**Pi: Holding Together [Union]**

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**Pi: Holding Together [Union]**

by **Mice**

**Summary**

Logan Cale heads east with a message.

**Notes**

The year is 2003. The world changed for the worse a few years ago in The Collapse. Nobody's entirely sure what caused it. Seattle is a trashed out mess of a police state, just like in Dark Angel. So is most of the rest of the world. This story is the sequel to Manticore -- In that story, John Fitzgerald Byers met Logan Cale and Max when he went to Seattle to investigate the Manticore project. Thanks to Sally and Anndie for brilliant beta. I Ching quote from the Wilhelm/Baynes translation.

*Holding to him in truth and loyalty;*
*This is without blame.*

*I Ching*, hexagram 8, Pi, six at the beginning

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DECEMBER 4th, 2003
Byers waited nervously at the gate, watching the flood of people leaving the plane. The traffic he'd seen today had been mostly military, area residents, or business travelers who could not avoid the area. Food riots had been sweeping the DC area for several weeks, and civilian travel was being discouraged. He ran a hand through his chestnut brown hair, mussing its usual perfection slightly. With a flick of the wrist, he brushed a speck of lint off his somewhat threadbare suit, worn under a black wool-lined trench coat that had also seen better days.

He knew that Logan would be offloaded last, treated more or less as luggage because of the wheelchair. To remove him earlier might "inconvenience" the passengers who could walk. He'd been there half an hour early, even though he knew that the flight would probably be late. All flights were these days, after all. They flew more on "suggestion" than schedule. It reminded him of some of the places he'd traveled in South America a few years ago, while he and his friends had been tracking down information on yet another drug-financed American political coup in a small Latin American nation. They'd nearly been killed when the weekly plane didn't show up on the right day, and had been forced to escape the country on foot through a mountain pass.

Finally, a tall, handsome man with spiky dark blond hair wheeled out of the corridor and into the gate area. Byers sighed and relaxed slightly, then went to meet his lover.

"John," Logan said with a smile, taking his hand and trying to pull Byers down for an embrace.

"Not here," Byers whispered to him, his voice tight. He glanced around nervously. "Being out is okay in Seattle, but around here these days, a public hug could get us both killed."

Logan nodded. "Later then." He squeezed Byers' hand and let go.

Byers smiled. "Definitely later. Did you check any bags?"

"I have one, yes."

"Let's go and pick that up, then." Byers took the handles of Logan's chair and set off for the baggage area. "How was your flight?"

Logan shook his head. "Uneventful, unless you count the thunderstorm over the upper Midwest. Chicago, as usual, was barely navigable for the flight transfer."

"Any trouble with the paperwork?" The slender, bearded man asked.

"None." Logan cleaned his glasses on his shirt. "I did have to tell them I was coming here on business, though. They're not allowing any tourist traffic into DC right now."

Byers nodded. "I figured as much. I was worried; the riots have been spreading. I'm not sure it was wise to come right now. Waiting until January probably would have been better."

"I would have done that, but I needed to pass a message along from Max."

"It must have been urgent." Byers pulled the bag Logan indicated from the moving track filled with bags, suitcases, and boxes of various shapes and sizes. "She couldn't just call Yves?"

Logan shook his head. "We haven't been able to raise her for close to three weeks. Do you know where she is?"

Byers thought carefully. "You know, I don't think that any of us have seen her in about that long
either. She doesn't make a habit of checking in with us on a regular basis, though. She comes and
goes pretty much on her own whims. Is there reason to think she might be in trouble?"

"I'm not sure," Logan said. "Max gave me the message for her, but didn't tell me what it was. All we
know is that we haven't been able to locate her."

Byers sighed. After punching a combination on a pad on the side of the ancient blue VW microbus,
he took the key out of his pocket, opened the passenger door, then opened the side door. "Here, let
me help you up into the van."

The two men worked together to get Logan into the high bench seat, allowing their touches during
the process to linger slightly longer than necessary, their heads close. "I've missed you," Logan
whispered as John helped him shift his weight into the seat.

"I've missed you too," Byers replied, not looking up from his task. "More than you could imagine."

Logan chuckled. "I can imagine a lot, John."

Byers blushed slightly. "I hope you're imagining what we'll be doing tonight," he said quietly.

"Oh, definitely," Logan replied with a grin as Byers folded the wheelchair and slid it into the back of
the battered, heavily modified microbus.

"Once we get out of here, we can talk a little more freely," Byers said, getting into the driver's seat
and starting the sputtering vehicle.

Logan looked around at the vintage van, taking in the many modifications, and the equipment behind
the curtain that separated the front seats from the rest of the vehicle. "Are you sure this thing still
moves?"

"Combination of solar and new fuel cell technology," Byers said, "but Gilgamesh here still rattles
like an old VW." He patted the dashboard.

"Gilgamesh?"

"Frohike named it," Byers said. "You can blame him. I would have called it Rocinante. 'Formerly a
van.'"

