it's possible for me to grant you, will be yours. Computer: Dark."

Chapter 7

A knock on his door drew Joseph out of a sound sleep.

The complete darkness was a surprise to him and he had to think for a moment about what to do to rectify the situation.

Eventually, Joseph remembered what Kenyon had done the night before and cautiously said, "Computer: Light."

To his surprise the lights immediately came up to full illumination.

His sense of wonder was short lived as another, more urgent, knock on his door reminded him of why he had turned the light on in the first place.

"Tell them to go away." Kenyon muttered.

"It might be important." Joseph said as he struggled to extricate himself from his blanket cocoon.

As he approached the door, there was yet another bout of knocking.

Joseph opened the door slightly, just enough so that he could peek out without letting whoever was outside see that he was in his underwear.

"Joseph, the doorway to the blue and gray room is blocked off!" Mary Nicole said anxiously. Joseph looked past her and saw Tammy standing off to one side.

"Blocked? By what?"

"A wall. It's completely solid."

"Hang on. Let me get dressed, then you can show me." Joseph said before sliding his door closed.

"What is it?" Jason asked as he propped himself up on one elbow.

"Something's happened. Mary Nicole said that the door to the blue gray room is blocked. I'm going to go check it out." Joseph said as he took a fresh pair of coveralls from the closet.

"I'll go with you." Jason said decisively as he slowly stood.

"I'll go, too." Kenyon said, although he hadn't opened his eyes yet.

Joseph carefully walked between Jason and Kenyon, as he said, "I'm going to get dressed and go with them now. You guys can catch up to us when you're ready."

Joseph quickly relieved himself, then pulled on the coveralls.

As he opened the bathroom door, he saw that Jason, Kenyon and Jude were all in various stages of dressing.

Before he could say anything, Kenyon walked past him into the bathroom.

"Why do you think that they'd block us from getting to the meeting room?" Jason asked as he sat down to pull on his boots.

"And do you think that the blue and green meeting room might also be blocked?" Jude interjected.

"I don't know... to both questions... Jude, would you mind going to the blue green room and checking it out?" Joseph asked as he sat on the edge of one of the mattresses and started to pull on his boots.

"Joseph." Kenyon quietly said from the bathroom doorway.

"What?"

"Would you come here for a minute? I need to... just come here." The tone of Kenyon's voice alerted Joseph to the fact that something was wrong.

"Yeah." Joseph said as he quickly pulled on his second boot, then he turned to Jude and asked, "Would you tell Mary Nicole that I'll be right there?"

Jude nodded then started walking toward the bedroom door in his sock clad feet.

As he did, Joseph walked to the bathroom door where Kenyon was anxiously waiting for him.

"What's wrong?" Joseph asked as soon as he was in the bathroom, with the door slid closed behind him.

Kenyon was standing with his coveralls pooled around his ankles.

"You've got to see this." Kenyon said as he pulled the front of his boxer shorts down.

Although looking at another guy's penis was an unusual experience for him, after a long look he could honestly say that he didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"What's the problem?" Joseph finally asked.

"I'm completely healed. There aren't even any marks or any raw patches." Kenyon explained.

Joseph looked again and realized that Kenyon was right before slowly responding, "I'm not completely healed and you were in a lot worse shape than I was."

"Maybe that ointment stuff they gave me did that, but if it works that good, why didn't they give it to everyone?"

"I don't know. Let's go see what's going on with Mary Nicole and we'll worry about this later."

"Yeah. Right." Kenyon said distractedly then squatted down to pull up his coveralls.

Joseph turned and was about to open the door when he had a sudden change of heart.

He turned back to face Kenyon and quietly asked, "How are you feeling... you know... about us?"

Kenyon stopped fastening his coveralls as he considered the question.

Joseph waited, not able to interpret Kenyon's expression.

Finally, Kenyon seemed to come back to himself and slowly answered, "I feel the same, but different."

"That doesn't tell me a whole lot."

"I know. It's hard to describe. I feel like I still like you and want to be with you and stuff, but I don't feel the same... hunger, that I did yesterday."

"Let's go with Mary Nicole right now and we can try and sort it out later."

Joseph said cautiously, not sure of what Kenyon's reaction would be to the suggestion.

"Yeah. We've kept her waiting too long already." Kenyon agreed, then went back to getting himself dressed.

As Joseph walked back into the bedroom, he saw that Jude and Jason had finished dressing and had invited Mary Nicole and Tammy into the room.

"I'll be ready in just a minute." Joseph said as he squatted down to tie his boots.

"The three of you spent the night together?" Mary Nicole asked as she looked at the mattresses on the floor.

"Four, actually." Joseph said just as Kenyon opened the bathroom door.

"And here I thought I was being daring by inviting Tammy to stay in my room last night." Mary Nicole said with a timid smile.

"I'm ready when you are." Joseph said as he stood back up.

"What? Oh, yeah." Mary Nicole said distractedly, then led the way out of the bedroom.

"See? It was like that when we woke up this morning." Mary Nicole said as they approached what appeared to be a solid wall.

"It looks exactly like all the other walls." Jude said slowly as he stepped up to the wall and felt it, possibly to verify the reality of it.

"That could mean that some of what we're taking to be solid walls could actually be doorways." Joseph said thoughtfully as he knocked on the wall experimentally.

"It sounds solid." Jason said as he looked toward the ceiling.

Jude turned to Joseph and asked, "How do you think this was put into place?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did it drop from the ceiling, push up from the floor, slide in from one side or did someone carry it in and snap it into place?"

"That's a really good question. If we knew where it came from and how it was attached, we'd have a better idea of where to put pressure on it to break through."

Jason took a step back, then turned to Joseph and suggested, "We could do like Korbin and try ramming it with a table."

"This thing seems pretty solid, I'm betting that the table will give out long before the wall. But if we decide to do something like that, let's make sure that it's *after* everyone's had a chance to eat."

"I don't see a gap anywhere." Kenyon said as he got down on his hands and knees to look carefully at where the wall met the floor.

Joseph knocked on the wall again, this time much harder. "From the sound of it, I don't think that someone on the other side could hear us knocking."

"Joseph!"

At the sound of his name, he turned to see Brianna hurrying toward him.

"What's wrong?"

"We... oh my God! This hallway's closed off, too!"

"Hold on. What are you talking about?"

"The door to the green hallway... it's gone. There's a wall there, now."

"Can we still get into the blue and green meeting room?"

"Yes. There's just no other way out of it, now."

"We're trapped." Mary Nicole gasped.

"Only slightly more than we were before." Joseph muttered absently as he fought to make sense of the new developments.

"What are we going to do?" Tammy asked, drawing Joseph's attention.

"As I see it, we're very limited on what we *can* do. I'm open to any suggestions."

"What's going on?" A younger looking girl with dark blond hair asked as she stepped into the hallway from room number 101.

"Did you hear anything last night when this was put into place?" Joseph asked as he glanced back at the wall.

The girl's eyes went wide as she quietly responded to Joseph, "No... When did that happen?"

"My guess would be, after everyone went to sleep."

"Holly, are you sure you didn't hear anything at all last night?" Mary Nicole asked to verify.

"No. When I left the meeting room, I went right to bed and didn't wake up at all."

Jason looked around at the other members of their group before suggesting, "Let's go check out the wall in the meeting room. Maybe we can spot some differences between them."

"Yeah, we might as well." Joseph said as he leaned into the wall with his shoulder and pushed with all his might.

"What if we can't find a way past these walls?" Mary Nicole asked as she looked around the others, sincerely hoping that someone had an answer.

"If you think about it, we're no worse off than we were before." Kenyon tried to reason.

Joseph looked at him with surprise at the statement, then cautiously said, "You may not think so at mealtime."

"I hadn't thought of that." Kenyon gasped.

"Come on. Let's go and see just how bad it is." Joseph said as he started walking.

Jude and Jason shared an anxious look as they followed.

After only a few steps, Joseph stopped, then walked back to room 105 and knocked on the door.

"Zarah? Are you awake?"

After a moment, he heard her quietly answer, "I am now."

"We've had a new development and I think that we're going to need that big brain of yours."

"Hold on... give me a minute."

"If you guys want to go on ahead, we'll catch up to you." Joseph said more quietly to his companions.

Before they could go, Mary Nicole quickly suggested, "Actually, I was thinking that instead of doing that, we might start knocking on doors. We've got some pretty smart people in here with us. We might want to put their talents to use."

Joseph considered for a moment, then thoughtfully said, "Yeah. I think that if there were ever a time for a mass meeting, this is probably it."

Joseph watched as the group dispersed and began knocking on doors and waking people.

The door beside him slid open and Zarah asked, "What's happened now?"

Rather than answer verbally, Joseph simply pointed down the hallway.

It took a moment for Zarah to understand the gesture, but she finally stepped through her doorway and saw the stark, blank wall that hadn't been there the day before.

"Where did that come from?"

"Good question."

Zarah turned suddenly and looked the other way down the hallway, then at Joseph, not daring to ask.

"There's also a new wall separating us from the green hallway." Joseph answered anyway.

"What are we going to do?"

"Another good question. Maybe if we put our heads together we can come up with something."

"Just a second." Zarah said quickly, then stepped back into her room.

Joseph looked up and down the hallway as people in various stages of wakefulness began to emerge from their rooms.

"We're ready." Zarah said as she stepped out with Leah following close behind.

Joseph's expression fell when he saw her.

"I thought you were okay with this." Zarah said cautiously at his unexpected reaction.

"I am. Really. It's just that every time I see someone else who's *not* wearing blue, I'm reminded of what's at stake."

"You don't think..."

"Yeah. I do."

When Joseph reached the meeting hall, he broke away from Zarah and Leah so that he could get a first-hand look at the wall.

Just as with the other wall, there was no indication of how it was put into place. The wall looked as solid and secure as any other. It was as though the wall had been there all along.

When Tammy noticed Joseph beside her, she quietly asked, "Do you think the greens are alright?"

"I'm sure that they're probably doing the same thing that we are right now, trying to figure out what happened, why it happened, and what to do about it."

"If they're trying to break through, can't we do something to meet them halfway?"

"The only way that will work is if we know what they're planning so that we can coordinate our efforts." Jason said thoughtfully, then looked to Joseph to confirm his reasoning.

"That's right. If they're trying to go through the ceiling while we're trying to go through the wall, we're both less likely to reach our goal."

"Does anyone know morse code? If we can tap on the wall so that they can hear it, maybe we can pass messages that way." Tammy asked as she looked around the assembled crowd.

Jason looked her in the eyes and gently explained, "I learned morse code as part of my scout training, but it's not going to be of much use unless there's someone on the other side of the wall who knows it too."

Joseph considered for a moment, then said to the crowd, "We should station teams at both walls and if we hear tapping that sounds like code from either one, we can get Jason to see if it's morse code."

"Do you want us to do that now?" A blond guy timidly asked.

Joseph didn't recognize him and cautiously asked, "What was your name?"

"Doug Styles."

"Okay, Doug. Right now, let's see what we can come up with as a group and make sure that we all understand what we're doing, then you can take a team to listen at the other wall."

"Do you think that the people in the other rooms are alright?" A girl asked nervously.

"I hope so. But either way, there's not much that we'll be able to do to help them until we've found a way to get ourselves out of here. We have to focus on that first." Joseph told her.

"Why are they doing this to us?" Another girl asked before breaking down into tears.

"Mary Nicole? This sounds more like your department than mine." Joseph said as he glanced in her direction.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I can't think of any 'practical' reason for them to isolate us like this. Your psychological experiment theory seems to be the most likely to provide any kind of a reason."

"Well, I guess that amplifying the feeling of isolation could be a method for increasing the stress."

"I can see what you're saying, but I still don't know *why*." Joseph said with frustration. "What do they gain from putting us under increasing stress?"

"If I knew that, I'd probably be able to explain why we're here in the first place."

Joseph looked around the gathering, then said more loudly, "Whatever else they're doing to us, there's no doubt that they're intentionally messing with our heads. So don't make the mistake of thinking that you're going crazy. Don't let it get to you."

"That's easier said than done." Mary Nicole said under her breath.

Joseph nodded his agreement, then addressed the crowd again. "If you're having trouble dealing with the stress, talk to someone. We're all in this together."

"But what about those of us who aren't blues? What are we supposed to do?" An auburn haired girl dressed in gray asked in a tremulous voice.

Joseph could respect her ability to ask the logical question, despite how frightened she was. "What was your name?"

"I'm Roxie."

"Well, Roxie. All I can tell you is that we're going to do our best to get through the wall so that you can get back to your room before meal time."

"And if you can't?"

"We'll see what options are open to us when that time comes. I'll tell you right now that there's no way I'm going to be drinking a full glass of breakfast, knowing that someone else is going without."

A girl in blue discretely put an arm around her and quietly said, "You won't go hungry."

Joseph smiled at that, then turned to Zarah and asked, "Have you come up with any ideas about what's going on or what we can do about it?"

"Not exactly. I'm still trying to put the pieces together. But I feel like we're missing something really obvious."

"Okay. Let's all look at the pieces that we have." Joseph said to the crowd, then looked around to see if everyone were following along. When he determined that they were, he continued, "We're being milked for our sperm and it stands to reason that they'll be harvesting eggs sometime soon. The computer has as much as admitted that something catastrophic is going on outside which prompted this project to be activated. We've been drugged and we've endured treatment that seems consistent with

psychological experiments. And although certain factors could have been staged to provide us false clues, it appears that this 'project' has been around for a very long time, probably more than fifty years."

Joseph looked over the crowd and could see that most of those present seemed to be carefully thinking over the puzzle pieces that he was placing before them.

"The people who did this already knew who we were long before this ever happened. Our lives were structured so that we all had the same formative experiences when we were growing up. For example, we all had walking pneumonia when we were ten. We all had a pet dog die when we were thirteen."

"Stop it! You're scaring me!" One of the girls screamed.

Joseph looked at her with concern, then remembered meeting her once before.

"Landra, I'm not trying to scare you. I'm trying to let you know what we've discovered so that maybe you can help us figure this out. If we can figure out why we're here and what's expected of us..."

"Shhh... I hear something!" Tammy called out, drawing everyone's attention.

Joseph raised his hands and motioned for everyone to be quiet as he strained to hear.

"I think it's Wade! I can hear him, but I can't make out what he's saying." Tammy said carefully as she kept her ear pressed to the wall.

Joseph walked to her side, careful to remain silent as he did.

"I can almost hear him..." Tammy whispered.

Joseph pressed his ear to the wall and listened as carefully as he could, but still couldn't hear anything.

After another long moment of listening, Joseph whispered, "I can't..."

"Shhh!" Tammy hissed.

Joseph finally stepped away, not sure if she were really hearing something or not.

He looked around the room, then spotted who he wanted and walked to him.

"Doug. Why don't you get one or two people and stake out the other wall? If you hear anyone calling out or tapping, be sure to send someone back here to let us know."

"Do you want to help me?" Doug asked a pair of girls near him and they immediately agreed. One was Roxie, in gray. The other was her companion from before, in blue.

As soon as they had left, Joseph turned to Mary Nicole and asked, "Do you want to get a team together and see if you can come up with any better theories about what they could gain by increasing the stress on us?"

"Yeah." Mary Nicole said as she glanced at Tammy with an expression of concern.

"Maybe she's just got really good hearing."

Mary Nicole forced a smile for his benefit before motioning to a few other people to join her on the other side of the room.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jason asked as he walked to Joseph's side.

"Yeah. It'd be a really big help if you could talk to the other non-blues and see how many of them already have someone who'll be willing to share

their snail-trail. Once you've found that out, find out who's left and see if you can find any kind-hearted blues who'll be willing to help someone in need."

"Can I assume that you'll be willing to share?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

Jason smiled at the reaction and seemed to be about to lean in and kiss Joseph, but stopped himself before he started.

"Having some regrets about yesterday?" Joseph guessed.

"No. It's not that. I just... you know... I shouldn't do stuff like that in front of everybody."

"Would you still feel that way if I were a girl?"

"Yes. Certain things should be done in private, because they're intimate and special. Doing them in public cheapens them." Jason explained, then quietly added, "But I'm not sorry that I kissed you, yesterday. I'm just sorry that I put it on display for everyone else to see."

"Are public hugs okay?"

"Yes. Public hugs are fine... great, in fact."

"Good. Then give me one so you can get to helping the non-blues."

Jason smiled, then leaned in and gave Joseph a firm hug that accurately conveyed his level of caring.

As soon as Jason had stepped away, Jude quietly asked, "Is there something I can do?"

"Yeah. It would be a really big help to me if you would go around and talk to people to see how they're doing and if they need help dealing with

what's going on. You might want to start with Landra." Joseph said as he glanced in her direction.

"But what should I tell her?"

"Tell her what you believe in and why you think that everything will be alright."

After a moment to consider, Jude quietly asked, "This is because of my religion, isn't it? In essence you're asking me to tell her something that you believe is a lie."

"I'm asking you to tell her what she needs to hear right now."

Joseph watched as Jude left, then noticed Kenyon watching him from across the room.

Joseph did a quick survey of the area, making sure that no one needed his help before he walked to Kenyon and asked, "Did I miss anything?"

"Not that I can think of. Of course, when I'm watching you, I'm usually not thinking about what I should be, anyway."

"What do you want to happen to us next?"

"Us?" Kenyon asked as he made a motion which indicated the entire room.

"Us?" he asked again as he indicated Jason, Joseph and himself. "Or, us?" He asked as he looked Joseph in the eyes.

"I'm not asking about love or anything. Before that, I'd like to know if you think that you'll be able to handle being in a relationship with a guy. Because if you can't, then regardless of how strongly we feel toward each other, it won't matter because it's not going to work."

"I don't think I'll know if I'll be able to handle it until I've tried."

"Okay. Then I guess the question is, *will* you try?"

Kenyon thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "Are you asking me for a commitment or something like that?"

"No. At least not in the typical 'boyfriend' sense of the word. Some couples work out and some don't. I understand that. But I need to know that if we do this that you're not going to bail out the first time someone looks at us funny or tells a homophobic joke. Basically, at this point, I'm not asking you if you have the heart, I'm asking you if you have the balls."

"What about Jason?"

"When he's ready to talk about it, I'll ask him the same thing."

"And what happens if we both say 'yes'?"

"Then I guess that we'll all have to decide what we want, what we'll settle for or maybe how much we'll put up with. Remember, up until yesterday you considered yourself to be straight. The vibe I get from Jason is that he never even considered his sexuality before yesterday."

"What about you? Were you gay before you were kidnapped and brought here?"

"I really don't know. There's a part of me that always thought that someday I'd get married and have kids and stuff like that. So I sort of 'assumed' that I was straight. But I don't remember ever really thinking about it, too much. I looked at it as what was naturally going to happen. As far as being *attracted* to guys or girls... I think it's all about the same to me."

"What about now? What do you feel when you look at me?"

Joseph shyly smiled, then said, "I feel honored to know that you're interested in me. I feel like I'd do anything in my power to protect you. It makes me happy when I know that you're happy. I genuinely *like* you and I want to spend time with you."