The younger man laughed. "I knew I should have pegged you for a Don Quixote fan."

"Tilting at windmills. Story of my life. And if you start singing tunes from *Man from La Mancha*,
you can get out and walk."

The two men laughed together.

Gilgamesh rattled and sputtered through streets crowded with people and bicycles. DC had fared
better than Seattle in The Collapse, at least in a structural sense, but ultimately, the population still
suffered the effects of the electromagnetic pulse and the subsequent technological disaster. More
money and effort was expended in the District than in much of the surrounding region because of its
political importance, but poverty still ruled the masses, and the middle class had entirely vanished.
Byers and the other Gunmen, once barely hanging on, had slid into a harsh and difficult poverty
along with the rest of the population.

Byers guided the van through areas where buildings had recently been burnt out. Some streets were
still blockaded with rubble, and he avoided these as best he could. The city had become a maze in
the last few years, almost impossible to navigate without a local guide. Fortunately, he had years of experience negotiating the area even before The Collapse.

A nasty December slush beat down from the mica sky as they got to the city sector gate. A guard approached the rickety van.

"Pass?" he demanded.

Byers showed a battered official zone pass as hoverdrones observed overhead.

"Business?"

Byers looked at the guard. "Returning home after picking up a business associate at the airport."

Logan waved and gave the guard a cheery smile.

"Move along," the guard said, motioning the van through with a tired gesture.

Once past the gate, Byers relaxed visibly. "I hate going in there," he said tightly. "Half the time, they try to search the van. They want to know about the equipment we have in here. I've been arrested a couple of times for it. I didn't like the idea of driving in, but at the moment, the only other way we have of getting around is by bicycle. I didn't think you'd be too thrilled with that idea."

Logan looked over at Byers, and said "Not really." He took a deep breath. "So what happened out here? How did things get so bad? I thought the scene here was still relatively safe."

Byers moaned. "A cadre of ultraconservatives took over the local government about three months ago. They've imposed martial law along some very harsh Biblical lines, and anybody who argued got shot. Can you believe we've had public stonings?" He shifted uncomfortably as he spoke.

"The guys and I are trying to figure a way to get out of Dodge with enough of our stuff to survive on, but we're not sure how long it will take. I hear things are better up in Pennsylvania right now. It's still rough, but at least I'm not likely to get shot up for holding your hand in public. The guys and I... well, it's a good thing we live in a warehouse district, or people would be asking questions and we might have gotten burned out of the building by now. I mean, four guys -- three of whom have been living together for years. Even though the other guys are straight, all it takes is an accusation these days. It's like the medieval witch craze around here. All we need are the public pillories and the bonfires."

Logan looked around at the buildings as the van moved along. "I had no idea it had gotten like this, John. Why didn't you say something before?"

"It's been too dangerous to email any sensitive information outside the area. Most outgoing email is tightly monitored, and even for us it's been difficult to get information out. The situation is really unstable right now," Byers said with a sigh. "Things seem to change every other day. We've been more concerned with the food riots though, really. The violence there is completely random. With the homophobic and sectarian violence, at least if you know what and where to avoid, you aren't likely to get caught. With the food riots, you can be anywhere and the rocks start flying. Then the bullets start. None of us have been going out much unless it's been absolutely necessary."

"Have you guys been able to get the supplies you need?" Logan's voice echoed with deep concern.

Byers turned left at a burned out stop light. "Most of the time. We had the foresight to install hydroponics about 18 months ago, so we're growing a good bit of what we need, but it's damned hard to get basics, like flour or sugar, and you can forget the luxuries. We haven't seen coffee or tea
in over six months. Food and tobacco are the *de facto* currency here right now. We've been trading food to the local clinic for Langly's asthma medications."

Logan nodded. "You have enough to trade?"

"We grow a lot of what we need for ourselves, but we also decided to grow things other people would be willing to trade for: You know what one vine ripened tomato will buy these days?" Byers grinned. "We had to give up most of our actual living space for the hydroponics, but it's kind of nice to have your bedroom in a garden... ah, here we are."

They had entered a shabby warehouse district about a mile back. Buildings were in various stages of disarray all around them, some abandoned, others burned out, but most at least marginally in use. Squatters moved in and out of the alleys, watching furtively as Gilgamesh rolled by. Byers turned the van down an alley and parked near a set of stairs, some leading up, some down.

"Wait here," Byers said. "I'll get one of the guys to come out and help get you into the building."

"You live here?" Logan asked in disbelief, openly gaping at the decrepit building. "This is worse than that hole Max lives in... no offense."

"It's the best we can do," Byers replied.

Logan watched as John vanished down the stairwell. Moments later, he returned, followed by a tall, buff man with short blond hair.

Byers introduced his roommate to his lover. "Jimmy, this is Logan Cale. Logan, my associate, Jimmy Bond."