"But I don't turn you on."

Joseph looked around, then guided Kenyon to take a few steps away from anyone else before saying, "Maybe there's something wrong with me. It's like, sometimes, when I see someone, a little alarm goes off inside me and all of a sudden my dick wakes up and my brain shuts down. I get all stupid and bumbling and I'll do anything to get that person to notice me, even if it's to annoy them into telling me to go away."

"And you don't feel that for me."

"I didn't feel that for you the first time I met you. What I feel for you is like a creeping sense of realization. I'll notice one thing about you that I find really attractive, then I'll spot another. I promise that if I didn't find you attractive at all, I'd just tell you."

"But you felt the 'alarm' go off for Jason, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I also felt that for Zarah, Randa and even Korbin. Once I got my brain to kick in and sort through what I was feeling, I realized that even though I was attracted to them and liked them, I wasn't really interested in getting any *closer*."

"Except for Jason..."

"Well, yeah. I got that initial physical attraction thing for him, like I was telling you about. But as I got to know him, I didn't find anything to make me lose interest. In fact, I think that I could love him... if he could handle being in a relationship with me."

"But you don't feel that for me."

"No. I feel something completely different for you. Jason's beautiful to look at and fun to be around. But I feel like... I don't know how to say it. It's hard to explain..."

"Please try."

"Okay. It's like, I don't feel like Jason would ever be *mine*. He's the kind of person who needs to maintain his own sense of self. I believe that I could love him. And I think that it's possible that he could love me, too. His life and mine could intersect at some key points, but they'd still be mostly separate. He's just wired that way... we could 'connect' but we could never 'merge'."

"Are you saying that you think that we could?"

"Yeah. I think that if we both decide that it's what we want and commit to it, that we could form a partnership... a 'union' that would redefine who both of us are, making us into something more than either of us would be on our own."

"But how would Jason fit into something like that?"

"I don't know if he would... or could. But I think that he's wonderful and special. Even if he isn't capable of sharing 'all' of himself, I'd still like to accept as much as he's willing to offer."

"What happens if I can't handle that?"

"I wish that I could work things out so that no one gets hurt. But from the look of it, that may not be possible. The most I can do is be sure that everyone goes into this with their eyes open. We'll all make our decisions, then we'll do our best to live with them."

Kenyon slowly nodded his acknowledgement.

"I wish that I were better at explaining how I feel. I promise that I don't love Jason more than you and I'm not waiting to see how things work out with him before making a decision about us. I just want for all of us to have enough time to sort through our feelings before we decide what we're doing next."

"Yeah. I'm usually pretty good about thinking rather than feeling, but when it comes to you... I guess it's like you said, I look at you and my alarm goes off, then all my *thinking* kind of just goes south."

"That's probably the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

There was a long moment of silence which was broken by Tammy calling out, "Joseph! Joseph! It's Wade! I heard him!"

"What did he say?" Joseph asked as he hurried to her side.

"I don't know, but it's him! Now I'm sure of it!"

"Keep listening and if you can even make out a single word, call it out. We need all the help we can get right now."

Joseph looked around the room at all the anxious people, then came to a decision, "Aaron, would you do me a favor?"

The dark haired boy with deep blue eyes looked at Joseph with surprise at being called on, before cautiously walking over to him.

"Could you get a few people and do a quick head count, then try to figure out if there might be any vacant rooms? If there are, then we'll see if maybe some of the blues were caught in other areas, or if maybe not all the rooms were full to begin with."

"Yeah... sure."

As Joseph watched him walk away, Kenyon noticed his inquisitive look.

"Don't tell me that your 'alarm' just went off."

"No. It's nothing like that. I'm just trying to remember where and when I learned Aaron's name."

"What do you mean?"

"When I needed his help, I automatically asked him for it, but now that I think about it, I never met him before and I don't remember anyone ever telling me who he was."

"That's weird."

"Yeah. I can't think of any reason why I'd know him."

"What about her? Do you know *her* name?" Kenyon asked as he pointed at a random girl in the room.

"No. I've seen her around, but I haven't met her yet."

"Okay. Fair enough. But tell me what else you know about Aaron."

"I don't know anything about him."

"Do you know his full name?"

"Why would I know that?"

"Well, if you know his first name without knowing why, maybe you know his last name for the same reason."

"As far as reasoning goes, that's about as roundabout as it gets."

"Maybe he's like me and Jason. Maybe his name is common enough that he has to use his last name sometimes to tell him apart from all the other Aarons that are running around."

"Or *maybe* he'd just use his middle name like Mary Nicole does."

"That's possible. What's his middle name?"

"Scott."

"How did you know that?"

"I don't know."

"So Aaron Scott what? What's his last name?"

"I need to sit down. All of a sudden, I'm not feeling very well."

"Okay." Kenyon said as he guided Joseph to the nearest available chair.

Once Joseph was seated, Kenyon quietly asked, "Aaron Scott what?"

"Kristofson."

Kenyon glanced around and caught Jude's eye. He quickly motioned for Jude to come over to them.

"Is Joseph alright?"

"I don't know, yet. But can you do me a really big favor?"

"Sure. What?"

"That dark haired guy over there. Would you ask him his full name, first middle and last? We need to know it."

"Um, yeah. Okay." Jude muttered uncertainly before walking away.

"Myrtle Beach, South Carolina."

"What's that?"

"That's where Aaron lives. Myrtle Beach. He actually hates the ocean and wishes that he could live just about anywhere else."

"Joseph, you need to stop."

"Some of the people around him think that he's slightly autistic or has aspergers. He's even been evaluated for it. The thing is, he just doesn't have any patience for drama and refuses to participate in it."

"Joseph. Forget about Aaron. Come back to me."

"His Maw-maw made him a little child-sized quilt when he was young. He carried it with him everywhere, until he went to school. He had such a fit on his first day of school, that his Maw-maw cut a piece off the quilt so that he could take it to school with him, in his pocket and touch it

whenever he needed to feel comforted by it. He carried that with him until a couple years ago."

"He says that his full name is Aaron Scott Kristofson." Jude said as he approached.

"Joseph. Focus on me. Listen to the sound of my voice. Come. Back. To. Me."

"What's wrong?" Jude asked with concern as he squatted at Joseph's other side.

"He's in some kind of a trance." Kenyon explained, at a loss for anything *meaningful* that he could do to help.

"He's always been so lonely. Sometimes he wanted to be around people and enjoy their company, but he just couldn't stand their bullshit and games."

"Joseph! Wake up!" Kenyon said firmly, drawing the attention of some of the people around them.

"What?" Joseph asked confusedly as he started to focus on Kenyon.

"You went away for a little bit. I need for you to stay with me, now."

"What happened?" Joseph asked as he began to look around to orient himself.

"Let's not get into that until you're completely back to being you."

"Yeah. Okay. I'm feeling really foggy right now. Did I just have a seizure or something?"

"What's wrong?" Zarah asked with concern as she approached.

"Stay with him." Kenyon whispered to Jude, then took a few steps away to talk to Zarah, out of Joseph's earshot.

"Something just happened that's impossible. Joseph went into some kind of a trance and all of a sudden knew things that he couldn't possibly know."

"Like psychic visions?"

"I guess so. I really don't know anything about stuff like that, but the thing that weirded me out most about it was that he seemed to get lost in it. It's like he could see Aaron's past and couldn't break away and come back to the here and now."

"Who?"

"Aaron, the dark haired guy by the wall, who's looking at us."

Zarah glanced over at him, then looked back to Kenyon with some concern.

"Do you think that you can watch over things here for a little bit? I'm going to take Joseph back to his room and get him to rest for a few minutes, away from all these people."

"That might be a good idea. If it really *is* something psychic, then being in a crowd of people is probably the worst thing for him."

"I'm feeling better. We should go back." Joseph said as they entered his room.

"We need to figure out what just happened to you. How much do you remember?"

"I think I remember everything. It's just a little bit muddled."

"What's Aaron's last name?"

"Kristofson."

"Okay. Do you know how you know that?"

"No. You asked me and somehow I just knew."

"I can't believe you're making me do this..."

"Do what?" Joseph asked him with concern.

"You're making me 'brain up' and figure stuff out. You're supposed to be the smart one. I'm supposed to be the pretty one." Kenyon said with mock annoyance.

"That sounds like a fair division of labor to me."

"But you can't tell anyone that I did this, alright? It could ruin my rep."

"My lips are sealed."

"Okay. Looking at this objectively, I can see two possible explanations. One is the obvious, that you have, or are developing, some type of psychic ability which allows you to know things that you couldn't possibly know."

"Yes."

"Or, it's also possible that while you were under hypnosis, that you were given information about Aaron and told to divulge that information at a certain point or under certain circumstances."

"I guess it could be that, too."

"Occam's razor would suggest that we give most credence to the hypothesis which is more probable and realistic."

"Which means that we're going to assume that what I know about Aaron is implanted information."

"We're only going to assume that inasmuch as we're going to test the assumption."

"How are we going to do that?"

"What's my middle name?"

"I don't know. You told me that your first name is Richard, but you never told me your middle name."

"I know. That's why I'm asking."

"But even if I know it, that won't prove anything. It could still be implanted information."

"True. But each time you answer another random question, it's less likely to be something that someone else would have thought to include in your subconscious programming."

"I guess."

"What's my middle name?"

"Nothing. You don't have one."

"Correct. What's my mother's maiden name?"

"Norris."

"What's her mother's maiden name?"

"Jasper."

"And what about her mother's?"

"Millebrand."

"Where was I born?"

"Ramah, New Mexico."

"What was the date?"

"October twenty sixth, nineteen ninety seven. By the way, belated happy birthday."

"Thank you. What can you tell me about where I lived in New Mexico?"

"Your grandfather bought the land just before he retired, he wanted to spend his retirement building the house of his dreams. But his dreams ended up being a lot bigger than his wallet or his ability as a carpenter. The land... was Native American reservation land that was being sold off. Although people had lived there before, no one really claimed that piece of land as belonging exclusively to *them*."

"You're going too deep. I need you to come back to me, now."

"What? Oh, right. What else do you want to know?"

"What kind of truck did my grandfather drive?"

"He drove lots of trucks. The list of trucks he *hasn't* driven would probably be shorter."

"What kind of a truck did he drive when I was living there?"

"Oh. I don't know. Probably either that oxidized tomato soup colored Bronco... or it could be the smurf blue Isuzu."

"Okay. That's enough. Go ahead and relax for a minute."

"How did I do?"

"Frighteningly well."

"Did I get all of the answers right?"

"As far as I know."

"How's that?"

"I asked you a few questions that *I* didn't know the answers to. I don't know my great-grandmother's maiden name, but you gave me an answer without hesitation."

"If you don't know the right answer, what does that prove?"

"First off, I asked some obscure questions about myself that no one could have predicted that I'd ask. So they couldn't have given you the answers in advance."

"Unless they programmed you to ask *those* questions."

"I hadn't thought of that. Yes. That could be. But the more layers of obfuscation we suppose, the less likely that the scenario we're imagining is true."

"Okay. So what have you been able to figure out?"

"If this were actually some form of telepathy, then you couldn't know anything about my past that I don't already know."

"But I could have known what you were testing me on and just made something up."

"I guess so, but I *know* what kind of a truck my grandfather drove when I was living there."

"Was it the Bronco or the Isuzu?"

"The Bronco. But you didn't know that. We can't say anything for sure until we've done a lot more testing, but based on the results of this one test, it looks like you have some sort of legitimate psychic ability... that isn't necessarily telepathy."

"Okay. But it still sounds a little bit too... sci fi for me. What if we assume that this is all some hypnotic scenario playing out in our heads and none of this is really happening."

"I guess that's not any more farfetched than anything else that we're talking about."

"If that really were the case, why would our captors try to convince us that I'm psychic?"

"Maybe to distract you?" Kenyon offered halfheartedly.

"Yeah. Like being kidnapped, drugged, sexually molested and caged wasn't distracting enough."

"Joseph! Tammy just passed out!" Brianna called through the door.

"I'll be right there!" Joseph called in return.

"Are you sure that you're alright? Do you need to rest some more?" Kenyon asked with concern.

"I'm a lot better than I was. Let's go."

"Let me know if you start feeling weak."

"Thanks for letting me see you 'brain up'. I understand what it's like to have to hide it."

"Yeah. Well, if I were really smart, then maybe I'd understand why people celebrate ignorance. Someone who's vapid, selfish and mean is treated like they've accomplished something great and someone really smart can't even get a date."

"War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength."

"That's another thing I like about you. No one else would ever think of quoting George Orwell to me."

As they walked into the meeting room, all Joseph could see was a group of people gathered at the wall that had once been the doorway to the green hallway.

"What happened?" Joseph asked as he gently nudged his way through the crowd of onlookers.

"Tammy was trying to talk to Wade through the wall when all of a sudden, she just passed out." Mary Nicole choked out as tears slid down her cheeks.

"Has anyone but Tammy been able to hear Wade?" Joseph asked as he looked at Zarah..

"No one else heard anything."

"Have you checked her breathing and pulse?" Joseph asked Mary Nicole, not knowing what else to do.

"Yes. They're fine. It's just like she's asleep, except that she won't wake up."

Joseph looked around and spotted Jason.

"Jayce, would you go and get Doug and his group from the blue gray door? Kenyon and I have stumbled onto something and I'm going to need everyone here to help us reason it out."

Jason nodded once, then dashed out of the room.

"But what about Tammy? Isn't there something we can do for her? She won't wake up." Mary Nicole urged Joseph to understand.

"Just stay with her and keep her comfortable. Hopefully when we get everyone working on this together, we'll be able to come up with something more that we can do." Joseph said quietly to her, then turned to the group and said, "Everyone, please sit down. As soon as Doug, Marissa and Roxie get here, we're going to have a brainstorming session to try and figure all of this out."

There were several incredulous looks, but people slowly started across the room to take their seats.

"We're here. What's going on?" Jason asked as he rushed into the meeting room, followed by those he had been sent to retrieve.

"If everyone will sit down, I'll tell you what we've been able to discover." Joseph said as he tried to get his thoughts into some sort of order.

After a moment, everyone seemed to be settled into place. Mary Nicole was still kneeling beside Tammy, but everyone else was seated in chairs.

"I know that this is going to sound... well, crazy, but that's why I'm bringing it up to all of you. I think that I might have come up with another scenario to explain why we're here."

That caught the attention of everyone in the meeting hall.

"Just a little bit ago, I asked Aaron to help me with something." Joseph glanced in Aaron's direction before continuing, "After I asked him for his help, I realized that I'd never met Aaron before and no one had told me his name. I just somehow *knew* it."

Uncertain glances flashed around the tables and the silent consensus was that Joseph appeared to be going off the deep end.

"I know what it sounds like, but hear me out. After the thing with Aaron, Kenyon and I tried a little experiment and I was able to do it again. I *knew* things about him that I couldn't possibly know."

Joseph could tell by people's expressions that they weren't far from dismissing what he was saying entirely.

He quickly scanned the group and finally found one person to focus on.

"Landra, your last name is Piet. You're from Seattle, Washington. Your mother's maiden name is Clark and your next door neighbor has a son named David who's fourteen, just like you are."

"Is that right?" Zarah asked Landra uncertainly.

"Yeah." Landra whispered, wilting under the stares of all the people in the room.

"Kelly. Your last name is Brighton and you're from Norman, Oklahoma. Even though you live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood, your parents don't seem to enjoy it. They're bitter and angry, even though they never say exactly why that is."

"How do you know that?" Kelly barked.

"That's why I wanted to talk to all of you. This... ability, seems like something straight out of a sci fi movie. It can't be real, but it's hard to deny it when it seems to work one hundred percent of the time."

"Could this be the next stage of the psychological experiment? Them making us think that we're psychic or something?" Brianna asked speculatively.

"Yes. Kenyon and I discussed the possibility that I might have been given the information about different people during the last blackout and instructed to have this 'realization', possibly to distract us from other things."

"Except that Joseph had information about me that no one could have possibly known." Kenyon interjected, then continued, "And the idea that they could *program* me to ask particular obscure questions so that Joseph could provide the right answers sounds unreasonable to me. That would be a whole lot of work for very little payoff, since you couldn't honestly count it as *proof* of anything."

"Where am I from?" A girl asked challengingly.

"Your name is Jeanna Leann Cade and you're from Breckenridge, Texas. Your great-great-grandfather was from County Donegal, Ireland. He faced a

lot of discrimination when he came to the United States and almost didn't survive to marry and start a family."

"Joseph, listen to me, you need to come back to the here and now." Kenyon said urgently.

Everyone watched as an expression of puzzlement crossed Joseph's face.

"To me it looks like the farther back he goes, the more he can see and the more likely he is to get lost in it." Kenyon explained to those watching.

"Was he right about your great-great-grandfather?" Zarah asked Jeanna cautiously.

"Maybe. I heard that one of my ancestors was from Ireland, but that's all I know about it."

"But he was right about everything else?"

"Yes."

"Sorry. We've got too much to do for me to be drifting away like that. If anyone else would like an amazing demonstration, talk to me after we're done with the meeting." Joseph said as he looked around.

"You said that you might have come up with a reason for us being here." A brown haired girl said anxiously.

"Yes. I mean, it's possible. What I was thinking is that if this thing that I have is a legitimate psychic ability, then I can see why someone, either from the government or another organization, might want to have complete control of me, and also might want to have access to my genetic material."

"Are you saying that you think we're all psychic?" Zarah asked cautiously.

"I don't know about that. But what if we all had that genetic potential? Then the next thing to do would be to put us in a situation where that potential might be realized."

"By abducting us and ramping up the stress." Zarah supplied thoughtfully as she seemed to be a million miles away, evaluating the permutations of what Joseph was suggesting.

"If you can see things and know things psychically, can't you just *know* where we are and how we got here?" Doug asked reasonably.

"So far, I've only been able to do it with people. I can look at you and know that you're from Empire, Ohio. In fact, I can even tell you about who lived in your house before your family moved there... wait. I'm getting lost in it, again. What I'm trying to say is that I haven't learned everything that I can do with it, yet. Once I've worked with it, I *might* be able to do that."

"So you can tell about where I was when I was six years old, but you can't tell me about what was being done to me day before yesterday?" Doug asked cautiously, to confirm his understanding.

"Yes. I can see the pony rides at your sixth birthday party at the local park as clearly as if I had been invited to it, but the most recent thing I can pick up from you is... I'm getting a flash about you being threatened by an older guy at school... Was that last year?"

"Year before last."

"I don't know anything about you more recent than that."

"You're saying that you think that all of us have the *potential* to be psychic?" Zarah asked to verify her understanding.

"That's what I'm proposing. I could be totally wrong. But if I am, I'm counting on all of you to help me figure out why that is."

"What about Tammy?" Mary Nicole asked from beside Tammy's prone form.

"I don't have any evidence to support this, but I think it may be possible that she's passed out because she has an ability that's awakening." Joseph responded.