"So you're Byers' friend. That's so cool. I'm really glad to meet you." Jimmy smiled and offered Logan a big hand.

Logan smiled back and completed the handshake. "Pleased to meet you, Jimmy."

Byers looked around the alley, checking to make sure that no one was watching. "Okay Jimmy. You need to carry Logan up into the living quarters. I'll get the wheelchair and his bag."

Jimmy nodded and picked Logan up in his arms. Carrying the tall, well-dressed man carefully, he hurried up the stairs. Byers took the wheelchair and bag from the van, closed the doors, armed the security and alarm systems, then followed Jimmy with the chair and the bag.

When he got inside, Jimmy had already seated Logan on the couch. "Got him into and out of the bathroom," Jimmy said.

"Rather efficiently, too," Logan added.

Byers nodded. "Thanks Jimmy. Why don't you go see what the guys are up to?" He opened the wheelchair and placed it next to the couch so that Logan would be able to move around if he wanted to, and took the bag to his room. When he returned, he sat down with Logan on the couch and the two embraced.

"Quite the place you have here," Logan said, waving at the room around him. Hydroponics tanks were everywhere and the place was crowded with greenery. Plants and grow lights filled every available space, and the couch was settled in a tiny oasis of clear floor, with a couple of chairs close by. A small table stood amid the arrangement, covered with books and magazines, and a chess board attempted to carve out space for a game in progress.
"It's a lot safer than it looks from the outside," Byers said.

Logan nodded. "It would have to be. If people knew what you had in here, they'd be breaking down the doors."

"Don't think it hasn't been tried," Byers said wearily. He sank back into Logan's embrace. They were silent for several minutes, simply soaking in each others' presence. Byers looked into Logan's eyes, about to speak, but was silenced with a soft, passionate kiss.

"We can talk later," Logan whispered. He leaned into Byers and kissed him again.

The two were busy running their hands over each other and unbuttoning each other's shirts when Frohike coughed. Byers looked up with a start, then blushed. He hurried to rebutton his shirt.

"Sorry, guys. I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay. And... well... I wanted to meet 'Eyes Only.'" The short, scruffy older man grinned sheepishly.

"We were doing just fine, Frohike. You could have had better timing, though," Byers complained.

Jimmy looked down at Frohike. "They were, like, kissing."

"This was better timing, man," Langly said, the tall, lanky blonde appearing on the stairway from the office behind his shorter companion. "Another five minutes and you guys woulda been all naked on the couch. I mean, jeez, Byers, you got a room."

"Yeah, Jimmy," Frohike answered. "They were kissing."

Logan laughed. "Your infamous partners, Ringo Langly and Melvin Frohike, I take it?"

Byers, his eyes covered with one hand, nodded in embarrassment. "Infamous barely begins to describe it."

"So, you had time for your greetings and all, let's get on with the tech talk, dudes," Langly said. "How do you keep those guerilla broadcasts up, Logan?"

Logan looked over at the long-haired, skinny blonde man. "Actually, I have something I need to ask you first."

Frohike and Langly looked at each other.

Jimmy smiled. "He's gonna ask *us* something! Man, these guys are the best. They can answer just about any question you've got. They're the experts."

"They certainly are," Logan said, running a hand down Byers' back. Byers let out a nearly silent sigh. "But this isn't a tech question. I need to find Yves Harlow. I have a message for her."

Byers nodded. "He says that he and Max haven't been able to raise her in about three weeks. This could be serious."

"Yeah, well, she disappears on us like that all the time," Langly said.

"I worry about her," Jimmy said, a glum expression on his face. "She does a lot of stuff that could really get her in a bunch of trouble. Even more dangerous stuff than we do."

"Why do you need to get in touch with her?" Frohike asked.
"Max said that she needed to talk to her. I assume it's more Manticore business," Logan replied. "I have a disk for her, but I don't know what's on it. Max insisted that it was for Petra's eyes only."

Jimmy's face clouded in confusion. "Who's Petra?"

"Another one of Yves' names," Byers said patiently.

"If she were able to contact us, she would have by now," Logan said. "Petra and Max have been staying fairly closely in touch since John got them back in contact." He gazed over at Byers and ran his fingers gently along the man's jaw line, tracing the thin trail of beard to his chin. John closed his eyes and let his head lean subtly into the touch.

After a moment, Byers looked pleadingly at Frohike. "Could you guys please give us some time by ourselves? I know you want to talk shop, but we'd really like to get reacquainted, okay?"

Frohike chuckled. "Yeah, sure. We'll go see if we can turn anything up on Yves. Meanwhile, why don't you two take it to your room? I don't wanna come up here in a couple of hours to read and find you still on the couch."

"But I wanna know about the guerilla video broadcast stuff, man," Langly bitched.

"Yeah, and Logan's here for a week," Frohike snapped back. "You'll have time to ask him. Now get your skinny blond ass down the stairs and give these boys some privacy!"

The two got up, but Jimmy sat frozen in place, looking at Logan and Byers.

Frohike clapped a hand on Jimmy's shoulder. "You too, Gigantor." He jerked his thumb at the stairway.

"But they're guys," Jimmy said as he stood. "You said we don't hug, but Byers and Logan were kissing. What's with that?"

Langly laughed. "They're gay, Jimmy."

"Well, I know they're happy to see each other. But you guys don't kiss when you're happy to see each other. Or, I mean, I've never seen any of you do it. Or is this one of those things like Carl who turned into Carol?"

The men's voices faded as they headed down the stairs into the office.

"Is he really that stupid?" Logan asked.

Byers sighed. "He's not stupid, exactly. He's just led a very sheltered life, and he's a little slow on the uptake sometimes. He'll be okay with it when he understands what's happening between us. He's very open minded. I don't think there's a hateful bone in the man's body. But we may get some... interesting questions later." He smiled. "Would you like me to fix you some dinner?"

Logan kissed Byers again. "Yeah. I'm starved, and not just for food."

Byers laughed. "Oh, I like the sound of that."

***

"No, Jimmy, it's not really like Carl turning into Carol, although sometimes that has something to do with it," Frohike replied. They passed a row of 50 gallon barrels as they entered the office space, each of which contained a growing potato plant.
Jimmy thought Frohike's response over carefully as Langly started outlining parameters for their evening's task. "So you're saying that Byers and Logan are, like, dating?"

"That's about the size of it, dude," Langly said. He motioned Frohike over to a keyboard. "Come on, Fro. We need to get started on this. You know how slippery Yves gets when she doesn't wanna be found. Bitch."

"You can't talk about Yves like that," Jimmy protested.

Frohike laughed. "Yeah, she may still have the place bugged." He turned his attention to his monitor, typing swiftly. "Wonder what she's got herself into this time?"

Jimmy smiled. "Maybe she's got a hot story?"

"She is a hot story," Frohike replied.

"She sure is," Jimmy said, wistful. "But if Byers and Logan are dating... well, how can they... you know. I mean, guys don't have anginas."

Langly snorted and turned to Jimmy. "That's vaginas, dipshit."

Frohike choked back a laugh. "Even the virgin knows that, Jimmy." He jerked a thumb at his lanky blond companion.

Langly glared at Frohike. "Asshole. You know I haven't been a virgin since... uh... never mind."

Jimmy looked over at Langly. "Well, okay, but still, how would two guys do something like that?"

Langly and Frohike looked at each other. Frohike looked up at Jimmy and said, "We ain't even going there, pal. You want to talk about the mechanics of guy sex, you have to go to the experts."

"Yeah," Langly said. "And that would be Byers. And Logan."

Jimmy looked puzzled. "But I thought Byers loved Dr. Modeski?"

"He likes girls too," Frohike observed.

"Oh." Jimmy turned and started for the stairs back to the living quarters.

"And where are you going?" Frohike asked.

"Up to ask Byers and Logan about --"

"Not right now, you idiot!" Langly shouted.

"Wait until later, Jimmy," Frohike said. "I'm sure they'll answer your questions, but they want some privacy tonight."

Jimmy grinned. "Oh, right! Does that mean they're..."

"B-I-N-G-O," Langly replied, turning his attention back to the work at hand.


***

John and Logan lay together in John's bed, naked, their bodies pressed in a comforting embrace. The
room was barely large enough to contain a bed and a dresser, and even then, most of the dresser's top was crowded with basil plants. Pepper vines grew in profusion, guided by a grid of strings along two walls and across the ceiling of the room. Dinner had been quiet and fairly simple, a thick, hot vegetable stew to drive back the cold of the December night. Logan's head rested on John's smooth chest as they caressed each other slowly.

"You're finally here," Byers said gently, tracing a finger along Logan's ear and down his stubbled jaw.

Logan hummed his approval, a soft rumble in his chest. He passed his fingers over John's small, brown nipples, and the Byers' breath caught.

"God, I missed you," John whispered.

Logan said nothing, but nibbled and licked his way along Byers' chest. He paused for a moment and nipped at a nipple. John responded with a delighted sound, not sharp enough to be a gasp nor throaty enough for a moan; the noise seemed to come up from his abdomen and escape as a not-quite-sigh.

"I like the sound of that," Logan said. He nipped again, and was rewarded with a similar sound. He ran a hand down John's side, over the hollow of his hip, and along the inside of his thigh.

John's body was ablaze with the soft sensation. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to sink into the sensual touch of his lover. "Please don't stop," he said.

Logan chuckled. "Did I ever tell you that you talk too much?" he asked.

"I..."

"Stop that, or I'll stop what I'm doing."

John silenced himself instantly at the terrible threat. Logan's fingers continued tracing the lines of his body, sliding along the edges of muscles, pressing gently into sensitive spots. He allowed himself a contented sigh, but restrained the expressions of pleasure that gathered on the tip of his tongue.