"Why do you think that?" Zarah asked curiously, not disagreeing with him but honestly wanting to understand his reasoning.

"She was listening at that wall, trying as hard as she could to hear Wade. No one else could hear him. All of a sudden, she passed out. If she were really hearing him, it might have been on some psychic level that the rest of us aren't aware of." Joseph explained.

Zarah seemed to be considering his words carefully and finally asked, "But since you seem to have your psychic ability up and running, why couldn't you hear Wade, too?"

"I don't know. I guess that I'm just trying to come up with explanations that fit the circumstances."

"Maybe it's because she's green." Jude said abruptly.

Zarah turned her inquiring gaze on him, silently asking for more of an explanation.

"What if the colors that we're wearing aren't random. What if they indicate the type of psychic ability that each of us have the potential to develop?" Jude responded.

"If that were the case, then most of the people in here would have the same ability as Joseph, the ability to see a person's past." Zarah quietly reasoned.

Jude turned to fully face Joseph and asked, "How do you do it? How do you make it work?"

"I don't know. When I wanted to know something about someone, I just all of a sudden knew it."

"Zarah. What's my last name?" Jude asked as he looked her in the eyes.

"Wicks. But you told us that at the meeting." Zarah said simply.

"Can you tell us about his home? Where is he from?" Joseph prompted.

After a moment to consider, Zarah shook her head as she quietly responded, "I don't know. Maybe I can't do it."

"Let me give you a little help. He's from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. What color is his house?" Joseph asked in a leading tone.

At Jude's curious look, Joseph put a finger to his lips, indicating for him to remain silent.

"No. That's not right."

"What's not right?"

"He's not from Pennsylvania."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. He just isn't."

"What color is his house?"

"Peachy, sandstone... coral. I don't know exactly what the color is, but all the houses around it are the same color, made from the same cookie cutter design."

"Are they old houses?"

"No. Not that old. Ten or fifteen years, at most. The land was just dry and sunbaked before that. No one lived there."

"Chandler, Arizona." Leah said abruptly.

"Yeah! That's it!" Zarah said with a relieved smile.

"What was that?" Joseph asked as he glanced at Leah curiously.

"That's where she's seeing. Chandler, Arizona."

"Jude? Is that right?" Joseph asked, already knowing the answer, but wanting him to confirm it for the others.

"Yeah."

Joseph then turned to face Leah and asked, "How did you know what Zarah was seeing?"

"I don't know. I could just see her struggling, trying to get a clear image and I wanted to help."

"This proves what you were saying, doesn't it?" Zarah speculated.

"It makes it much more likely." Joseph confirmed, then added, "Based on what we've seen so far, it seems to me that the blues appear to have some sort of... clairvoyant ability to look into the past."

"What about the greens?" Zarah asked as she looked at Leah with concern.

"My first guess, based on what's happened to Tammy and Leah is that they've got some sort of telepathy."

"How do you figure that?" Kenyon asked, wanting to understand his reasoning.

"Tammy said that she could hear Wade calling to her, even though no one else could hear anything at all, no matter how hard we tried. I think it's possible that she might have been telepathically reaching out to him and making some sort of vague telepathic contact, or at least sensing his presence. When Leah was worried about Zarah, she was able to see what Zarah was trying to focus on inside her mind."

"If the blues are clairvoyant and the greens are telepathic, what about the grays?" Marissa asked anxiously from Roxie's side.

"I have no idea." Joseph admitted.

"If I were going to guess, I'd say that we're probably empathic." Jason reluctantly interjected.

"Why would you think that?" Joseph asked with surprise.

"Because I've had it my whole life. I've just never told anyone before. For the most part, I just try to ignore it."

"So you can feel what I'm feeling?"

"No. Not exactly. My empathy isn't like what the comic books talk about. I don't feel other people's emotions, I can just sometimes feel what other people are physically feeling."

"So, if someone's hurt, you feel their pain?"

"Yeah. Sympathy pains."

Kenyon looked to Jason and asked, "Did you feel it when I got all chewed up?"

"No. I have to be close to someone to feel their feelings. By the time I met you, you must have been past most of the pain."

"The drugs that they gave us probably didn't help, either." Joseph added.

"That's possible. But the drugs made us do things that we wouldn't have done, otherwise. That put extra stress on us, either making us regret the things that we'd done or making us worry about the people that we'd become close to." Jason said thoughtfully.

"I can't do it." One of the girls in the group said with frustration.

"What's that, Teresa?" Joseph asked curiously.

"I can't make myself see your past or anything about you." She answered.

"Maybe you can't do it, yet. Or maybe your ability is different. Stop trying for a little bit and you might just start *knowing* things without realizing it, at first."

Zarah considered for a moment then asked, "Joseph, since you've had your ability the longest, could you try something for me?"

"What's that?" Joseph asked in return.

"I'm trying to get a sense of the 'range' of our abilities. You obviously don't have to be in physical contact with someone to 'read' them. But can you do it to someone who's not in the same room with you?"

"I haven't tried."

"Try Korbin. See if you can get any information about him."

"Um... okay. I'll try." Joseph said as he tried to focus on an image of Korbin in his mind's eye.

Everyone waited as Joseph tried to come up with any new information.

Kenyon walked closer to Joseph's side and quietly asked, "What is Korbin's last name?"

"I don't know." Joseph said absently as he tried to focus his concentration.

"Where is he from?" Kenyon continued in the same quiet tone.

Joseph slowly shook his head.

"What color was the house where he grew up?"

"I can't do it. I'm not getting any answers." Joseph said as he opened his eyes.

"Which might mean that you have to have a line of sight for it to work." Zarah speculated.

"While I guess that's possible, I can't think of any reason *why* it should have that limitation."

"Well, since I have to be close to someone for my empathy thing to work, maybe it's just like that and you're out of range." Jason speculated.

"Yes. That sounds more likely to me."

"Okay. Someone just walked into the hallway, out of your line of sight. Can you tell me anything about them?" A blond girl from the group called out, drawing all attention to her.

Joseph involuntarily looked toward the hallway as Kenyon quietly asked, "First name?"

"Marcus... um, he goes by Mark." Joseph answered.

"Last?"

"Timmerland... without a 'B'."

"Middle?"

"Evan."

Kenyon looked at the girl inquiringly.

"His first name is Mark, I'll have to ask him about the rest." The girl said before dashing away.

"He's from Ringgold, Georgia. The people where he lives are crazy, hardcore evangelicals that make the Southern Baptists look liberal."

"Yeah. That sounds like my home." Mark said with a smile as he walked into the room.

"What's your full name?" Kenyon asked Mark as he approached.

"Marcus Evan Timmerland... without a 'B'." He responded automatically, then thought to add, "I go by Mark."

There were a few chuckles, due to Joseph's accurate reading.

"I guess that's settled. Thanks, Alia."

"Joseph. If you don't have to be able to see someone, could you see if you can read Wade?" Mary Nicole asked from Tammy's side.

"I wouldn't mind trying, but I don't know what good it would do."

"Since your ability seems to have a 'range', maybe you could see if Wade's on the other side of this wall or not." Mary Nicole urged him to understand.

Joseph looked toward Kenyon, to be sure that he was going to help, before answering, "Since I don't know what my range is, I don't know how much good it will do, but I don't mind trying."

Both Joseph and Kenyon walked to join Mary Nicole and Tammy beside the wall before Kenyon quietly asked, "What can you tell me about Wade? What's his last name?"

"I don't know."

"What's his middle name?"

Joseph concentrated for a moment, then said, "I'm not getting anything."

"Where is he from?"

After another moment of concentration, Joseph quietly said, "It's just like with Korbin. I'm not getting anything at all."

"Do you think it would make any difference if Wade were passed out, like Tammy is?" Zarah asked speculatively.

Joseph looked at Tammy, then shook his head and said, "I can read Tammy just as clearly as anyone else. If Wade's on the other side of the wall, I should probably be able to read him, too."

"If he passed out, like Tammy did, maybe they took him to his room." Doug suggested.

"That's possible. All I know is that I can't get a reading on him."

"Why don't you come over here and sit down? You don't look too steady." Kenyon said as he guided Joseph to walk toward the tables.

"Yeah. Doing that messes with my head. It kind of reminds me of overusing a muscle that you're not used to using."

"Go ahead and sit down. Give yourself a few minutes to recover before you give yourself a brain cramp."

"Hold on. I feel something."

"What's that?"

Joseph looked around the room, then started walking toward the corner which was diagonal across the room from where Mary Nicole and Tammy were located.

"What is it, Joseph?"

"I guess I was still thinking about Wade, in the back of my mind. All of a sudden, I'm getting information about him."

"How is he?" Leah asked with concern from nearby.

"I have no idea. All I know is that *now* he seems to be in range."

Several of those present looked from where Mary Nicole was kneeling, across the room to the corner where Joseph was now standing, facing the wall.

"If Wade's in range, can you get any idea of how far away he is or in what direction?" Kenyon asked as he watched Joseph with concern.

"No. Not really. I just know that over here I'm able to 'read' him a little bit."

"He must be on the other side of this wall." Leah said in realization.

"We can't automatically assume that. We don't know Joseph's range or how this thing really works." Kenyon gently reminded her.

"But if Joseph can 'read' Wade over here, that must mean that Wade's in the inner room that Joseph's been talking about." Zarah interjected.

"That's *possible*. But there are still too many unknowns for us to be accepting that as a fact." Kenyon cautioned her to understand.

"William Wade Warren from Scituate, Rhode Island. Although the land has been in his family for generations, the house is a prefab that was put on the property when he was two or three years old."

"Joseph, you're tired. You don't need to be going too deep right now." Kenyon warned.

"That's when his parents bought Duke for him. He got the new dog when they moved into their new house." Zarah said as she stepped away from Leah, to Joseph's side.

"Watch out, Zarah. It's easy to get lost in it if you go too deep." Kenyon told her quickly.

"Duke always had such a good time when they went camping. Wade and Duke would go off into the woods for hours at a time." Doug said in a trancelike voice as he stepped closer to face the wall.

"Everyone! You need to stop!"

"Wade would tell his parents that he and Duke were going to get firewood and when he'd return four or five hours later, he'd barely have an armload of sticks." Alia said with a distant smile as she stepped to Doug's side.

"Jude, help me get them away from this wall. We need to get them out of range." Kenyon said as he took firm hold of Joseph's shoulders and guided him to walk away.

"Wade's grandfather's house burned down in nineteen fifty-three. They lost everything." Marissa said quietly.

"Oh no! Not you, too. Come on. We need to get you away from here." Roxie said as she urged Marissa to walk with her.

"Jason! Help us!" Kenyon commanded as he guided Joseph across the room. As Kenyon spoke the words, Jason suddenly grabbed his abdomen. All the color seemed to wash out of him as he crumpled to the floor.

"What happened?" Zarah slowly asked as Leah was guiding her to walk.

"That thing that Joseph does when he zones out, you were all doing it." Leah gently explained, then her eyes went wide as she suddenly looked toward the corner of the room and gasped, "Oh crap!"

Chapter 8

"Oh, fuck!" Joseph said as he slowly opened his eyes.

The throb of his headache was monumental.

He contemplated staying in his bed, but reasoned that as bad as he felt, that laying in bed wasn't likely to improve his situation.

It seemed to take every bit of his energy and willpower to force his body to move at all.

Before he could take the few steps to his bathroom, he noticed an ache in his groin. The sensation made him stop to catch his breath and reassess his decision to get out of bed in the first place.

He couldn't say that what he was feeling was 'pain', in the sense of an injury, but it was more like the ache of an overused muscle or possibly a recent injury that was in the process of healing.

As he came more awake, he was also aware of something else. It wasn't pain, but it was unfamiliar and it took a moment for his sleep fogged mind to process what it could possibly be.

In a sudden burst of insight, he came to the realization that what he was feeling was the sensation that Jason had described. He felt uncomfortably 'stretched', back there. In that moment, he knew without a doubt that he had been anally violated. It was yet another indignity that he would have to endure and somehow find a way to deal with.

A combination of the throb of his headache and the insistence of his bladder helped to snap him out of his thoughts and continue on his way to the bathroom.

When he arrived at his destination, he reluctantly looked down at his penis. In the back of his mind he half expected to find himself mutilated. He realized at that moment that he had purposefully not looked down at himself when he felt the ache for fear of what he might find.

When he looked, he was surprised to see that his penis was nearly flaccid and seemed to have been stretched well beyond its usual proportions. Although he was unfamiliar with such things, he speculated that some sort of suction device might have been used on him. Combining the appearance of his grossly misshapen penis with what he was feeling, he concluded that he must have been 'milked' for hours or days on end. He suspected that if he were somehow able to manage an erection and achieve orgasm, that he would probably ejaculate dust.

The urge to empty his bladder once again asserted itself and he finally got about his business.

Once that had been concluded, he walked to the sink and was only mildly surprised to see that the circles under his eyes were far worse than they had been when he'd first arrived. He also noted the pinkness of his cheeks, which looked strangely like they had been sunburned. Although there wasn't any 'sting', it still looked as though he'd spent too much time outside.

He continued his self-inspection and noticed that he appeared to be clean shaven. It was less of a surprise this time, although it served to confirm that he had been unconscious long enough to *need* a shave. That being the case, he couldn't begin to estimate how long he might have been blacked out.

Looking down to his arms, he found six injection sites, three on each arm. All of them appeared to be fresh, and yet another way of estimating the passage of time had seemingly been circumvented.

A knock on the door startled Joseph out of his contemplation in front of the mirror.

"Who is it?" Joseph asked as he looked out the bathroom door.

"Jason."

"Come on in." Joseph said as he forced himself to step away from the sink.

As Jason walked into the room, he was shocked to see Joseph standing before him naked.

"Sorry... I'm just..." Joseph trailed off, not knowing how to explain what he was thinking or feeling in that moment.

"It's okay, Joe. I'm right there with you." Jason said frankly.

Joseph looked at him with concern and realized that Jason appeared not only to have the same dark circles under his eyes, but also the same pinkness on his cheeks, suggesting that he'd been out in the sun.

Joseph walked past Jason to the white, molded plastic dresser to get a pair of boxer shorts before asking, "How are you doing, Jayce?"

"I'm so tired that I can barely move." Jason said honestly.

"Yeah." Joseph muttered.

"It happened... Just like you said." Jason said quietly.

"What's that?" Joseph asked curiously as he pulled a tee shirt on, over his head.

"I've checked on a few of the girls, they're all in pain. From what they've told me, it's like the worst case of cramps they've ever had in their lives." Jason said quietly.

"Have you been awake long?" Joseph asked curiously.

"About half an hour, I guess." Jason said slowly.

Joseph looked at him curiously, then remembered something. After taking a fresh pair of coveralls out of the closet, he quietly asked, "Could you feel their pain?"

"Yeah. Every bit of it." Jason reluctantly admitted.

"Sorry." Joseph said weakly, not knowing what else to say.

"I just wish that there was something that I could do to help them." Jason said quietly.

"Figuring this out and getting us the hell out of here might be a good start." Joseph said frankly as he walked to his bed and sat down to pull on his socks.

"I just realized, our beds are back to like they were before." Jason said suddenly.

"Oh, yeah." Joseph said as he looked around, then continued, "I guess that everything gets reset back to zero every time there's a blackout."

"Why?" Jason asked in confusion.

Joseph shrugged.

"I mean, why would they go to the trouble? Why not just leave the beds where we put them?" Jason asked reasonably.

Joseph thought for a moment, then said, "I guess that it could be another way to throw us off balance, you know, kind of like the creepy repetition in that movie 'Groundhog Day'."

"That seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to just to make us feel weird." Jason said frankly.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a way for them to be sure that we're not hiding something, you know, like when prisoners try to tunnel out of a jail cell. If everything's always put back to being the same, it's less likely that we'll be able to hide our escape plan from them." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"That sounds a little more reasonable." Jason said speculatively.

"Wait! Did you wake up back in your own room?" Joseph asked suddenly.

"Yeah."

"So does that mean that we're not cut off from the other sections anymore?" Joseph asked hopefully.

"We don't seem to be. I've only been to the Gray and Purple room and here, so far." Jason said seriously.

"Thanks for checking on me, Jayce. It means a lot to me." Joseph said honestly.

"After losing my parents, the way I did, then the foster homes and stuff, I guess I got the feeling that no one could ever love me. And that if I ever loved anyone else, that they'd be taken away from me." Jason said introspectively.

"Forever isn't really forever. It's just for as long as we've got. It's up to us to make it count for something." Joseph said as he stood.

As Joseph walked into the hall, Jason automatically followed.

"Are we going to check on Kenyon?" Jason asked curiously when he noticed which direction Joseph was going.

"Unless you have some other stops that you need to make first." Joseph confirmed.

"I already checked on Autumn and Karen. There's nothing I can do for them and it hurts me to be around them, so..." Jason trailed off with a shrug.

"I'd really like to check on Wade, since we're headed that way. The last thing I remember before the blackout was 'reading' his history. I'd like to see if we can make any sense of that." Joseph said slowly.

"Yeah. I can't remember that very well." Jason said honestly.

"Me either. I remember kind of going into a trance while I was focusing on Wade and then I woke up in my bed." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"So, do you think that all that ESP stuff is why we're really here?" Jason asked curiously.

"Yeah. It's the only theory that we've come up with that makes sense." Joseph said simply.

"Except that it doesn't." Jason added.

"How's that?" Joseph asked curiously.

"If they had us hypnotized anyway, why bring us here and lock us up? They could have collected our genetic material whenever they wanted to." Jason said frankly.

"I agree that there's probably a lot more to it than we're seeing. But I still think that the ESP is probably at the root of it all. Someone, somewhere wants to breed a psychic army who will be under their control. We're a step on the way to that..." Joseph trailed off as they entered the Blue and Green meeting room.

"Do you know what's going on?" Mark asked suddenly.

"It's impossible to know for sure, but it appears that the girls have had their eggs harvested. Now they're in bed, trying to recover. It looks like we have

access to the other parts of the station now... that's about all we know so far." Joseph finished uncertainly, then looked at Jason with question.

"But what about what they did to us? What was that all about?" Mark asked insistently.

"I think they milked us." Joseph said simply.

"Through our assholes?" Mark asked incredulously.

"I honestly don't know what that's about, but whatever it is, they did it to me, too." Joseph said wearily.

"What can we do now?" Doug asked anxiously.

"Well, Jason and I have a few people to check on. If you guys don't have anything better to do, could you check the Blue hallway and check on how the girls are doing and maybe see if you can tell if we're missing anyone?" Joseph asked hopefully.

"I can't read you anymore." Aaron said suddenly.

"What was that?" Joseph asked curiously.

"Before we... blacked out, I could look at you and if I wanted to know something, I'd just know it. Now... I don't." Aaron said with difficulty.

Joseph looked at Aaron for a long moment, then cautiously said, "I can't do it, either. Maybe we have to be in a certain frame of mind or under a certain level of stress for it to work."

"Or, maybe, they drugged you to keep you from using your new ability against them." Jason said speculatively.

Joseph looked at Jason with surprise at the suggestion.

"They put you under enough stress so that your ability would wake up, but I'm sure that they wouldn't want you to become powerful enough to figure out who *they* are and what *they're* up to." Jason said reasonably.

"Now that they know that I've fulfilled my genetic potential, they've psychically blinded me so I'm not a threat to them." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"I'm saying that it's a possibility. I mean, it sounds reasonable to me." Jason confirmed.

Joseph nodded, then looked to the others dressed in blue and said, "If you'll check on the other Blues, we're going to make a round of the station. We'll fill you in on what we found when we get back."

"I was working on doing a headcount of the Blues before we blacked out. If anyone's missing, I should be able to tell."

"Thanks, Aaron. I appreciate your help." Joseph said sincerely, then looked to Jason to see if he were ready to go.

A single nod was Jason's only response.

"Is it bothering you?" Joseph asked quietly.

"What's that?" Jason asked cautiously.

"The pain. Can you feel it out here in the hallway?" Joseph asked quietly.

"Only a little bit. Don't worry, I can handle it." Jason assured him.

"I need to check on Wade. Would you feel more comfortable waiting out here?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"No. But if you're going to be checking on too many of the girls, I may need to hang back."

"Wade? Can we come in?" Joseph called from outside the closed door.

"What?" Wade asked groggily.

"It's Joseph. Jason and I stopped by to see how you're doing. Can we come in?" Joseph asked patiently.

"Yeah. I guess." Wade said uncertainly.

Joseph cautiously opened the door and stepped inside to find Wade in bed with his eyes closed.

"How are you doing?" Joseph asked quietly, suspecting that Wade probably had a headache, much like the one that he had woken with.

"I feel like shit." Wade said honestly.

"There's a lot of that going around." Jason said frankly.

Joseph nodded his agreement, then said, "A lot of things have happened since the last time I saw you. Let me know when you're up to talking about it."

"I had the weirdest dream. We were cut off from the Blue and Green room and the Yellow hallway. I was at the wall where the door used to be and then I started hearing all kinds of voices... and then I passed out." Wade said with difficulty.

"Yeah. That happened." Joseph said simply.

"What?" Wade asked as he fought to open his eyes.

"There were walls where the doors should be and we were all trapped. Tammy was in the Blue section. She was convinced that she could hear you, then she passed out... probably when you did."

"Oh my God! I feel horrible!" Wade said as he closed his eyes again.

"From what Jason and I have been able to put together, it seems like anyone who demonstrated any kind of psychic ability has been drugged to prevent them from using it anymore." Joseph said seriously.

"Wait. What?" Wade asked with confusion.

"It seems that the colors that we were assigned have to do with our psychic potential. If we're right, then you and all the other Greens are telepathic." Joseph said simply.

"Do you have any idea of how crazy that sounds?" Wade asked quietly.

"Yes. But how crazy is it to imagine that two hundred kids would be kidnapped, drugged and brought to a secret facility from a nineteen sixties sci fi movie? If those two hundred kids had been bred to be some kind of psychic army, how much *more* crazy would that be?" Joseph asked reasonably.

"You're nuts." Wade said half-heartedly before throwing off his blanket and forcing himself to a sitting position.

"Um, Wade..." Jason began to say, but stopped at Joseph's shaking head.

"What?" Wade asked with an annoyed look at Jason.

Before Jason or Joseph could answer, Wade followed Jason's concerned gaze.

"Holy fucking shit!" Wade exclaimed as he looked down at his grossly misshapen penis.

"Yeah. It looks like we all got milked... a lot." Joseph quietly added.

There was a long moment of silence, then Wade forced himself to put his feet on the floor, then tried to make his way to standing.

Seeing that Wade was having difficulty, both Jason and Joseph hurried to his aid and helped him to stand.

"Hold on. I'm dizzy." Wade said as he closed his eyes and fought to take in long slow breaths.

"Yeah. I'm guessing that that's the drugs that they're using to suppress our psychic abilities. They probably use something different or a whole lot stronger to suppress telepathy." Joseph said speculatively.

"Lucky me." Wade said between breaths.

"Do you want us to help you to the bathroom?" Joseph asked quietly.

"No. Just give me a minute. I think I can do it." Wade said slowly, then fought to open his eyes again.

Joseph and Jason tentatively let go of Wade's arms, ready to grab him if it looked as though he were about to lose his balance again.

"So, did you say that they did this to all the Greens?" Wade asked as he slowly walked toward the bathroom.

"You're the only Green that we've talked to. But if I were going to guess, I'd say that they probably drugged any of the Greens who gave any evidence of their psychic abilities awakening." Joseph said slowly.

Wade finally made his way into the bathroom on shaking legs and pulled the bathroom door closed behind him.

"Did you guys get something jammed up your asses, too?" Wade asked irritably through the door.

"Yes. I get the feeling that it happened to most, if not all, the guys." Joseph called after him.

"What are you going to do now?" Wade asked loudly.

"Right now, we're going to go check on Kenyon. After that, we're probably going to make a round of the station to see how everyone is doing and see if anyone's noticed anyone else missing." Joseph said frankly.

"Did you check on Tammy?" Wade asked as he stepped out of the bathroom.

"No. You're the first Green that we've checked on." Joseph said honestly.

Wade seemed to be more steady on his feet as he walked through the room.

Jason and Joseph moved out of the way to allow Wade access to his dresser and closet.

"Let me see if I got this right. You think that all of us have psychic abilities?" Wade asked curiously as he began to gather clothes.

"Yes. That's how it seems." Joseph confirmed.

"The Greens are telepathic?" Wade asked cautiously.

"That's what it looked like to me."

"What about the Blues?" Wade asked curiously as he moved to the closet and took down a pair of coveralls.

"We can look at someone and see their past." Joseph said weakly.

"Really?" Wade asked with confusion.

"We're just going on what we experienced before the blackout, but that's how it seemed." Joseph said frankly.

"What can you see about my past?" Wade asked curiously.

"I can't see anything, right now. I think they drugged me to keep me from using it." Joseph said honestly.

"But I remember you getting some information about Wade, right before you blacked out." Jason helpfully provided.

"Oh, yeah. Um... it's a little fuzzy, but let me see what I remember."

Joseph said thoughtfully.

Wade began to pull on his clothes as he waited for Joseph to continue.

"Scituate, Rhode Island... prefab house when you were two or three years old... and your dog, Duke. That's really all I can remember." Joseph said with difficulty.

"And there was something about camping." Jason quietly added.

"You can do it, too? You're not Blue." Wade said suspiciously.

"No. I can't do it. I was just there when the Blues were looking at your history and overheard them talking about it." Jason said honestly.

"Yeah. Jayce's ability is to feel what other people are feeling." Joseph explained.

"Physically. I can't feel other people's emotions." Jason quickly added.

"Yeah." Joseph agreed.

"If you can feel what I'm feeling, I don't envy you." Wade said frankly.

"Joseph and I both felt a lot like you do when we woke up, except that neither of us were as dizzy as you are." Jason said honestly.

"You really *can* feel what I'm feeling." Wade said with surprise.

"Yeah. I can only think of one circumstance when that might be a good thing." Joseph said as he looked at Jason with concern.

"What..." Jason began to ask, then his face slightly reddened as he realized what Joseph was inferring.

"I'm guessing that you're heading toward the Yellow and Green room." Wade said seriously.

"Yes. We'll be passing through there to check on Kenyon." Joseph said seriously.

"I'll walk down with you. I'd like to check on Stone and Alyssa." Wade said simply.

"Sounds good." Joseph said, then looked to see if Jason were ready to leave, too.

When they reached the Yellow and Green room, the only people present were two boys dressed in green who Joseph didn't know.

"How's it going, guys?" Wade asked as they approached.

"I wonder if this is what a hangover feels like." One of the boys said wearily.

"Actually, a hangover feels quite a bit worse." Jason said frankly.

Both boys looked at him with surprise at the declaration.

"I just know. Okay?" Jason said before looking away.

"You know where to find us if you need us." Joseph said as he looked at Wade.

"Yeah. I got this." Wade assured him.

Joseph nodded, then started walking with Jason down the Yellow hallway.

"It's weird not having the girls around." Jason said quietly as they walked.

"I know. It feels so wrong." Joseph said nervously.

"Have you thought of anything that we can do to help them?" Jason asked quietly.

"You mean, besides breaking them out of this place and taking them somewhere that no one will try to steal their eggs?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Besides that."

"No. I haven't."

Neither were surprised when they entered the Yellow and Orange room and found it vacant.

"I feel like there's something more that we should do." Jason said anxiously.

"I know. But the most we could do right now is wake them up and ask them questions that we already know the answers to. That isn't going to help anyone." Joseph said frankly.

"It might help if they knew that someone was concerned about what they're going through and that they're not alone." Jason said quietly.

"I think that with the situation that we're in, we don't have the luxury of indulging in empty gestures. If there's something we can do to help, we'll help. If there's not, then we need to devote our time and energy to getting all of us out of here." Joseph said seriously.

"Meanie." Jason said with a teasing grin.

Joseph felt his heart melt at the sight.

As they stopped outside Kenyon's door, Joseph quietly said, "After going over all the theories about what's being done to us, there's only one conclusion that I can realistically come to. Our genetic material is being harvested because they don't intend on keeping us alive to breed us. We don't have a lot of time."

After a moment to consider, Jason slowly nodded, then said, "We need to stay on task."

"Right." Joseph confirmed before gently knocking on the door.

When there was no answer, Joseph knocked louder, then called out, "Kenyon? Can we come in?"

After waiting a moment, Joseph pulled the door aside and cautiously walked into the room.

Kenyon appeared to be fast asleep in his bed.

"Kenyon?" Joseph asked quietly as he walked further into the room and up to Kenyon's bedside.

Again, there was no answer.

"Jason, can you feel anything? Is he hurt?" Joseph asked with concern.

"Would you mind standing back? If you're too close, I won't be able to feel what's you and what's him." Jason said quietly.

"Yeah." Joseph said as he immediately backed away.

Jason knelt at Kenyon's bedside and closed his eyes as he began to concentrate.

Joseph waited anxiously, especially worried after what had happened to Kenyon the last time that they'd blacked out.

Jason slowly began to shake his head as he raised his hands so that they were about four inches from Kenyon's abdomen.

"What's wrong?" Joseph whispered.

"It's hard for me to see past my own pain to his, but it *seems* like he's not injured at all." Jason said slowly.

"Then why won't he wake up?" Joseph asked plaintively.

"I don't..." Jason began to say when Kenyon suddenly grabbed his wrists.

"Kenyon?" Joseph asked hopefully.

Rather than responding, Kenyon twisted and pulled Jason's wrists, guiding him off the floor and up onto the bed.

"I don't think he's awake." Jason said cautiously as he followed Kenyon's lead.

Once Jason was fully up on the bed, Kenyon released his wrists, then placed one arm around him.

"If he's still asleep, then I'm guessing that his subconscious has taken a liking to you." Joseph said hesitantly.

"Should I try to wake him up?" Jason asked as he felt Kenyon's hand stop moving, right on his butt.

"Let's wait a minute. With all the weirdness that we've already been through, this might end up being something significant." Joseph said slowly.

"Um... Joe? He just put his hand through the fly of my coveralls." Jason said unsteadily.

"What's he doing?" Joseph asked, not sure that he wanted to know.

"Nothing. He just put his hand in there and stopped." Jason said slowly, then gasped with surprise before adding, "It's hot."

"Yeah. Don't rub it in." Joseph said grumpily, then added, "If he was awake, he'd be doing that to me."

"No, not sexy hot. Thermal, hot. If it gets any hotter, he's going to burn me." Jason fought to explain.

"Does it hurt?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"I don't know... almost. But, do you know what it feels like when you put a heating pad on a sore muscle and it makes it feel better?"

"Yeah."

"That's almost what it feels like." Jason said slowly.

There was a long silent moment as Joseph watched.

Neither Jason nor Kenyon moved.

Finally, Joseph quietly asked, "How does your ache feel now?"

"I don't know. With his hands where they are, I really can't feel it." Jason said honestly.

"What if the 'Oranges' are psychic healers?" Joseph asked slowly.

Jason considered for a moment, then quietly asked, "Do you think that's really possible?"

"When we woke up 'yesterday', Kenyon's dick was all healed up, even though he was the person who was hurt the most in the last blackout." Joseph said slowly.

"So, right now he's healing me, in his sleep?" Jason asked dubiously.

"Yeah. That's what it looks like to me. But you're the guy with the physical empathy thing, you'd probably be able to tell that better than I could." Joseph said honestly.

"What if his healing makes him weaker? That might be why he hasn't been able to wake up, he's been using all his energy healing his own damage."

Jason said suddenly.

"Or, maybe he can only heal while he's sleeping. When he healed his dick and while he's healing you right now, he's asleep." Joseph said reasonably.

"That seems like a really weird limitation for a psychic ability." Jason said honestly.

"If a psychic ability can have *any* limitation, then one is as realistic as any other. The people behind this are forcing genetic patterns together hoping for a specific result, it's reasonable to assume that unforeseen things like a bizarre limitation could happen in the process." Joseph said frankly.

"It stopped." Jason said quietly.

"Do you need help getting untangled?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Um, yeah. I don't want to wake him up if I don't have to. Could you move his hand off my butt?" Jason asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I've got it." Joseph said as he moved to Jason's side.

"I think you're right. Now that I don't feel the warmth anymore, I really *do* feel better. I think that he actually healed me." Jason said as he slowly worked his way out of Kenyon's bed.

"Um...Jayce? He got me." Joseph said nervously.

"What? Oh..." Jason said as he realized what had happened.

"What should I do?" Joseph asked as Kenyon began to pull on his wrist.

"Go along with it." Jason said as he took a few steps back, so as not to get into Joseph's way.

"But what if this is hurting him or draining his energy?" Joseph asked as he was guided into the bed beside Kenyon.

"We don't have any way of knowing that, at this point. For all we know, this could be *helping* him." Jason said honestly.

"Well, if we're going to do this, why don't you get over here and see if you can see what he's doing while he's doing it?" Joseph asked as Kenyon seemed to be trying to get him settled into place.

"Yeah. There's a chance that we'll be able to get some answers." Jason said as he moved closer.

"I'm betting on more questions, but I still think that it's worth a try." Joseph said frankly, then quickly added, "But if you see that it's hurting Kenyon in any way, I want you to tell me."

"There he goes. I can feel it." Jason said quietly.

As he heard Jason's words, Joseph could feel the warmth that Jason had described. As he thought about the sensation of having a heating pad on sore muscles, he had to agree that the feeling was much the same.

"How's he doing?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"I'm fine." Kenyon answered.

"How do you feel? Do you want me to move?" Joseph asked as he turned his head to see that Kenyon was looking at him.

"No. I don't want you to move. In fact, I wouldn't mind waking up like this every morning." Kenyon said warmly.

"How do you feel, Kenyon? Are you in pain? Do you feel any weakness?" Jason asked carefully.

"No. I feel wonderful, like I just had the deepest, most amazing sleep ever." Kenyon said with a warm smile, then glanced down and was surprised to find that he had one of his hands inside the fly of Joseph's coveralls.

"When I walked up beside your bed, you kind of pulled me in." Joseph tried to explain.

"So it's all my fault?" Kenyon asked playfully.

"Well... I was helping Jason... I mean, you did the same thing to him... first." Joseph stammered.

The playful look fell away from Kenyon's face as he looked toward Jason and asked, "I didn't do anything to hurt you or anything that you didn't want, did I?"

"No. You didn't hurt me at all." Jason assured him, then quietly added, "In fact, you healed me."

"I what?" Kenyon asked dubiously.

"Do you remember 'yesterday', when we figured out about different psychic abilities? It looks like you have the ability to heal yourself as well as other people." Joseph explained carefully.

"I think I must be missing something. How does me possibly having a psychic healing ability explain me waking up with my hand wrapped around your dick?" Kenyon asked curiously, then quickly added, "Not that I'm complaining."

"You remember the 'milking' and all of that? It happened again. While you were asleep, you seemed to instinctively know where I was hurting and you put your hands there to heal me." Joseph said carefully.

Kenyon thought about that for a moment, then noticed that he had one hand firmly on Joseph's butt.

"Did they..." Kenyon trailed off, not sure how to phrase the question.

"Yeah. From what we've been able to tell, this time around they did it to all the guys." Joseph said gravely.

"But that's nothing compared to what happened to the girls." Jason quietly added.

"What?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"Just what we'd guessed might happen. Behind some secret door somewhere, there's a whole lot of full egg cartons." Joseph said frankly.

"How are the girls?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"They're in pain." Jason said honestly.

"So, since I have a healing ability, I should probably go and help them." Kenyon said speculatively.

"Yes and no." Joseph said slowly.

Kenyon turned his attention to Joseph and looked at him inquiringly.

"Until we know a lot more about your ability, we'd do best not to use it foolishly. I know that we'll all want to help as many people as we can, but I think that, at least until we know more, we're going to need to prioritize who gets helped first." Joseph said seriously.

"Like who?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"Lisa, Mary Nicole and Valerie, then if it's possible, Alyssa and Zarah next." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"Because, if you help the leaders, then you can leave them to each help their own people." Jason said with a nod.

"I see what you're saying, but if we run into someone who's suffering along the way, don't expect me not to help them." Kenyon said firmly.

"It's your body and your gift. I'm just telling you what I think is the most reasonable course of action." Joseph said honestly.

"Okay. I'll keep it in mind." Kenyon said with a smile.

"Are you feeling well enough that we can go? We need to walk the station to see what else has happened since we were all isolated from each other." Jason said seriously.

"I'd like to check on Jude." Joseph said honestly.

"Yeah. I feel great." Kenyon said frankly, then moved in to give Joseph a quick kiss before continuing, "And I wouldn't mind you waking me up like this again, sometime."

"I'll see what I can do." Joseph said with a smile, before getting out of the bed, making way for Kenyon.

"Is it just me, or is this hallway creepier than usual?" Jason asked as they walked.

"If you're right about the colors and the psychic abilities, then all the other Oranges might be healing themselves right now." Kenyon said thoughtfully.

"Should we wake them up so that we can get them to help the others?" Jason asked carefully.

"No. I think we need to see how this thing works, first. Once Kenyon's healed one or two people, then we'll know more about what to tell them about how to use their abilities. Plus, they'll probably need all the rest that they can get to be at full power." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"Hey! Do you guys mind if I go with you?" A boy in yellow asked in a rush as he approached them from behind.

"Sure. I'm Joseph..." He began to say, but was interrupted.

"Yeah. Jason in blue and Kenyon in orange. Wade told me in the Yellow and Green room. I was getting a little freaked out with it being so quiet and I haven't walked around the station yet. And after some of the stories that I've heard, I didn't want to walk around this place by myself." The boy said in a rush.

"That's probably best. We're happy to have you." Joseph said simply, then quickly asked, "What was your name?"

"Oh! Yeah. I forgot to tell you that." The boy said enthusiastically, then quickly added, "I'm Kyle."