The need for restraint didn't last long, as Logan's mouth covered his, tongue probing gently between his lips. His own tongue joined the caress, and the kiss electrified him, adding to the sensation of Logan's moving hands. He could feel his pulse and breathing quicken as his world melted slowly into pleasure.

Byers' own hands moved over Logan's body as well, taking in the strength and definition of his lover's upper body, toned by the exertion of life in a wheelchair. John's hands moved down Logan's back and followed the curve of his ass down to his thighs, and his desire rose, filling his chest and causing his breath to catch.

He started to turn and roll Logan to his back. "Let me --" he began, but Logan cut him off again.

"No. It's been too long, and I really want to do this for you. You were doing most of the work last time, after all."

"But..."

Logan looked into John's eyes. "What did I tell you? Now hush; no talking. We can talk later, about anything you like." He ran a gentle hand along John's hard cock to emphasize his words.

Byers moaned and nodded. He gasped as Logan's hand moved away from his cock and down along
his inner thigh again, barely managing to hold his tongue as Logan's mouth traced patterns down his abdomen and into the hair at his groin. When Logan took him into his mouth, John groaned loudly at the intense heat and wetness.

Logan chuckled, then started caressing John's cock with his tongue. Byers ran his hands through Logan's hair, his body responding to the pleasure of his lover's lips and tongue. Logan caressed John's balls and his fingers roamed everywhere along John's ass as he sucked. Byers groaned and pulled him tighter to his body as Logan licked and sucked more intensely.

"God..." Byers whimpered, trying to obey Logan's restriction, but failing. Logan made a low, growling sound in his throat as he sucked, and John gave up on words, settling for a long, deep moan as the sensation raced through his body. He wanted more, needed more, but without speaking, all he could do was press more deeply into Logan's mouth, hold the man's head more tightly to himself, and tremble from the pleasure he felt as Logan's hands moved over his body to caress sides, chest, legs and ass.

When Logan slid a finger into his ass, John let out a sound; half whimper, half groan. He could hear Logan chortle before he latched onto John's cock again and sucked hard. Byers wanted to beg, wanted to scream for Logan to fuck him, wanted to cry out for the other man's cock to pound into him, deep and hard. He choked back a howl of ecstasy and frustration, instead producing a keening cry. The mouth around his cock released its hot, tight grip, and Byers panted and tried to push Logan's head back down.

Logan grinned. "Oh, believe me John, you want this." He pulled himself up along John's body, and together they fumbled to line up Logan's cock with John's opening. When Byers finally got a good grip on Logan, he realized that his lover's cock had already been slicked, and he had been too lost in his own sensations to notice. Then Logan's hard cock pierced him, filling him, and his body took over again.

The two rocked against each other, and John gasped and moaned as Logan moved deep inside him. Byers hadn't realized Logan would be able to manage this kind of penetration and motion, depending only on his arms and his upper body strength, as his own approach tended to rely heavily on the use of his legs. Ultimately, though, the mechanics were utterly unimportant in the face of Logan's hard, deepening thrusts. Logan's grip on his body was tight, fierce. He wrapped his legs around Logan's hips and used them to intensify the thrusting, to bring Logan yet closer to him, as though allowing any space to exist between them would negate the feeling of wholeness he felt as their bodies pressed and slid together.

John's hands gripped Logan's ass, fingers digging into muscle, caressing the mounds of his flesh. The pressure of Logan's pelvic bone, and the sensation of his rough pubic hair rubbing against John's cock was bringing him to a rapid peak. Part of him wanted to slow down, to enjoy the sensations for as long as possible, but the rest of him was rushing toward orgasm as Logan's cock pounded deep inside him. He gasped and cried out, wordless, begging for more as his lover's pace quickened.

"You like that, don't you?" Logan asked, his own breathing harsh and irregular. "Harder?" he asked.

Byers answered by pulling Logan even more deeply into him with legs and hands, and Logan responded just as John hoped he would. Thrusting deep and hard, both lovers grunted and moaned, savoring the edge of orgasm, then the fullness of it as it rushed over them, pushing them headlong into a dizzy abyss of overwhelming sensation that left them spasming together, sweating and sated. As aftershocks rocked their bodies, they clung together, conscious only of each others' presence. John, energy drained, held tight to Logan and let a fathomless wave of love roll over him, tossing him like a branch in the tide.
The two panted harshly, catching their breath.

"God, you're good," Logan gasped.

Byers waited until he thought he could speak a whole sentence before replying. "You are the most amazing man I have ever met," he said quietly. Having offered his opinion, he kissed Logan; a deep, intense kiss that lasted a small eternity. As they gently broke the kiss, he traced a finger along Logan's lower lip and said, "I really have missed you. I'm so glad you're here."

Logan nodded. "So am I." He smiled and kissed the tip of John's finger. Slowly, the two drifted into sleep.