"We're going to be making a few stops along the way to check on some people." Joseph warned him.

"No problem. It's not like I've got someplace else to be." Kyle said simply.

"Why are you so happy, Kyle? After everything that's been done to us, most of the guys are just about fed up with everything." Jason asked curiously.

"Yeah. That's another reason that I didn't want to hang out in the Yellow and Green room. They're kinda bitter. I'm not 'happy' about what's happened but I'm not as miserable as they are." Kyle said frankly.

"So you're not headachy or dizzy at all?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Nope. I felt a little drained when I first woke up... and I don't mean just my cock. I felt tired. But once I got up and moving around, I started feeling better." Kyle said honestly.

"What about your ass?" Joseph asked uncomfortably.

"What about it?" Kyle asked suspiciously.

"Were you messed with... back there?" Joseph asked quietly.

"No. Not that I know of. Do you mean that you guys were?" Kyle asked with surprise.

"Yes. That happened to all the guys that I've talked to so far." Joseph said honestly.

"No wonder everyone's so pissed off. I'm sorry if me not being ass-raped makes you guys feel bad or something." Kyle said awkwardly.

Joseph felt an unwilling smile cross his lips and he finally said, "It's okay, Kyle. You don't have to be ass-raped to walk with us. Just be yourself and we'll deal."

"Okay." Kyle said with easy acceptance.

Joseph glanced at Jason and Kenyon to find them both also smiling.

As the group walked into the Red and Orange meeting room, their good moods immediately dissipated.

"I should have known that you'd be walking around again." Korbin said wearily from his seat at one of the tables.

"They're stepping things up. I have the feeling that our time is limited." Joseph said honestly.

"Yeah. I'm getting that, too." Korbin said quietly.

"We were blocked off from all the other sections 'yesterday'. How did things go here?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"I wouldn't know. All the Reds were locked in our hallway, we couldn't get to either of the meeting rooms." Korbin said frankly.

"Really? The Blues had access to the Blue and Green meeting room. I wonder why they locked you out." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"From what I heard about the Red and Black room, I didn't particularly want to go in there. But they could have let us have access to *this* room." Korbin said irritably.

Joseph looked around to verify what he already knew. The two other people in the room were 'reds' and they were both male.

"Have you checked on the girls?" Joseph asked quietly.

"Yeah. They're hurtin real bad. I wish that there was something I could do. I don't even have any aspirins that I could give them." Korbin said with his frustration showing through.

"I don't know how much Randa passed onto you about the mass meeting that we had, but we sort of predicted this. I think that what the girls are feeling is what was done to them to 'harvest' their eggs." Joseph said carefully, watching closely for Korbin's reaction.

"I don't know what to do." Korbin said frankly.

"Try to come up with ways to get us out of here. Our *worst* worst case scenario seems to be coming to fruition. Now, here we are with a decently well reasoned idea of what's happening, but still not knowing one single thing to do about it." Joseph said gravely.

"Lay it on me. What's going on, from your point of view?" Korbin asked seriously.

"Back fifty or more years ago someone must have made a massive effort to test people and found a bunch of them with low-level psychic abilities. Using drugs or mind control or... I don't know, maybe they just paid them. However they did it, they got people with similar abilities to breed, so that

their offspring would be more likely to have that same genetic potential." Joseph said carefully.

"Which is us?" Korbin guessed.

"Which was our parents or grandparents. I really don't know how long this has been going on. We guessed the 'eugenics' aspect of this early on, but the psychic thing didn't come into play until they heaped enough stress on us to cause some of us to 'activate'..."

"Like how?" Korbin interrupted.

"When I'd look at someone and want to know something about them, I'd suddenly know things about them that I couldn't possibly know." Joseph said honestly.

"Can you show me?" Korbin asked cautiously.

Joseph shook his head, then said, "Just about anyone who showed that they had an ability woke up drugged and found out that they couldn't use it anymore."

"So, we're all psychic?" Korbin asked cautiously.

"Potentially." Joseph said simply, then continued, "It appears that we're sorted by color according to what kind of psychic 'gift' we're most likely to have. So far, all the Blues that have manifested have had the ability to see into people's pasts."

"What about the Reds?" Korbin asked anxiously.

"You'd be able to say better than us. Have any of your people said or done anything that might be considered 'supernatural'?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"No. Not that I can think of." Korbin said thoughtfully.

"What about the Yellows?" Kyle asked quickly.

"When we were all isolated, the Yellows were blocked off from us, so I don't have any idea what type of 'gift' they might have discovered. Like with Korbin, you'd probably know better than I would." Joseph said honestly.

"When we figured out that we were blocked in, I think all the Yellow guys pretty much stayed in their rooms... at least, I did. You know how the girls in my neighborhood are. They don't want to have anything to do with us." Kyle said honestly.

"Yeah. That's part of why I usually don't stop and visit when we're passing through 'The Amazon'." Joseph said with an understanding smile at Kyle.

Korbin looked at Joseph speculatively for a moment, then cautiously said, "I bet you named all the rooms, didn't you?"

"We named the rooms, not just me." Joseph said in his defense.

"Thought so." Korbin said with a reluctant smile.

"We need to keep our focus." Joseph said quickly, then continued, "For fifty or more years they've been breeding a... let's call it a psychic army. Then, something happened in the world and rather than lose this 'crop' of potential psychics, someone pushed a button and we were all abducted and brought here."

"That makes better sense than I want it to." Korbin said thoughtfully.

"You think *that's* bad? Try this. With them milking us and harvesting eggs, the only conclusion that I can come to is that they don't intend to keep us alive. They're harvesting the genetic material that they've been cultivating. Once they're done, they'll have no reason to keep us alive." Joseph said frankly.

"In fact. We're all evidence of what they've been up to. From a certain point of view, we could be looked at as 'loose ends'." Jason added.

"So, whatever we're going to do, we need to do it. We may not get another chance." Korbin said slowly.

"We may not get even *one* chance. But we can't let that stop us." Joseph said honestly.

"And you're counting on *me*?" Korbin asked to confirm.

"No. We've all got to do whatever we can. I'm just saying that, given your nature, you've got the best shot at making this work. Most of the rest of us 'think about' things. You 'do' things." Joseph said frankly.

"I think that there's a good chance that the Reds and anyone else that I can get to help me might be losing their meal privileges today. Would you see what you can do to help us out with that?" Korbin asked hopefully.

"Honestly, I don't know how much longer they're going to bother with feeding us. But for as long as I have food, you'll have food." Joseph said firmly.

"Then, I guess it's time for me to get a crew together and start ramming some walls." Korbin said as he stood.

"If you don't need someone who's big and strong, I'll help." Kyle said quickly.

Korbin looked him up and down one time before saying, "You may not be bulky, but I'm betting that you're scrappy. You'll do just fine."

"We're going to go check on some people and see what else is going on. Remember to let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Joseph said seriously.

"Jackhammer." Korbin responded with a grin.

"I have the feeling that we don't have time to wait for one." Joseph said frankly.

"Then we'll just have to make do." Korbin said simply.

"Number twenty-three, right?" Jason asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He's in the reverse room." Joseph confirmed.

"Right." Jason said quietly.

"I feel like we should be doing something." Kenyon said seriously.

"You're our healer. You're going to have plenty to do. We just need to check on Jude and Ryan first." Joseph said simply.

"Jude! Can we come in?" Joseph called after knocking.

"Joseph?" Jude asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I've got Jason and Kenyon with me." Joseph confirmed.

"Give me a minute." Jude called in return.

After a long moment, Joseph cautiously asked, "How are you?"

"Defiled, it seems." Jude responded, and from the tone of his voice, Joseph could easily imagine him fighting back tears.

"The same thing happened to us, Jude. You're not alone." Joseph called out to assure him.

The door slid aside, revealing Jude wearing a pair of red coveralls, only fastened to his mid chest, revealing that he wasn't wearing a tee shirt beneath.

Joseph glanced down and saw that Jude had boxer shorts, a tee shirt and socks gathered into a bundle and that he was barefoot.

"Tell me if there's something that I can do to help." Joseph said seriously.

After a moment to consider, Jude slowly asked, "You walked all the way around the station to check on me, didn't you?"

"We're walking around checking on how everyone is doing after the isolation, but we made a special point of stopping in to check on you." Joseph said simply.

Jude smiled, then quietly said, "Thank you."

"If you'll go ahead and finish getting dressed, I'll fill you in on what we've discovered and deduced since the last time we saw you." Joseph said seriously.

"Would you mind if we stopped by Tanner's room to see if he's has been returned?" Jude asked hopefully.

"Do you remember his number?"

"Twenty-nine."

"That's on our way."

"It's a lot different than the last time we were here." Jason said as he looked around the Red and Black room.

"Yeah. Which is a good thing." Joseph confirmed.

"It looks like nothing happened." Kenyon said slowly.

"Reset to zero." Joseph said with a significant look at Jason.

"Do you think that everyone else is asleep?" Jude asked cautiously.

"Yeah. That's what I'm guessing." Joseph confirmed, then looked downward and asked, "Did you get your boots back?"

Jude was surprised by the question and looked down at his own feet before saying, "It appears that I did."

"Would you show me the sole of your left boot?" Joseph asked cautiously.

Jude unsteadily twisted his leg so that he could let Joseph see.

"It has a sticker. They gave you new boots." Joseph said seriously.

"Considering what was done to my old ones, I can't say that I'm disappointed." Jude said frankly.

"I'm just trying to figure these people out. They do the cruelest things to us, but sometimes it seems that they're almost compassionate. It just doesn't make any sense." Joseph said slowly.

"Maybe we've been captured by schizophrenics." Jason said frankly.

Joseph smiled and said, "Yeah, that must be it."

After a knock on the door, Jude quietly said, "Tanner? If you don't answer, I'm going to come in."

"I'm here." A groggy voice responded.

Jason, Kenyon and Joseph all looked at each other with surprise.

"Tanner?! Are you alright? May I come in?!" Jude asked excitedly.

"What? Yes. Um... come in." Tanner said confusedly.

"I have others with me. May they come in as well?" Jude asked cautiously.

"What's going on, Jude? Who did you bring with you?" Tanner asked as Jude hurried into the room.

"You've been missing for... I don't know how long. How are you? Are you alright?" Jude asked quickly.

"I've got the worst headache of my life. Would you please be quiet?" Tanner asked hopefully.

Jason eased slowly into the room, then quietly said, "His headache is a lot worse than any of ours were."

Tanner tried to sit up, but immediately gave up and laid back down.

"Do you want me to help?" Kenyon asked uncertainly.

Joseph saw the tears beginning to fall from Tanner's closed eyes and quietly said, "Go ahead."

"What are you going to do?" Tanner asked cautiously as he opened his eyes and fought to focus on the strangers in his bedroom.

"We've found out that Kenyon has the ability to heal people. He can help you, if you'll let him." Joseph said carefully.

"How sure are you that this will help Tanner?" Jude asked dubiously.

"Jude, I'm *really* hurting. If he can help, let him." Tanner whispered.

Kenyon stepped forward and slowly extended his hand, as he would with an injured animal.

After a moment, he withdrew his hand and said, "I don't know where to start. Jason, can you tell me where it's hurting most?"

"Yeah. Try putting your hands behind his ears, about halfway up his head. I think that if you can stop it hurting there, the rest will ease on its own." Jason said carefully.

Joseph, Jason and Jude watched as Kenyon carefully and gently cupped Tanner's head in his hands.

After a moment, Tanner quietly said, "Your hands are hot."

"Do you want me to stop?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"No. It's not bad. Go on." Tanner said and some of the tension seemed to ease from his expression.

"How are you feeling, Kenyon? Is it too much for you?" Joseph asked with concern.

"I feel like I'm running down, like my energy is draining out." Kenyon said honestly.

"Jason, will you keep an eye on what Kenyon is doing and tell him to stop when Tanner's pain is manageable?" Joseph asked carefully.

"It's still pretty bad, but he's making progress." Jason said in deep concentration.

"You can see my pain?" Tanner asked curiously.

"Jason can feel where your pain is. We're theorizing that all the Grays have that ability." Joseph said, consciously keeping his voice low, so as not to aggravate Tanner's headache.

"While you've been gone, we've discovered that the colors we wear identify the type of supernatural abilities that we may be capable of." Jude quietly explained.

"Do you have an ability like that?" Tanner asked as his eyes shifted to look at Jude.

"Not yet." Jude admitted, then looked to Joseph and asked, "Did you find out about the Reds' ability, on your way here?"

"No. We talked to Korbin and so far none of them have experienced anything like that." Joseph said seriously.

"What about Blacks?" Jude asked as he looked at Tanner with concern.

"No. Tanner is the first Black we've seen since we woke up." Joseph said simply.

"Kenyon, why don't you pull back now. If you keep going, you're going to pass out." Jason warned.

"How's his pain?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"Much better. He should be able to endure." Jason said frankly.

Kenyon slowly released his grip on Tanner's head and noticed that his hands were slightly shaking.

"How are you feeling, Tanner?" Jude asked cautiously.

After a moment to consider, Tanner cautiously said, "I feel a lot better."

"Good. I'm glad." Joseph said with a smile, then cautiously asked, "What's the last thing that you remember?"

"Jude and I were in the Red and Black meeting room. We were telling the others about what a wonderful thing was happening to us. It was beautiful... everyone was so happy..." Tanner drifted off with a smile.

"Then you woke up here, with a headache?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"Yes. I feel like I had some vivid dreams, but I don't remember them." Tanner said thoughtfully.

"What you remember happened... I don't know, two or three weeks ago, probably. We really don't have any way of judging the passage of time." Joseph said quietly.

"I've been asleep for weeks?" Tanner asked uncertainly and looked to Jude to explain.

"Yes. When I woke up from the blackout, I came here to check on you, but your bed hadn't been slept in. I searched everywhere, but I couldn't find you." Jude said honestly.

"You weren't the only one missing. There was a girl from the Yellow section, named Kimberly, who also went missing. For all we know, there could have been more that no one had noticed." Joseph added.

"What happened while I was... gone?" Tanner asked cautiously.

"I think that maybe you'll want to be a little stronger before we talk about that." Jude said quietly.

"Why don't we step outside for a minute so that you can have a chance to get dressed?" Joseph suggested.

Tanner looked at Joseph with confusion, then realized what he meant. He tentatively peeked under the blanket and froze with surprise.

"Oh, yeah. Um, it seems that they did a lot of sperm collecting while we were blacked out..." Joseph said, but was interrupted.

"Among other things." Jason said darkly.

"Let us know if it's a problem and we'll do whatever we can." Joseph said sincerely.

"Thank you, but I think that I'll be alright." Tanner said, not sounding to be entirely certain of it.

"Do you want for me to stay and help you?" Jude asked quietly.

"No. I'm feeling a lot better. I'll be ready in just a minute." Tanner assured him.

Taking Tanner at his word, Jude, Joseph, Jason and Kenyon filed out of the room.

"So far we haven't figured out the Yellow, Red or Black psychic abilities. Does anyone have any insights?" Joseph asked the group that were waiting outside Tanner's room.

"If it weren't for the psychic abilities, I would have guessed that the colors represented personality traits. The Yellows are enthusiastic, the Reds are frenetic and the Blacks seem to be passionate." Jason said slowly.

"When you consider that a group of people have their brains wired the same way to do a certain thing, maybe it makes sense that they'd have other things in common, too." Kenyon said thoughtfully.

"You're letting it show." Joseph said in a warning tone.

"Oh, yeah." Kenyon said abruptly, then added, "Or maybe wearing Yellow just makes people feel perkier."

"That must be it." Joseph said with a grin.

"Do you think that, while we're here, we might be able to stop in and check on Julie?" Jude asked cautiously.

"Sure. If you want." Joseph said simply, then looked to Kenyon and asked, "Are you up to giving it a try?"

"Yeah. I was just tired for a few minutes, but I'm better now." Kenyon assured him.

The door beside them opened to reveal Tanner, dressed in his black coveralls.

"How are you feeling?" Jude asked with concern.

"I think that something else was done to me while I was asleep." Tanner said darkly.

"Yeah. They did that to all of us." Joseph said simply.

Tanner looked to Jude and quietly asked, "Why would God allow these things in His paradise?"

"Since you've been gone, I've realized that we misread the signs. This isn't the end of days, it's a science experiment and we're the guinea pigs." Jude said frankly.

"Tanner, we've been genetically engineered or selectively bred to have psychic abilities. If God is behind this, then he's got some real scumbags working for him." Joseph said frankly.

"Maybe it's like you say, but I still have to believe that this is all part of God's plan." Tanner said thoughtfully.

"God *might* have a plan. I'm just saying that from all that I've seen, it looks like *this* doesn't have anything to do with *that*." Joseph urged him to understand.

"Tanner, the horrors that I've witnessed could not have been perpetrated by a good and loving God. If you honestly believe that this is something supernatural, then it seems more likely that we're at the mercy of the Father of Lies." Jude said frankly.

"What do *you* believe?" Tanner asked cautiously.

"That this is what it appears to be. There is nothing divine or diabolical at play beyond the motivations of flawed mortal men." Jude said honestly.

"Have you lost your faith?" Tanner asked curiously.

"No. I have simply realized that not everything has a mystical reason behind it. A series of things happened and naturally fell into an order. From inside,

it's easy for us to look back on events and construct the idea that there was some overarching plan at work. But I believe that some evil people made some selfish decisions and that where we are and the situation that we are in is the consequence. I don't see any 'reason' beyond that." Jude said seriously.

"Where is the person you were wanting to check on?" Joseph quietly asked.

"Right there, number thirty-three." Jude said as he pointed.

"Do you want to do the honors?" Joseph asked hopefully.

Jude nodded, then looked to Tanner and quietly asked, "Will you help me? I believe that our sister in the faith may need our understanding."

Tanner looked at him uncertainly for a moment, but finally slowly nodded his head.

Jason looked at Joseph inquisitively as they silently followed.

"Julie? It's Jude. May I come in?" Jude asked after knocking.

After waiting a moment and hearing no answer, he looked to Joseph with question.

"If she's unconscious, then it's better to find out sooner rather than later." Joseph reasoned.

"Julie! I'm coming in! Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just here to see if you're hurt or not." Jude said before reluctantly opening the sliding door.

Joseph, Jason and Kenyon shared a look and silently decided to stay back and allow Jude and Tanner to check on the condition of their friend.

"She's not in here." Jude said a moment later.

"Does it look like she slept in her bed?" Joseph asked cautiously.

"No. The bed is perfectly made and there's nothing at all that seems to be out of place." Jude said as he slowly walked out of the bedroom.

"Is she a really close friend of yours?" Joseph asked gently.

"No. I was just worried about how she might be feeling after everything that's happened. When you met her she was calling herself 'The Whore of Babylon'." Jude said frankly.

"And now she's missing. I wonder if that's a coincidence." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"Where to next?" Jason asked quietly.

"Oh, um... Ryan's, number forty-four." Joseph answered distractedly.