***

"Oh, man, this is just getting nowhere," Langly groaned. He was too tired to slam his head against the keyboard. He sighed.

Jimmy looked up from the filing cabinet. He had been concentrating on remembering not to put the files beginning with "The" in the "T" section. "You still can't find her?" he asked, surprised.

"When Yves doesn't want anyone to know where she is, she doesn't generally get found," Frohike observed.

"But why would she be hiding?" Jimmy asked.

Langly snorted. "If we knew that, we'd know how to start looking for her."

Frohike wafted a paper airplane across the room, where it tapped the back of Langly's head before fluttering to the ground. "Maybe we're looking the wrong way," he suggested.

"Oh yeah, Doo-hickey? So what's your big idea?" Langly picked up the plane, added a paperclip for better aerodynamics, and launched it back at Frohike from a rubber band. It hit Frohike's stomach with a low 'thwack.' Jimmy watched with quiet amusement.

Frohike picked up the plane and flung it back at Langly, missing wildly. The plane landed on a top shelf of electronics clutter. "Well, I was just thinking that it's possible somebody else found her. Maybe they don't know who they've got their hands on?"

"You think somebody's caught Yves?" Jimmy asked, worry in his voice.

"Oh, no way," Langly said. "She'd lay out anybody who put a hand on her. You know that Fro."

Frohike reached over to his screen and tapped it with a forefinger. "Maybe. Or she could have been careless."

Langly got up and leaned over Frohike's shoulder to read what he was pointing at. Jimmy joined them, reading the screen with moving lips, then looked at both of them solemnly. It was a black market posting, advertising an "exotic item" for sale.

All of the Gunmen had read enough of these postings to know what the code meant. The peddling of flesh had only become more outrageously blatant since the coup that had overthrown the local government. The junta had been so busy persecuting the people it had identified as 'dangers to the moral fabric of society' that it missed the festering sores growing openly under its collective nose. Jimmy had never understood why the new government thought people who were simply a little
different were such a threat to society.

"We don't know that this is Yves," Jimmy said.

"No," Frohike agreed, "we don't. But it's worth looking into, wouldn't you say?"

"That would never be her." Langly shook his head and leaned his hips against the shorter, scruffy man's desk.

"Under normal circumstances, I would tend to agree." Frohike leaned back, putting his feet up on his desk, hands behind his head. "But nobody's seen her in three weeks. This popped up on one of the local boards less than three hours ago, according to the time stamp. I say we toss them an email and set up a deal to see the merchandise."

"No way," Langly said. "That would just be too convenient. Besides, how would anybody catch her?"

"She's gotta sleep sometime."

Jimmy's fair face creased with concern. "Yves is too smart to get caught by anybody."

Frohike looked up at Jimmy. "We've caught her before."

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, but you guys aren't just anybody. And besides, she knows you wouldn't hurt her."

"All the same," Frohike said, getting up to hunch over his keyboard, "I'm sending them a message and asking them for a meeting. At worst, we can ask if they know anybody who's seen a similar... item on the market recently."

Within ten minutes, Frohike received a response from the black marketeers, photo attached. With Langly and Jimmy gathered round his computer, he opened the graphics file.

"It's her," Jimmy said, shocked.

"Man, she looks in bad shape, too," Langly said.

Frohike nodded, shaken. "I'll start negotiations and set the meeting."

Another hour passed before a deal was struck. Jimmy paced nervously through most of the procedure.

"She's going to cost us a fully loaded 286 with a working motherboard, a dozen tomato sets, one set of night-vision goggles, and six teabags. And they want it by ten o'clock tomorrow morning," Frohike finally announced.

"Ten o'clock?" Langly asked. A look of panic crossed his face. "Where the hell are we gonna get six tea bags by ten o'clock tomorrow?"

"Does it matter?" Jimmy asked. He felt his anger rising in him. It was just like Langly to complain about the difficulty of the task ahead, even when something as important as one of their friends was concerned. "This is Yves we're talking about. You know she's worth a lot more than that. We're just lucky we have most of that stuff here already."

Frohike nodded. "But these guys don't. It's obvious they have no idea that she's an X5. I'm not sure how they're keeping her under, but they say she's drugged. I'm just worried that she might be hurt so
bad that she's unconscious. Unfortunately, I couldn't persuade these guys to let us take a look at her tonight. They did agree to honor our bid though, and take her off the for sale list."

"Well yeah," Langly said, "that's understandable, man. More riots tonight. Hit southeast DC the worst. Hoverdrones everywhere, the streets are hip deep in heat, and we don't have any tea."

"At least we can work on that," Frohike said. "Jimmy, I don't think there's much more you can do tonight. Why don't you go hit the sack while Langly and I try to find a source for those tea bags?"

Jimmy thought for a few minutes. He didn't really feel sleepy, but Frohike usually said that when he wanted to hang out with Langly or Byers alone. The guys always had late night conferences after he was in bed, he knew.