Jason started walking in that direction and the rest of the group automatically followed.

"Ryan?" Joseph called after a knock on the bedroom door.

"Don't tell me that he's missing, too." Jason said regretfully.

"This sucks." Kenyon added.

"Let me go in and take a look." Joseph said before sliding the door aside.

After a moment, Joseph returned to the group in the hall and said, "He's not in there, but his bed has definitely been slept in. Let's go check Area 51 and see if he's in there."

"Area 51?" Tanner asked with confusion.

"We named the rooms so we wouldn't have to keep referring to them by color combinations. We call the Purple and Black room Area 51 because they were investigating the theory that we were abducted by aliens." Jude explained as they walked.

"Really?" Tanner asked dubiously.

"They reached the same conclusion that I just told you. There's nothing extraterrestrial, just evil, selfish people using us for their own reasons." Jude said frankly.

Before the conversation could continue, they arrived at 'Area 51'.

"Ryan! How are you doing?" Joseph asked happily when he saw Ryan sitting at the table with one other guy dressed in black and two in purple.

"My head hurts, my dick's nearly been stretched off of my body and I'm guessing that someone had a good time with me while I was passed out. All things considered I'd have to say that I'm doing pretty fucking bad." Wade said frankly.

"Blacks are passionate, huh?" Joseph asked with a look askance at Jason.

"Passion isn't always positive." Jason said in his defense.

"By the way, after the thing with the walls appearing, it's good to see you again." Ryan quickly added, then continued by asking, "How did you guys do?"

"We found out that we're psychic." Joseph said frankly.

"Huh?" Ryan asked cautiously, not getting the joke, if there were one.

"When we woke up and were cut off from everyone else, I guess it was enough to push us over the edge and activate our psychic abilities. We figured out that each of our colors shows which ability that we're likely to have." Joseph explained reasonably.

"What ability am I supposed to have?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"I really don't know. We figured out a couple of the colors, but not all of them." Joseph reluctantly admitted.

"Let me guess, you're walking around, checking on everyone?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We're doing our best to figure out what happened when we were all separated. I don't know how much help it is, but I guess it's better than doing nothing." Joseph said frankly.

"I checked on Kenna right after I woke up... I'm just about done. I don't know what they want from us, but whatever it is... they can just fucking take it. I'm done playing their games and jumping through their hoops. I'm just... done." Ryan said firmly.

"I understand." Joseph said simply, then added, "But I have the feeling that as soon as they've taken everything that they want from us, they'll have no more reason to keep us alive. I plan on fighting, looking for a way out until the very end. You deal with it however makes the most sense to you... Just don't waste it."

There was a long silent moment, then Ryan quietly asked, "What are you going to do next?"

"I was thinking about stopping by and checking on Lisa. There's a chance that we might be able to make her feel a little better." Joseph said simply.

"What are you going to do?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"Why don't you come with us and see?" Joseph asked with a smile.

Ryan seemed to be about to answer when a low vibration could be felt through the floor.

"What's that?!" Joseph asked as he looked around.

The tables and chairs were vibrating on the floor, making a clattering sound and Joseph had to fight for balance as the vibration became more intense.

"WHAT IS THAT?!" Joseph called out, but couldn't hear if there were any response.

Chapter 9

As the vibration started to subside, Joseph noticed that everyone in the 'Area 51' meeting hall was in nothing short of a complete panic.

"Listen! We're not hurt! We're no worse off than we were a few minutes ago!"

"Was that an earthquake?" One of the guys dressed in purple asked in a shaking voice.

"No. I'm from California, so I've been through a few earthquakes. I don't know what that was, but it was something else." Ryan said as he looked around for any signs of damage.

"He's right." Joseph nodded, then continued, "That was something mechanical."

"What are we going to do now?" Jude asked as he seemed to be calming.

Joseph thought for a moment, then said, "Wade, I need for you to stay here, since Lisa's out of action. Try to keep people calm and see if you can get them to brainstorm about what that might have been. If you come up with anything, send someone to 'The Bunker' and let us know. I'm going to do my best to coordinate things from there."

"I can handle it."

"Good." Joseph said with a quick smile at him, then turned to Jude and said, "You guys, go back to 'Paradise' and do the same. Your people are going to need you to keep them calm and let them know that everything is going to be alright."

"But is it?"

"It'll be a lot more 'alright' if everyone isn't panicking. You've got a brilliant mind. I really need for you to think about this to see what you can come up

with. I don't know what's going on and I have a feeling that we've got limited time to figure this out."

"I'll do my best."

"Send word if you come up with anything." Joseph said with an assuring smile in his direction, then he turned to Jason and said, "We'd better get going. Your people are going to need you to be strong for them."

"Yeah."

"Should I go with you or stay with Jason?" Kenyon asked from Joseph's side.

"Actually, if you wouldn't mind, would you stay in 'The Pit of Despair' for a little bit to help the people there? I haven't seen Mary Nicole yet, so I don't know if there's anyone watching out for her people."

"Yeah. And I'll go back to 'The Bunker' as soon as someone shows up to take over."

"Let's go." Joseph said as he started toward the purple hallway with Jason and Kenyon following a step behind.

As they hurried down the hall, they encountered a few of the girls in their doorways. They were obviously in pain but also frightened by what had just happened.

The three of them worked as a group to calm the girls and fill them in on what little they knew as quickly as possible before moving on.

At one point, Kenyon quietly asked Joseph if he should be trying to heal them. Joseph told him that it might be best to save it, since things seemed to be escalating and they didn't know what might happen next.

As they passed through the Gray and Purple room, Jason went immediately to the few people gathered at the tables and began talking to them.

Joseph and Kenyon continued on down the Gray hallway, dedicated to their purpose.

They encountered a few more distressed people as they walked, but only spent a minute with them before continuing on.

After leaving Kenyon in the Blue and Gray room, Joseph entered the Blue hallway and was confronted by the sight of Zarah's door.

Without thought, he walked up to the door and knocked.

He heard a response but couldn't be sure if it were a voice or a low moan.

He reluctantly opened the door and cautiously walked inside.

Zarah was flat on her back in bed, looking as miserable as anyone that he had encountered so far.

"How bad is it?" Joseph asked in a whisper.

"Worse than anything."

"I'll get you some help."

"Kenyon. I know that I told you to save it, but I really need Zarah's help. Is there any way that you could try healing her?"

"Yeah. No one's been in here yet. So there's not anything for me to do."
Kenyon said as he stood.

"Just don't go too far. Take the edge off her pain, if you can."

"It doesn't work like that. I can't 'see' like Jason does. When I'm near something that needs healed, it kind of turns on, all by itself. I don't know that it's done healing until it turns itself off."

"Just see what you can do."

"I brought Kenyon to help you."

Zarah fought to open her eyes and the incredulity could easily be seen in her pained expression.

"I'm not sure how this is going to work." Kenyon warned them.

"Just do what you can."

Kenyon knelt on the floor beside Zarah's bed, then held his hands out, about four inches above her midsection.

"What's he doing?" Zarah asked in a pained voice.

"Do you remember when we all figured out about the psychic abilities? It turns out that Kenyon's ability is psychic healing."

"Something's happening." Kenyon said as he gently placed his hands on top of Zarah's blanket, over her lower abdomen.

"It's hot."

"Yeah. That means it's working."

"What else has happened? We were in the meeting room and then..."

"I think that we must have been getting too close to something, so they called an unscheduled blackout."

"That feels better." Zarah sighed.

"How are you doing, Kenyon?" Joseph asked with concern.

"It seems to be work..." Kenyon was saying as he fell into unconsciousness, mid-sentence.

"Is he alright?" Zarah asked as she watched Joseph easing Kenyon to lie on the floor.

"Yes. His healing ability drains him. If Jason were here, he could monitor Kenyon's healing and get him to stop before he reaches this point." Joseph said as he did his best to make sure that Kenyon was resting comfortably.

"I don't understand."

"Jason is an empath who can feel other people's physical pain. He can somehow sense what Kenyon is doing and tell him where the pain is and when he needs to pull back, so that he won't pass out."

"There was another thing... like an earthquake. Did that really happen or did I dream it?"

"Unfortunately, it happened. So far, we don't know what it was, but I'm betting that it wasn't a good thing. That's one of the reasons that I asked Kenyon to heal you. If we're going to figure this out, we're going to need your big brain working on this."

"I'm feeling a lot better than I was. I should be able to help."

"Let me see if I can rouse Kenyon, then we'll get out of here so that you can change."

"Is he alright?"

"I think so. It seems that when he uses his ability too much that his body naturally forces him to go to sleep. I should be able to wake him up and he should be fine as long as he doesn't use his power again for a little while." Joseph said as he sat down on the floor, then lined himself along Kenyon's side, so that he could drape an arm around him.

"What are you doing?" Zarah asked as she fought to sit up enough to see what was happening on the floor beside her bed.

"Waking him up." Joseph whispered, then moved in to give Kenyon a slow, gentle kiss.

It took a moment, but Kenyon's eyes finally started to flutter open.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Joseph said as he backed away slightly.

"That's the best way to wake up." Kenyon said with a smile.

"We need to get up so that Zarah can get dressed."

Kenyon looked around in confusion, then asked, "Did I pass out?"

"Yeah. Just for a little bit. Don't worry about it." Joseph assured him as he got up off the floor.

"How are you feeling, Zarah?" Kenyon asked as he accepted Joseph's hand and was pulled to standing.

"I'm better than I was. Thank you."

"We'll be right outside, when you're ready." Joseph said as he gently coaxed Kenyon to walk with him.

"I'll just be a minute." Zarah assured him, then watched as Kenyon and Joseph left the room.

"Do I need to go back to 'The Pit of Despair'?" Kenyon asked quietly as they waited outside Zarah's door.

"No. If someone needs help, they can go see Jason or come to 'The Bunker' and talk to us. I'd rather you be with me."

"Because you're worried that I'll pass out again?"

"No. It's because I know that when you're with me, you've got my back. A lot of people are depending on me right now, and if you'll let me, I'd like to depend on you."

"Yeah. I'll be there. You can count on me."

"Are you guys ready?" Zarah asked as she pulled open the door.

"Ready when you are."

When they walked into the Blue and Green meeting room, Mark immediately asked, "Did you guys feel that earthquake too?"

"It wasn't an earthquake, but yes, we felt it." Joseph answered.

"What was it, then?" Doug asked dubiously.

"That's one of the things that we need to figure out. I've already asked the leaders in a couple of the other rooms to start brainstorming. If they come up with anything, they're going to send someone to tell us about it. We're going to be coordinating the whole thing."

"Before we get started, I'd like to go check on Leah." Zarah said as she stopped at the table.

"Sounds good. I hope she's alright." Joseph said with a smile at her, then watched as she hurried toward the Green hallway.

When he turned his attention back to the table, he noticed that Charity, Brianna and Landra were present, along with the three 'blue' guys.

"From what we can tell, we're missing two people."

Joseph's first impulse was to be put off by Aaron's abrupt nature, but then his thinking self reminded him that Aaron was socially awkward and tended not to speak at all. In the end, he finally asked, "Do you know who?"

"No. This would be a lot easier if we had paper and pens to keep track of things. All I can really tell you is that rooms one thirteen and room one twenty-one had people in them before we blacked out and now their rooms are empty and it looks like their beds haven't been slept in."

"Room one thirteen is next to mine. That room belongs to Jeanna. I don't remember who had room one twenty-one."

"While we were checking the rooms, we talked to a few of the girls who were awake. We told them that we were going to be in here working on figuring things out and that we'd let them know when we come up with something." Doug added.

"Good."

"Leah's fine. She just needs her rest." Zarah said as she returned to the table and took the seat beside Joseph, the other side from Kenyon.

"What do you think the chances are that they did the 'earthquake' thing just to put more stress on us?" Charity asked as she looked around the table.

Joseph looked at her with surprise, then said, "I hadn't thought of that. It's possible."

As he was saying that, everyone heard a movement and saw Tammy walking into the meeting room from the Green hallway.

"I just need to check on Mary Nicole." Tammy said quietly as she passed through.

"We're working on brainstorming. Tell Mary Nicole that you're free to join us when you're feeling up to it." Joseph said, sounding concerned.

"We will." Tammy responded before entering the blue hallway.

"We're never getting out of here, are we?" Doug asked into the silence that followed, directing his question mostly to Joseph.

"Probably not. At least, not alive."

"Then what was the point of the 'Academic Exercises' and all of that?"

"Looking back, all I can think is that they must have had several scenarios in mind: obedient drug-zombies, conditioned slaves, hypnotized assassins... you know, stuff like that. Anyway, at some point along the way, they must have done a cost benefit analysis and we ended up being in the red."

"How sure are you that they're going to try to kill us?"

"I'm becoming more and more convinced of it."

"Isn't there anything we can do about it?"

"Not that I can think of. Of course, some of the things that we've just discovered might end up being game changers... somehow."

"What things?"

"Well, it's looking more and more like the reason that any of us were chosen to be here is because of our potential to develop psychic abilities.

Of course, as soon as we've shown them that our abilities have become active, they drug us but... there still might be a way that we can use it."

"Have you figured out any more of the abilities?" Charity asked.

"So far, we know that the Blues can see people's pasts, the Greens appear to be telepathic, the Grays are empathic and the Oranges can heal people."

"Wait! What?" Mark asked with surprise, then looked at Kenyon and asked, "You can heal people?"

"Yeah. But I keep passing out when I do it."

"But we've got girls all over this station hurting so bad that they can barely move. If we've got a way to help them, we should be doing that."

"You're right, of course" Joseph reluctantly admitted. "Why don't you take Doug and Aaron to the Orange hallway and wake up as many of the Oranges as possible so that they can get started healing."

"That won't work." Landra said timidly.

"Why's that?"

"The Amazons probably aren't going to want to help you... I mean, it might be better if some of the girls asked them."

"You're right, Landra. Thank you." Joseph said with a smile at her, realizing how much of a struggle it was for the usually timid girl to speak up in a group.

"I can go and invite them." Zarah volunteered.

"That'll probably work out best." Joseph admitted.

"I'll go, too." Brianna automatically added, then looked to Landra with question.

Although she seemed to be torn by the decision, Landra finally nodded her agreement.

"Before you go..." Joseph said quickly to forestall their departure, "Mark and Doug, would you go down to the 'Confidential' room and talk to Jason? Ask him if he can help you find about... six of his empaths with active abilities and send them here to us? If we're going to have healers working, we're going to need to have someone to keep them from passing out."

"Excuse me..." Zarah interrupted.

Joseph looked at her inquiringly.

"I didn't think of it before, but how will we know if their healing abilities are active?"

"When you wake them up, ask them how they're feeling. If they tell you that they feel fine or had a wonderful sleep, then that probably means that they've completely healed themselves. Anyone who didn't heal in their sleep is going to wake up feeling like crap."

"That makes sense."

"If you can get all the Oranges and Grays to meet here, we'll split them into teams and then we can set off doing a mass healing effort. Try for six, but if that's taking too long, just go with what you've got."

When it was obvious that Joseph was finished, Zarah, Brianna and Landra started walking toward the Green hallway as Doug and Mark started toward the Blue one.

Joseph, Kenyon, Aaron and Charity were sitting at the table when one of the girls in blue slowly walked into the meeting room.

"Did you guys ever figure out what that vibration was all about?" The girl asked in a pained voice.

"No. We're still working on that. Did you have any ideas?" Joseph asked hopefully.

Kenyon could clearly see the anguish on the girl's face as she shook her head before withdrawing into the Blue hallway.

After a long silent moment, Kenyon finally whispered, "I wish that there was something I could do."

Joseph could see how much it was hurting Kenyon to know that he had the ability to heal, yet couldn't do anything for a person who was standing before him, suffering.

"If you want to, you can go talk to Jason and see if he can find someone to 'spot' for you."

"Yeah. I'll see if he has someone to spare. But either way, I'll be right back."

"Aaron, would you mind going with Kenyon? He passed out a few minutes ago and I'd just like to be sure that he's alright."

"Yeah."

Although the abrupt answer might make one think that Aaron felt 'put out' by the request, Joseph had the feeling that Aaron appreciated being asked to help, he just didn't know how to appropriately express that appreciation.

"So, is Joseph your boyfriend or something?" Aaron asked as he walked with Kenyon down the Blue hallway.

"Yeah. 'Boyfriend' or 'Something' is about as close as I can come to narrowing it down." Kenyon said with a smile, then thought to add, "So far, our relationship doesn't seem to be 'typical'. I don't know what to call it, or how it's going to turn out. But with things being like they are... I don't have anything else to hold onto."

"People don't like me. I piss them off."

"Yeah. I can see that." Kenyon said honestly, in a completely nonjudgemental tone.

"I don't know if I'll ever find someone who understands me like Joseph understands you."

"Don't give up, Aaron. I'm not saying that if you keep looking that you'll find someone. What I'm saying is that when you give up trying, then there's absolutely no chance." Kenyon said as they entered the Blue and Gray room.

The three girls in blue who were there were silent and didn't seem to notice them passing through.

Once they were in the Gray hallway, Kenyon quietly said, "In a way, I think you're kind of lucky."

Aaron looked at him with surprise, then cautiously asked, "How's that?"

"You don't automatically fall into line and conform with everyone else. I mean, yeah, it may cause you some challenges when people don't know how to deal with you. But you get to be yourself and have your own independent ideas. Not everyone has that."

"I still think that I'd like to try being 'normal', at least for a day."

"Normal is overrated. You're always going around saying things you don't mean and acting like you feel things that you don't, because it's expected. You spend your whole day lying and pretending. And while you're doing that, you're always careful not to do anything that will make it seem like you have any independent thoughts or feelings. After all of that, if you make it through without screwing up and if you're really lucky, you get to do it all again the next day... and the next... forever." Kenyon said as they spotted the Gray and Purple meeting room ahead.

"Is that what it's really like to be normal?"

"Nah. It's only like that if you think. If you're able to turn your thinking mind off and lose yourself in the fantasy, then I guess it's not too bad. If you get good enough at it, you might even be able to convince yourself that you're happy," Kenyon said as they walked into the meeting room.

As Kenyon and Aaron walked into the room, they found Jason talking with Doug and Mark, discussing what to do next. "I don't know if any of the Grays have had their abilities become active yet. At least, no one's mentioned it, if they have."

"The healers will probably be able to figure out how to do the healing part, but without an empath to 'spot' for them, we're going to have healers dropping over left and right from overusing their abilities." Kenyon interjected into their conversation, then added, "And we still don't know what happens to a healer when they go too far. I for one, don't want to find out."

"I'm not saying that I don't want to help, I just don't know what to do."

"Start waking people up and then test them to see if they're empathic."

"How..." Jason started to ask, then looked around the group, with his focus stopping on Aaron.

"What?"

"If you wouldn't mind helping me, we might be able to make this work."

"What do I have to do?"

"When we go in and wake someone up, all you'll need to do is stand there and be in pain. If they can sense your pain, we'll recruit them."

"You're in pain?" Kenyon asked Aaron with concern.

"Other people's pain is worse. I can live with it."

"As soon as we're done recruiting empaths, I'm going to heal you."

"Shouldn't you save that for the people who need it?"

"It's my ability. I'm the one who chooses who I heal. When we're done, I'm healing you."

"Mission accomplished!" Kenyon said as he walked into the Blue and Green meeting room with Aaron at his side.

Following along behind them was a group of five girls, all dressed in gray.

Joseph recognized Autumn, but while he had seen some of the others around, he hadn't learned their names.

"Thank you for helping us. As soon as we get some healers for you to work with, I think that you're going to be able to help a lot of people." Joseph said to the group.

"What do you need for us to do?" Autumn asked carefully.

"Actually, there's not much that you can do until Zarah gets back here."

"Did I hear my name?" Zarah asked as she walked through the doorway from the Green hallway.

"How did it go? Did you find any?"

"You asked for six, I brought six." Zarah said with accomplishment.

When Joseph saw the girls filing into the room, he recognized Valerie and Madison from 'The Amazon' and Denise, who had been working as security for Korbin in the Red and Orange room.

Before he could say anything to greet them, he noticed a girl, dressed in yellow, at Valerie's side.

Zarah recognized Joseph's look of question and quietly said, "That's Kimberly."

"It's nice to meet you, Kimberly. I'm glad that you're back." Joseph said to her, then said to the group, "I guess you all know why you're here. The Grays can sense pain, so they can tell you where someone is hurting, so you can direct your healing to where it's most needed. They can also keep an eye on you to see that you aren't depleting your own energy too rapidly. Working together, we're hoping that you'll be able to heal a lot of suffering people."

"Can we get started?" Valerie asked impatiently.

Joseph realized that the girls, the Oranges in particular, weren't comfortable with him telling them what to do, so he looked to Zarah to take over for him.

"I was thinking that we could start with the Green hallway. If everyone will team up, I think we'll just dive right in and see how it goes."

Joseph was happy to see that the girls had no problem with Zarah's plan and they all sprang into action.

"Valerie's got it under control. They'll be fine." Zarah said as she walked back into the meeting room.

"Good. We need you here." Joseph stated as a simple fact.

"When we told Valerie about her healing ability, the first thing she wanted to do was go and heal Kimberly." Zarah said as she took the seat at Joseph's side.

"Did Kimberly mention anything that happened to her during her time away?"

"No. She blacked out, just like the rest of us, then she woke up. She mentioned that she had some vivid dreams, but she didn't remember them."

"Yeah. That's what Tanner said, too."

"I told the Oranges that when they get to the Orange hallway, they need to see if they can find anyone else who has their healing ability active. It felt like we were running out of time, so I stopped looking when we reached six."

"I think that you've done everything that you can with the healers. Right now, we need to see what we can come up with about the 'earthquake'. I have a feeling that it wasn't just some trick to amp up the stress. I think it means something."

"Joseph! There you are! I didn't think I was ever going to find you!" Kyle said as he entered the meeting room from the Blue hallway.

"Everyone, this is Kyle." Joseph said to the group around the table, then turned to Kyle and asked, "What's up?"

"I don't know what happened. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, Korbin got this really bad bloody nose, then he passed out. Nothing caused it."

"I'll go." Kenyon said as he started to stand.

"No. Not without someone to 'spot' you." Joseph said firmly.

"I'll stop by and ask Jason if he has anyone that he can spare to go with me."

Joseph struggled with the decision for a moment, but could see Kenyon's determination to help.

"Okay." Joseph relented, then turned to Kyle and asked, "Will you go with Kenyon? We don't know what kind of a toll the healing has on people and I don't want to take the chance of him passing out again."

"Yeah."

"Let me know if you need me." Joseph called after them as he watched them hurry away.

The group around the table were racking their brains, trying to come up with any plausible explanation for what the vibration earlier might have been.

Although they had come up with a few different theories, none of them fully explained what was happening to them.

"The computer stopped working!" A girl in blue said as she hurried into the meeting room.

"What?" Joseph asked with surprise.

"I asked it for a glass of water and it didn't respond. I tried all the different commands that I've used so far and none of them worked." The girl said urgently.

"We'd better go check this out." Joseph said as he stood.

The others around the table did likewise.

They walked as a group into the hallway and each went to their own individual room to see if they could get a response from their own computers.

Joseph tried everything that he could think of, but he had no better result than what Kelly had described.

As he walked out into the hallway, he found a few others already there and from their expressions, he surmised that none of them had any better luck.

"Doug, you remember Jude, don't you?"

"The Red guy?"

"That's right. As far as I know, he's the closest thing we have to a computer expert, especially when it comes to one with a verbal interface. Will you go to the Red and Black meeting room and ask him to try his computer and see what he can come up with?"

"Yeah."

"See what he says and report back. Without the computer, we can't get food."

"Got it."

When Joseph returned to the meeting room, he could see that everyone present was as worried as he was.

Unfortunately, he found that he didn't have any words of encouragement to offer to improve the situation.

"Joseph!" A boy dressed in yellow called as he ran into the room from the Green hallway.

"What now?" Joseph asked in a pained voice. He knew from the boy's expression that whatever he was about to say couldn't be good news.

"You need to go to the Red and Black room, right now!"

"Hold on, Dennis. I've already sent Kenyon down to help heal Korbin. I'm sure that he's going to be alright."

"That's not the problem! Come on, we need you there NOW!" Dennis said as he seemed to be fighting the urge to grab Joseph and drag him away.

Joseph turned to Zarah and quietly asked, "You got this?"

"Yeah. Go on."

"Come on!" Dennis called.

"I'm on my way."

"What's going on?" Joseph asked as he fought to keep up with Dennis.

"Stone and Alyssa figured out the Yellow psychic ability."

"What is it?"

"I don't know the technical term for it... fortune telling or... I don't know... seeing the future or something." Dennis said as they passed several Orange and Gray clad individuals, all hard at work in consecutive bedrooms.

"Do you have that ability?"

"I knew you were going to ask that." Dennis said playfully.

"What's going on? Why does Korbin need me?" Joseph asked, but before he could receive an answer, they arrived in the Yellow and Green meeting room.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Joseph asked as he stopped.

"We don't have time. Go on. Cory will go with you and explain what we've been able to figure out." Stone answered.

Although Joseph wanted to question further, he could tell that Stone and Alyssa both believed that he needed to keep moving.

Dennis was ahead of them, but Cory was right at Joseph's side as they jogged down the Yellow hallway.

"Can you tell me what's going on and why we're hurrying?" Joseph asked with annoyance.

"Stone and Alyssa both got some of this while we were all isolated, but now they're drugged and can't see anything. Dennis and I have both had our abilities awaken and we've started getting flashes of the things that are going to happen and a lot of different things that might happen..." Cory trailed off.

Without missing a beat, Joseph picked up the thread, "...because the future is unwritten and with every possible decision there are multiple futures as a consequence."

"No wonder they told us to get you. That's right. With the glimpses that Dennis and I got put with what Stone and Alyssa got before the blackout, we figured out that you needed to be in the Red and Black room." Cory said as they passed through the Yellow and Orange room at a steady run.

Joseph caught a glimpse of a few Orange and Yellow girls sitting in there, but they seemed to be barely aware of what was going on around them.

"What do I need to do when I get there?" Joseph asked as they ran into the orange hallway.

"That's the thing. We don't know. The only thing that we've been able to see for sure is that if you aren't in the Red and Orange room when you're supposed to be, bad things will happen."

Before Joseph could formulate another question to ask, they rushed into the Red and Orange room, where Korbin was on the floor with Kenyon, holding his open palms over Korbin's eyes.

Although Joseph had a variety of questions on his mind at that moment, the first one to make its way to his mouth was directed at Kenyon. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Jason's keeping a close watch on me."

"Thanks, Jayce." Joseph said with a smile at his much taller friend.

After an indulgent moment of basking in the relief of knowing that Jason and Kenyon were safe and well, Joseph turned to Dennis and Cory and asked, "I'm here. Now what?"

"We don't know that. We just know that you need to be here when 'it' happens." Cory answered.

"We just don't know what 'it' is, yet." Dennis added.

Accepting that asking further questions of the pair was unlikely to lead to anything productive, Joseph instead turned his attention back to Jason and asked, "What's wrong with Korbin?"

"I don't know. He doesn't have any pain so there's not much I can do to direct Kenyon. I'm just keeping an eye on him to be sure that he doesn't push himself too far."

Joseph nodded, then turned to the rest of the occupants of the room and asked, "Do you know what Korbin was doing when this happened?"

"We don't know what happened." Kyle answered. "We were all standing here, trying to decide what to do to try and break through this wall when blood started running out of his nose."

"Well, if he wasn't doing anything, was he saying..." Joseph trailed off as he saw blood starting to trickle onto the upper lip of one of the other boys dressed in red. "Jayce! See if you can tell what's going on, while it's happening!"

Jason focused all of his attention on the boy and slowly started shaking his head.

Randa and another red clad boy helped to ease the bleeding boy down to the floor, positioning him next to Korbin.

"I think I know." The boy with the bloody nose said weakly.

Joseph knelt beside him and quietly asked, "What do you know?"

"The Red ability... I think I know what it is."

Randa ran up to the group and handed the boy a handful of toilet paper.

"Thanks." The boy said with a quick smile at her, then began to dab at his nose.

"What's your ability?" Joseph asked.

"Ben?"

"Right here." The other red clad boy answered as he moved to be more in the boy's line of sight.

"Would you give me one of your shoelaces for a minute?"

"My shoelace?"

"Yeah. Just for a minute."

"Okay." Ben said before sitting on the floor to unlace one of his boots.

"Help me to sit up."

"Are you alright?" Joseph asked with concern.

"Yeah... Well, maybe. I think I got this figured out, just let me see if I'm right."

Joseph braced the boy so that he could sit up and was supporting most of his weight.

"Here it is. Where do you need it?" Ben asked as he held out his shoelace.

"Just put it on the floor, where I can see it."

Ben did so, then everyone watched and waited.

"I think..." The boy said in concentration.

Joseph's eyes went wide as the shoelace began to twitch and move, all on its own.

"I was right..." The boy said with satisfaction as the shoelace literally began to slither on the floor beside him.

When the shoelace suddenly stopped moving, Joseph looked down at the boy in his arms with concern and found that he was passed out cold with fresh blood running from his nose.

"Kenyon. Do you think you can stop his bleeding?" Joseph asked suddenly.

"I can try." Kenyon said as he moved away from Korbin and shifted a few feet over.

"Be careful, you're close to your limit." Jason warned him.

"Just let me know when." Kenyon responded, then placed his open palms over the boy's eyes.

Randa was using toilet paper to sop up the blood while Kenyon worked to heal whatever was causing it to flow in the first place.

Joseph looked around and his gaze stopped on Dennis and Cory, standing side by side. "Is this what you needed me here for?"

"I don't know." Dennis admitted.

Cory had a deeply contemplative expression and Joseph waited to find out what was on his mind.

"I don't think so... not yet." Cory said slowly, as though he were looking at something far distant.

"Korbin's waking up!" Kyle happily announced.

Joseph turned to see Korbin's eyes slowly opening.

"How are you feeling?" Joseph asked as he hurried to Korbin's side.

"Alright... I think. What happened?"

"You passed out from a bloody nose."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. It's beginning to look like the Reds are telekinetic. If that's the case, your nosebleed could be an indication that your power is awakening."

Korbin seemed to be lost in thought for a moment. He finally slowly said, "I was so focused on that wall, trying to think of anything we could do to break through it that I might have been trying to break through it with my mind."

"You might want to start with something a little bit smaller."

A sudden movement in his peripheral vision caused Joseph to turn in time to see Cory and Dennis running away, down the Red hallway.

"What's up with them?" Kyle asked curiously.

"They say that they can get glimpses of the future and I guess whatever they saw told them that they need to be somewhere other than here."

"Should we, maybe, be somewhere other than here, too?"

"They said that I need to be here for something."

"Did they say for what?"

"Not really."

"What did you need?" Doug asked as he ran into the meeting room, from the Red hallway, directing his question at Joseph.

"For what?"

"Those guys in yellow said that you needed us in here."

Joseph looked past Doug and saw Jude and Tanner approaching. He then quickly asked, "Where are the Yellow guys?"

"When they were done talking to us, they left down the Black hallway." Jude said simply, then asked, "What did you need?"

Before Joseph could answer, a low vibration in the floor caught his attention.

"It's starting again!" Korbin called out.

"The doors! They're closing!" Randa screamed.

Joseph turned and saw that walls were sliding into place on both sides of the room, effectively blocking them off from both hallways.

The vibration in the room was deafening and Joseph once again found that he had to fight to maintain his balance.

"There's something I don't understand." Jason said quietly from Joseph's side, breaking the long silence that had fallen over the room.

"There's a lot of things I don't understand." Joseph automatically answered as his mind fought to process what had just happened to them.

"The Yellow guys brought you here for a reason... I don't get that."

"Maybe it's just so that I could be trapped in the same place with the two of you. I can't think of any real reason for me to be here. But since I can't think of anyone else that I'd want to be trapped with, I don't have a problem with it."

"Are you giving up?"

"I don't know what else to do. We're cut off from food and water. We're cut off from other people..."

"We need to fight. We need to find a way to break out of here." Korbin said as he straightened his posture.

"I saw that wall sliding into place. That thing's almost a foot thick. I don't care how many plastic tables you throw at it, you're not going to break it."

"Yeah. I'd come to pretty much the same conclusion about the inner walls."

"Jude? Did you come up with anything to do with the computers?"

"The vocal interface must have been turned off. None of the verbal commands are working."

Joseph nodded with resignation.

"What do we do now?" Kenyon asked anxiously. It was only then that Joseph noticed that Kenyon still had his palms covering the boy's eyes.

"We wait."

"For what?"

"Whatever happens next."

"What if nothing happens?"

"I guess we die, then."

"Do you really think so?"

The panel in one of the outer walls lit up as the computer voice said, "Level three residents. Self-destruct has been initiated. All personnel are urged to evacuate immediately. Self-destruct in forty-five minutes."

After a moment, Joseph turned to Kenyon and quietly said, "Yeah. I really think so."

"Kyle! Help me!" Korbin barked, then walked to the nearest table and began to drag it.

Kyle ran immediately to Korbin's aid, as did Randa, Doug and Ben.

"Should we help them?" Kenyon asked quietly.

"If you can think of anything that we can do that will make one bit of difference, we'll do it." Joseph said as he watched them use the table as a battering ram against the wall that blocked them from the Orange hallway.

"Kenyon, pull back. You're running out of juice." Jason quietly warned him.

"Oh, yeah. I got so caught up in everything, that I forgot that I was still doing it." Kenyon said as he took his hands off the boy's eyes.

"Thank you for doing that. It felt wonderful." The boy in red said quietly, with his eyes still closed.

"No problem." Kenyon said with a self-satisfied smile.

"Let's look at what other tools we have to work with." Joseph said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Jason asked curiously.

"You can sense pain. Kenyon can heal. Jon has low level telekinesis..."

"Who's Jon?"

"Him." Joseph said as he pointed to the boy in red who seemed to be resting.

"Did he tell you his name?"

Joseph thought for a moment, then said, "I think I just knew it."

"What about him? The guy in red beside Kyle?"

Joseph looked at the boy, then said, "Benjamin Lee Slater, age fourteen. He's from Tappan, New York."

"The drugs must be wearing off!"

"That doesn't really do us much good. I mean, it's not like I have laser beam eyes or something useful, like that. I can just see into people's pasts."

"If you're snapping out of it, then maybe the telepaths are too! If we try, maybe we can make contact and coordinate something with them."

"I don't know what good it would do." Joseph said, then turned at the sound of something shattering.

He looked at the group of people who were all now holding separate pieces of the plastic table.

"Does anyone have any suggestions?" Korbin asked as he looked around the room.

When Korbin noticed that he was holding the remains of a table leg in one hand, he absently tossed it aside.

"How solid is the floor?" Ben asked as he stomped his foot a few times.

"If I were to guess, I'd say it's poured concrete." Korbin said frankly, then turned to Joseph and continued, "If I had a jackhammer..."

"Yeah. Sorry 'bout that." Joseph said with an unwilling grin.

A low scraping sound drew everyone's attention.

Korbin made a 'quiet' motion as he flattened himself against the wall that he had just been battering, minutes before.

"Hello?" A timid voice asked from a gap between the inner walls in what had, a moment before, been a corner.

When a man with brown hair peaked his head into the room to look around, Korbin moved like a flash to grab him around the neck.

"Don't let the door close!" Kyle screamed as he ran as fast as he could to block the door open.

"Who are you?! Talk or I'll break your fuckin neck!" Korbin screamed as he kept hold of the man's neck and kept him off balance.

"Korbin! Stop! You're going to kill him!" Joseph said as he ran forward and fought to get Korbin to loosen his grip to allow the man to breathe.

"After what he's done to us, serves him right!"

"Korbin. This is Luke. He's not a bad guy. He's only been doing what he's told to do... what he's been raised to do."

"Make one wrong move and I'll kill you." Korbin whispered to his captive before cautiously releasing him.

"Are you alright, Luke?" Joseph asked as he watched the young man fighting to catch his breath. The first, and most noticeable thing was the brown coveralls that he was wearing, but the second was the fact that Luke wasn't a teenager. The young man was in his early to mid-twenties.

"They said that you guys were smart... I don't know how to turn it off."
Luke fought to explain.

"Are you saying that you know where the control for the self-destruct mechanism is?"

Luke nodded, then pointed toward the door that Kyle was keeping propped open.

Korbin immediately started toward the door, but Joseph held up his hand and carefully asked, "If we go in there, is someone going to try and shoot us?"

"They all left. I was going for another load of boxes and they left without me..."

"Jude. You're our computer expert. Will you see if you can figure out how to turn off the self destruct?"

"By myself?"

"No. We'll all go with you. There's nothing we can do in here." Joseph said decisively, then looked to Luke and quietly asked, "Are you okay to walk? Can you show us where the self-destruct is?"

"Yeah. We got to hurry." Luke said anxiously then led the way back through the door.

All of them were in awe as they stepped into the cavernous space. The room was enormous and seemed to be made entirely out of concrete.

"Where's the self-destruct?" Joseph asked distractedly.

"Right here. That's why I used this door." Luke said quickly, then motioned to a control console that looked like it came straight out of a 1950's sci fi movie.

"Jude, I hope you're good with legacy computer systems." Joseph said hesitantly as he stared at the electronic monstrosity dubiously.

"I can't even get Windows XP to work right." Jude said absently as he looked briefly at the CRT monitor screen.

"Can you shut it off?"

"Not from here. This is just a display. This... console is dedicated to something to do with water reclamation... I think." Jude said, then walked

from console to console trying to identify the purpose of each different workstation.

"Do you know which one of these is the self-destruct?" Joseph asked Luke hopefully.

"No. I thought it was this one, since it said 'Self-Destruct' on the screen."