"Okay," Jimmy agreed. "G'night guys." He climbed the stairs up to the living quarters and headed for the bathroom. He could hear quiet snoring coming from Byers' room, and noticed that the door was partly open.

Curious, Jimmy peeked inside. In the dim room, he saw Byers and Logan lying together in Byers' small bed. The two men were twined around each other, their faces peaceful. Jimmy had seen Byers asleep before, and always felt that he looked sad and tired. John always looked as though there was something missing in his life while he slept, Jimmy thought, something that he carefully hid away from the world, but right now, he looked... happy. Content, even.

Byers moved restlessly, changing the angle of his body, pulling Logan closer. The sleeping Gunman sighed. Jimmy smiled. John Byers was a hero to him, and a good friend. John always stood up for him when the others treated him like an idiot. Sure, he knew he wasn't as smart as they were, but John could look past that and see his heart; he was sure of it. John believed in him. And he was happy to see his friend so peaceful for once. He still didn't quite get how this worked between John and Logan, only knowing what men and women did together, but whatever it was that the two men did, it sure seemed to make John happy, and that was good enough for him. With a sigh of his own, Jimmy idly wished that he had someone he could be happy with. His thoughts turned to Yves, and he worried for her safety. With a last glance at John and Logan, he turned and left his friend asleep.

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TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND
LONE GUNMEN OFFICES
DECEMBER 5th, 2003
7:14 A.M.

Jimmy padded through the living area, intending to start breakfast in the kitchen, when he was distracted by the sound of voices. They were coming from John's room.

"... it will take to move to Pennsylvania?" Logan was asking.

Byers sighed. "I really don't know for sure. First we'll have to work up travel papers to cover all four of us."

Jimmy poked his head into the room. "Good morning, guys!" he said cheerfully.

Byers and Logan looked up. John pulled the covers up over his chest. Jimmy knew Byers was always awfully shy. "Good morning, Jimmy. What's up?"

"Oh, since you guys are awake, I was wondering if you could explain this whole sex with other guys thing to me."
Logan looked at Byers and chuckled. "Ah... sure Jimmy. Hang on a sec. Logan, would you lean over and pull my laptop out from under the bed?"

Logan leaned over, exposing a fair amount of his side and hip. Jimmy looked on, fascinated. He'd certainly seen enough naked guys in his three seasons with the NFL, but Logan was really quite good looking for a guy in a wheelchair, he thought. Great muscle tone in his chest, and really nice legs. After a moment of feeling around under the bed, Logan pulled the errant laptop up onto the bed, carefully avoiding tangling the wires.

"Here you go," Logan said.

Byers flipped it open and turned it on.

"You're gonna explain with a computer?" Jimmy asked.

Byers nodded. "It would be a little... easier if you could see what we're talking about, I think."

Jimmy walked into the room, and Logan patted the bed, moving his legs to make room for Jimmy to sit.

"Do you always have to use your hands like that, to move your legs?" Jimmy asked.

Logan nodded. "Most of the time, I can't feel them or move them. This is just how I have to get around."

"You're in real good shape though," Jimmy said.

Logan smiled. "Yeah, I do physical therapy almost every day. I stay on top of it."

"And me," Byers muttered quietly to himself as he opened a net connection.

Logan laughed. "I heard that."

Jimmy looked over at John. "Heard what?"

"Never mind," John said, blushing again. With a few clicks on the keyboard and a tap or two on the touchpad, he brought up a site that he figured Jimmy would be able to grasp. He turned the laptop toward his friend. "Here you go."

Jimmy looked, fascinated. "Why do guys do this, anyway?" he asked.

"Well," Byers said, "sometimes people fall in love. Even if it's two guys, or two women, they still want to be close to each other. They still... they still want to make love."

Jimmy looked at the two of them. "So you guys are in love."

John nodded, and looked at Logan. The two joined hands. Logan leaned over and kissed John softly.

"Yeah, we are," Logan said, not looking up from John's eyes.

"That's cool." Jimmy took the laptop and read for a few minutes, looking at the pictures. His eyes widened. "I didn't know that guys could do this," he said, awestruck.

"Those are only some of the things guys can do together," Logan said.

"Really?" Jimmy's face was open and astonished. "What about this?" He pointed to a particular
photo. "Can you guys do that?"

Logan and Byers looked at the photo, then at each other.

Byers turned bright red from his hairline all the way down to where the covers met his chest, Jimmy noted.

"Uh... well, some guys can, Jimmy, but I don't think Logan and I are athletic enough to try something like that. And really, I don't think I'd be strong enough to hold him up anyway."

Jimmy tilted his head. "I dunno. It looks kinda... fun. I'm pretty strong and athletic. I bet I could do it." He thought for a few moments, watching as John and Logan stared at each other. It really did look interesting. He wondered what it would be like.

Logan grinned. Slowly, an answering smile spread across John's face. It wasn't long before the two were laughing.