"Do you think some more brain power might help?" Jason asked as he approached Joseph's side.

"What have you got in mind?"

"Let's see if we can figure out how to open all the doors. The way it all shut down at once, there must be a button or a lever somewhere that will open them back up."

"Luke, do you know where that is?"

"I just sweep floors and carry stuff."

"Korbin, would you get a few people and start opening the secret doors to all the meeting rooms? We can't do anything to help the people who are in their bedrooms, but it's better than nothing."

"Randa, Ben, Jon... you too, Kyle. Help me." Korbin called out.

"Doug, Jason and Kenyon, would you come with Luke and me to see if we can find the release lever?" Joseph asked quickly.

"If you happen to run into the self-destruct console, would you let me know? I still haven't found it." Jude asked frantically.

"Believe me, if we find it, you'll know!"

"Do you know where we are?" Joseph asked Luke quietly.

"In the command center."

"No. I mean, do you know where this base is located? The city or state or... anything?"

"No. My whole life they've been talking about when it was going to be time for all of us to go and do God's work. When they said it was time, they made me take a pill and I went to sleep, then I woke up here."

"Who is 'they'?"

"My pa and the elders... we're not supposed to talk about it."

"Elders? Like a church?"

"Yes. We're the First Order of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints."

"The First Order? What does that mean?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

Having determined that none of the consoles that they were looking at were anything important, Joseph motioned for them to walk to another bank of controls.

"In a church like ours, you can't join and you can't leave. You have to be born into the church."

"Well, from the look of it, even if you can't leave it, it can leave you."

Joseph muttered.

"Everyone in my family, everyone in the church, has been trained for all their lives to work here. My grandpa trained my ma on how to be a doctor."

"Yeah, because medical schools are so overrated." Joseph said absently as he tried to comprehend the antique technology that he was looking at.

"Maybe you want to look over there. I wasn't ever even allowed to sweep over there." Luke said as he pointed.

"Stay and check this out. I'll go have a look." Joseph said to Kenyon and Jason.

Doug looked at Joseph with question and Joseph tilted his head, indicating for him to come along.

"Your twelve-year-old sister got married?!" Doug asked Luke suddenly.

Luke looked at Joseph with confusion.

"We've got psychic powers." Joseph explained simply, then slowly asked, "Did your twelve-year-old sister get married?"

"We're not supposed to talk about it."

"She married a fifty-year-old man?!" Doug asked disbelievingly.

"Doug, let it go. Self-destruct... remember?" Joseph asked quietly.

"Oh, yeah." Doug said as they walked up to another bank of control panels.

"This looks promising." Joseph said, then called across the room, "Jude! You might want to have a look at this!"

"On my way!"

"This is sick." Doug said as he looked at all the different small television screens, each tracking the movements of a different person.

"We knew they were watching us."

"We thought they were watching us. There's a difference between making the assumption and knowing for sure."

"I don't see a cancel button, here." Joseph said as he looked carefully at the console.

"Wait! Is that the door control?" Doug asked as he pointed.

Joseph moved around to the control panel that Doug was indicating.

"Yes. I'm guessing that each one of these toggles works a door." Joseph said speculatively. "You flip the ones you want, then you press the big red button to make them all move at once."

"Can you do just one to try it out and see if it works?"

"Yeah. Let's see... I think from the way these things are labeled, that this one should work the door in the Blue and Green room that opens to the Green hallway. Can you see if we have a picture of that on the screens over there?"

"Yeah." Doug said as he hurried around to the other side.

"What's going on?" Jason asked as he and Kenyon approached.

"I think we found a way to open the doors between the meeting rooms and the hallways."

"What about the self-destruct?" Kenyon asked cautiously.

"I think we found it. Jude's looking at it now."

"I found the screen. Try the door." Doug called out.

"Here we go." Joseph called in return, then flipped one single toggle before depressing the big red button.

"It's moving!"

"Good. Then get ready because I'm going to open them all up." Joseph said as he started flipping toggles.

"What does it matter if the doors are open or not if the self-destruct goes off?" Jason asked reasonably.

"With two hundred other people brainstorming the problem, maybe we'll be able to find some way around that." Joseph answered with a shrug.

"Don't forget the Whites." Luke said quietly.

"What was that?"

Luke pointed to a central structure in the cavernous space and said, "They keep the 'Whites' in there."

"Do you mean that there's other people locked up in here besides us?"

"I overheard them talking about the Whites, sometimes. I even got to feed them once, when my brother Matthew was feeling sick."

"So, what are the Whites like?" Joseph asked as he started walking toward the enclosure.

"I don't know. I never seen them. I just loaded their food dispensers that one time. The elders never even said that there was people in there, but we all knew it because we loaded up the same 'snail trail' for them as we did for you... and for us."

"Where did you come up with the name 'Snail Trail'?"

"From Matthew, I think. He heard it somewhere and told me about it." Luke said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "Just about everyone called it that... at least when the elders weren't around."

"Nyxon, it looks like your wit and charm reached far beyond our captivity."

"I'd be just fine if it didn't."

As they stopped at the side of the large concrete structure, Joseph quietly asked, "How do you get inside?"

"I don't know. The place where you put the food in is on the corner through there and the corner back on the other side, but I don't know how you get in the middle, where the Whites are." Luke said honestly.

"Well, being a big concrete cube, there's only so many possibilities. Let's walk the perimeter. If we don't find a door, then we'll just see what we can do from the feeding stations." Joseph said simply.

"Do you want us to go check those now?" Doug suggested carefully.

"Let's do this first." Joseph said as he started walking.

"What's through this door?" Joseph asked as they approached double doors abutting the side of the cube.

"That's the crew area, our sleeping quarters and dining hall." Luke answered.

"Maybe we'll check it out later. Right now I want to see if we can find a way to get the White's out of here." Joseph said as he pushed open the double doors.

"It's weird, it being quiet, like this." Luke whispered.

"What does that door go to?" Joseph asked as he pointed.

"I don't know. I never noticed it being there before."

"From where it's positioned, it probably opens into the White area." Joseph said frankly, then stopped to look at the lock.

"What do you think it would take? A sledgehammer?" Kenyon asked speculatively.

"Luke, do you know where they keep the keys?"

"Yeah. In the lock box in the command center."

"Do you know where they keep the key to the lock box?"

"Yeah. They leave it in a drawer for me, so I don't keep bothering them, asking for it."

Joseph squatted down and looked carefully at the number engraved on the lock, then said, "Why don't you show me where?"

"Do we really have time for this? I mean, with the self-destruct and everything?" Kenyon asked anxiously.

"What do you think the chances are that we're going to be able to shut off?"

"Somewhere between slim and none."

"By the way I figure it, our chances can only improve with more minds focusing on the problem."

"It's right here." Luke said as he pointed to a box on the wall.

"If you'll go ahead and open it up, we'll see if we can find the key to the White room."

As Joseph waited, Tanner hurried up to him and said, "Jude said that that console is just the interface with all the little computers in the bedrooms and the intercom in the meeting rooms. It doesn't have anything to do with the actual self-destruct mechanism."

"We've got people coming in here from every direction. Tell them what you're looking for and get them to help you find it."

"Jude doesn't think that it's here. He thinks that the self-destruct was triggered from somewhere else. All we've got here is the warning system, telling us that we need to evacuate."

"That's really nice, since we don't know of a way out..." Joseph trailed off, then slowly turned and asked, "Luke? Do you know how to get out of here?"

"No. They pulled the ramp up." Luke said as he pointed toward the ceiling.

"How do you get the ramp to go back down?"

"I heard Matthew say that he didn't like that we can't open it from inside. He said that if there was a fire or something that we couldn't get out unless someone outside let the ramp down for us." Luke said seriously, then asked, "Do you know what key you want?"

Joseph looked into the open lock box, with over a hundred keys, each on a little peg, each with a little tag. It took him a few minutes of searching, but he finally took one key off its peg and looked at the number engraved on it.

"I think we've got the one we need." Joseph said, then noticed that Tanner was still waiting for Joseph to tell him what to tell Jude.

"Look. I don't know what to tell you. If there's a self-destruct running, we've got to find a way to stop it... maybe if it was activated from the outside you could try to find a way to call for help."

"Communications! Of course. I'll go tell him!"

"Let's hope that this works." Joseph said as he held up the key and started walking back toward the concrete structure in the middle of the hall.

As Joseph and his crew passed through the double doors, Zarah spotted him and said, "Joseph! There you are!"

"I'm glad to see that you made it out of there."

"Yeah. Have you seen over there yet?" Zarah asked as she pointed to the corner, opposite the one that Joseph had entered from.

"No. We've only made it this far." Joseph answered as he walked to the door and inserted the key.

"We found our missing people. They're all unconscious and hooked up to IV bags. I don't know what they were doing to them, but they just left them... they didn't even wake them up."

"Those that work in the medical ward are trained to do only as they are told. They are taught only as much as they need to know and nothing more. I was told never to speak to them and they were told only to speak to me to let me know when they needed cleaning or supplies."

"Who's he?"

"Hasn't your drug worn off yet?"

"Oh, yeah." Zarah mumbled, then admitted, "I forgot I could do that."

Luke looked back and forth between them, obviously not knowing what they were talking about.

Joseph didn't have any psychic insights telling him, but he nonetheless had the feeling that Luke wore that puzzled expression a lot.

"It's nice to meet you, Luke. I'm Zarah."

"Yeah. It's nice to meet you, too. I never really met any girls who weren't my family, before." Luke said with a huge grin.

"Hold that thought." Joseph said, then turned the key.

Upon opening the door, the last thing that Joseph expected to find was a blank wall.

"You unlatch it, down there." Luke said as he moved beside Joseph and pointed.

"Can you show me?" Joseph asked, not seeing what Luke was indicating.

Luke walked past Joseph and undid a small latch at the edge of the wall. After doing so, Luke pushed on the wall, causing it to pivot on some hidden, central axis.

"No wonder we couldn't figure out where the doors were." Jason chuckled.

"You can't keep us in here! Let us out!" A girl, dressed in white coveralls, screamed as she staggered toward the open door.

"Don't worry, Cassie. We're keeping the door open." Joseph assured her.

"Did you stop the self-destruct?" Cassie asked in panic as she finally made her way to the door.

"No. We were actually hoping that you might be able to help us with that." Joseph said as she passed by him.

Joseph looked into the room to find five other people, dressed in white, looking back at him.

"Well, do you want to leave or not?"

All of them got up from the table and started for the door at the same time.

Joseph started to back away and bumped into Jason, who was standing behind him.

"Back up. We're about to get stampeded."

Jason seemed to be frozen in place, staring at one of the 'Whites'.

"Teddy?"

The boy that he was looking at smiled and said, "Actually, it's Theodore, now. I told you that I'd see you again."

Joseph looked at Jason in time to see all the color drain out of his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Close the door."

"Too late." Joseph said as the five remaining occupants of the 'meeting hall' stumbled past them.

The last of the group was Theodore. He stopped between Jason and Joseph long enough to say, "Now things get interesting."

Joseph was confused by the terrified look on Jason's face and wished that he had better control of his gift so that he could 'know' what was wrong with him.

"Remember the self-destruct?" Kenyon asked in an urging tone.

"Um, yeah." Joseph said distractedly, then put a hand on Jason's arm and guided him to walk away from the 'White' area.

As they walked away, back toward the double doors that led to the 'command center', Jason quietly said, "I think you just made things a whole lot worse."

"What's wrong?" Joseph asked as they walked.

Jason shook his head, then said, "Kenyon's right. We need to get the self-destruct stopped before we worry about anything else."

Joseph shared a look with Kenyon, but didn't dispute Jason's words.

"Does anyone know how to stop a self-destruct mechanism? Time is running out!" Joseph asked the nearly fifty people who were milling around the command center and the accompanying area that looked to be something of a machine room.

A boy in white leaned against one of the control panels and said, "If they didn't have me so drugged up, I could probably find out what we need to know. But I can't help you like I am now."

From all appearances, Joseph would be willing to bet that as casual as the boy acted, he was probably propping himself up like that because he wouldn't be able to stand upright for any length of time.

"I'm sorry, Gary. But I don't think we have any way of helping you with that... unless... do you think that a psychic healer could do anything about the drugs?"

"No. We've tried that. Cassie can do healing, but the drugs are like poison in our systems. Nothing gets rid of them but time... Speaking of time, do you have any idea of when it is? I mean, the day and date?"

"No. I was able to estimate it for a little while, but now I have no idea."

"Do you know what year it is?" The youngest among the whites asked anxiously.

"It's probably still 2012. I don't think it's past Christmas yet."

"2012? I've been here three years!?" The girl asked before breaking down into tears.

"Three years? We've only been here about a month... as far as I know." Joseph said as he tried to find any indication that his estimates of time might have been severely off.

"I've been here almost five years." The boy that Jason had called Teddy, said as he approached.

He didn't give any outward appearance of being drugged, but Joseph supposed that it might just be an act that he'd been able to perfect in the years that he had been having to deal with it.

"They've kept me psychically blinded most of the time, but I saw this day coming. I saw what was going to happen next."

"What? Can you tell us?"

"Don't." Jason said under his breath as he stepped to Joseph's side.

"C'mon, Jason K, don't be mean. Did you know that you're the first friend I ever had?" Theodore asked with a crooked smile that sent a shiver up Joseph's spine.

"How can you call me your friend after telling me all those horrible things?"

"I only told you the truth." Theodore said with a shrug.

"Joseph, don't listen to him. It's true that he can see into the future, but he'll tell you just enough of the truth to get you to do what he wants you to."

"I was a kid with a really, really big psychic ability. Sometimes I used it to hurt people and... yeah, sometimes I used it to hurt them before they had the chance to hurt me. But that's because I could see what they were capable of. I knew what they'd do if I didn't stop them."

"Is that what you did to me?"

"No. You're my friend. For you, I did what I had to do to make things turn out right, so that you'd be right here, right now."

"So, what happens next?"

"That's a good question. Thanks to them chemically blinding me for all these years, I've only caught flashes of the possible futures and I have no way of knowing how many of those futures aren't possible anymore."

"Do you know how to disarm the self-destruct?" Joseph interrupted.

"No. I don't know that."

"Then you guys can work out the rest later... assuming that we have a later. Right now it's looking like we only have about fifteen minutes left to live."

"Tina? How's your flames?" Theodore asked loudly.

"No fire. Not even any smoke." One of the younger 'White' girls responded.

"Jesse? How about you? How's your second sight?"

"Blinder than a bat." The girl who had been crying earlier answered.

Theodore then turned to Joseph and said, "When we're not drugged out of our minds, we're actually kinda useful."

"Any of us who've shown that we have an ability were drugged during the last blackout. It's starting to wear off, but I don't think that any of us are up to doing very much."

"Yeah." Theodore acknowledged, then his gaze shifted to Luke before he slowly asked, "Is it just me, or does someone seem out of place here?"

"Luke works here. He was left behind by his people when the base was evacuated."

"Then why are you asking me how to turn off the self-destruct? You should be asking him!"

"I did. He doesn't know."

"And you believed him?"

"That's my ability. I can see his past. I know what kind of a person he is. Luke doesn't lie." Joseph said seriously, then looked Theodore in the eyes and said, "You, on the other hand..."

"Yeah. Yeah. You can go ahead and tell me how evil I am after we figure out how to neutralize the explosive charges."

"Explosive charges? Are you telling me that you know where the self-destruct mechanism is located?"

"In general, yeah. But it's somewhere that we can't reach it."

"What about the control system? Do you know where that is?"

"Yeah."

"Where?!"

"About a thousand... or fifteen hundred miles from here... as the crow flies."

"So, there's no way to shut it off from here?"

"Nope. It's possible to neutralize the explosive charges at this location. But it's not possible to do anything from inside this base."

"How sure are you?"

"Since it's my life at stake, let's just say that I was sufficiently motivated to pay attention to that particular vision. But I've been so drugged up for the past few years that I've only been able to get flashes of visions and all kinds of things might have changed since then. But from all that I know, there is absolutely no way that we can disarm or disable the self-destruct ourselves. We need help."

"Greens! Do we have any telepaths who are strong enough to call to anyone outside?" Joseph asked as he looked around at the greens dotted amongst the other colors.

"Our strongest telepath couldn't call to the far side of this room." Wade answered.

"Yellows? Does anyone have a vision of the future that can give us a hint of what we can do to save ourselves?" Joseph called out to the crowd in general.

"We already did it." Dennis said, with Cory at his side.

"What do we have to do now?"

"We don't know that. We were just able to see that if Luke were killed, then a lot of people would die. You being there to protect him made it possible for all of us to be here, now." Dennis said seriously.

"Why didn't you just tell me that?"

"Because that could have changed what you did or how you did it. We just had to get you to be in the right place at the right time, then leave you to it." Cory explained.

"They're right. That's how it works." Theodore said with a nod.

"But what do we do now?"

Cory and Dennis looked at each other for a moment, then Dennis finally said, "There's layers on top of layers of things that could happen and some of them aren't too nice. There's no way that we can see past that. But there's at least a chance that someone from outside is going to stop the self-destruct and rescue us. We need to be ready for that and be sure that no one gets left behind."

"Okay." Joseph said thoughtfully, then looked around and said, "Each leader, take a team to sweep your area to see that we haven't forgotten anyone. If you find someone who is too sick to move, come back here and get a healing team. We've only got a few minutes to do this, make it count!"

"What about Julie? Zarah said that they've got her sedated." Jude asked anxiously.

"Yeah. Actually, there's about eight of them, like that." Tanner added.

"Jayce, can you handle that?"

"Yeah. Kenyon, will you help me?"

"Sure."

"Autumn, will you take a team to check the Gray section?" Jason asked hopefully.

"I've got it!"

As Joseph was watching everyone spring into action, he noticed Theodore ripping the wires from inside a control panel.

Joseph walked up beside him and quietly asked, "What are you doing?"

"This thing generates the tone to put us into a hypnotic state... or at least it used to. No one is going to be using this thing on us again."

"Good."

"Who would have thought that a retrocog would step up and become the leader? I never saw that coming."

"A what?"

"Retrocognition. It's one of the base abilities of clairvoyance. I never saw much use for it, but you seem to make it work."

"What did you do to Jason?"

After a moment to consider, Theodore quietly said, "I hurt him. I made promises that I didn't keep, then I ran away and left him all alone. The funny thing is, I already knew that I couldn't get away. I'd seen it. I went through all of that for Jason, just so that he'd be in the right state of mind so that he'd be selected for the program so we could be here, now."

"I love him."

"So do I." Theodore said simply, then added, "But you don't need to worry about it. I love him the way that seven-year-old best friends love each other."

"Joseph! We found some stretchers. Do you want for us to load up the sedated patients?" Wade asked as he quickly approached with Ryan at his side.

"Sounds good. You can set them down right over there, so they'll be close at hand when the ramp drops down."

"When the ramp drops down? You sound pretty sure about how things are going to turn out." Theodore said with a teasing grin.

"Well, if I'm wrong, who's going to know?"

"Good point."

The End