"I bet you could, Jimmy," John said shyly.

Logan looked over at the half-open door. "Why don't you close the door, Jimmy, and we can see if it'll work."

Jimmy blinked, confused. "If what'll work?"

Logan pointed to the picture.

"You and John are going to try that?"

Logan grinned. "No, actually, you and I are going to try that."

"We are?" Jimmy looked at Logan, then at John. "Does this mean that you guys love me?" Jimmy asked. If that was the case, it was awfully sudden.

Byers looked up. "What it means right now, Jimmy, is that we like you and since you've asked about this, we... we thought maybe you would have fun with it. If you like it, then we'll see what happens."

"Oh, okay," Jimmy said, slightly relieved. He knew that John didn't usually do anything in a hurry. "Because, like, I really love you and the guys, John. I don't know what I'd do without you guys."

Byers nodded. "That's a different kind of love, Jimmy. I think you know that."

Jimmy nodded. He did understand. He just didn't want to assume anything.

When he and John had been undercover in a Texas death row prison, he'd been afraid for John's safety, even his life. He knew Byers wasn't a fighter, and had done his best to protect his friend. He thought about what they'd been through during those three days sometimes, and wished he'd been able to get into that fight instead of John. He wished he'd been able to take care of his friend when John had been hurt.

Sometimes, deep down, he loved John the way that he knew John felt about Logan; that he loved John enough to be his lover, enough to want to share his nights with him. He'd never thought it was possible though, and besides, he liked women -- he loved women, especially Yves -- and he'd always thought that gay guys didn't like women that way; if he loved women, he couldn't really be gay himself. Jimmy also figured that John wasn't gay because he loved Dr. Modeski, so there was no way John could love him like that. But here was John, loving her, and Logan too. Maybe it was
possible to love both a man and a woman and not have it be strange. He wasn't sure what it was, though. He always thought that people wanted one or the other, but you couldn't do both.

He knew that sometimes when he touched Byers, he felt more than just friendship for him. And when they'd stood there in the rain, outside the death house, after Mrs. Pfeiffer hit John in the face, he knew he loved him then, more than he'd ever loved anyone else. He loved John for being brave, for caring about others more than he cared about himself, for being the kind of hero Jimmy knew he was.

Mrs. Pfeiffer didn't have any idea what John had been through trying to prove her son's innocence, or that he'd saved an innocent man's life despite the fact that her son really had been guilty. It wasn't John's fault that Douglas was executed. When he'd put his arm around John that night, he wished that the guys did hug, so that it would be okay for him to hug his friend, to try to make him feel better.

"Uh, does it hurt when you do that stuff?" Jimmy asked. "That... the being inside each other?"

"It can, if you don't take it slow at first, and you don't use enough lube," Logan said. "But I'm used to it, and I like it, so if we lube you up, you won't hurt me. Actually, when you're used to it, it feels wonderful."

Byers reached over Logan and pulled lube and condoms out of the bedside drawer. "You'll need to use these," he said, handing them to Jimmy. "I assume you know what they're for."

Jimmy took them, nodding. "Yeah, I've used them before."

Logan looked at Jimmy with a bit of a leer in his eyes. "But you do have to take your clothes off first," he observed.

Jimmy looked down at himself. He was half dressed in his robe and jeans. "Oh, right. Clothes."

The next thing he knew, Logan's hands were at the belt of his robe, untying the loose knot. John moved closer, and was running one hand gently along Jimmy's neck and shoulder. It amazed him that they would share something this private with him. It also excited him. Their hands moved along his body, and then Byers closed the computer and Logan slid it back under John's bed, and the two of them pulled him close and slid his clothes off him. He decided it was time to try something he'd wanted to do for a long time.

Putting his arms around John, he pulled him close, then leaned awkwardly to kiss him.

Miraculously, John responded, but stopped him after a moment.

"Am I doing something wrong?" Jimmy asked, worried and uncertain.

"There are a lot of ways to do this," John said. "It just takes a little practice. Here, let me show you how I like it." And the next thing Jimmy knew, John's mouth was covering his, and John's tongue was sliding softly and slowly over his own. Jimmy concentrated for a few moments -- Logan's hands sliding around his hips were very distracting -- on how John moved his tongue and his lips, then carefully imitated the movements. He caressed John's tongue softly with his own.

Byers leaned into the kiss, moaning, and Jimmy felt an electricity in it that he'd never felt from a kiss before, even when he'd kissed Mary Sue Morgan back in High School. His whole body was tingling. His breath quickened. He moaned and pulled John closer to him, letting the wave of pleasure pass through him. Yes, this was definitely something wonderful, something he wanted more of. He felt his cock stirring in his lap, and Logan's hands drawing closer to his hardness, then he was
conscious of Logan's lips on his shoulder, warm and soft.

Logan's hand found Jimmy's cock, and he could feel Logan's breath on his back.

"My, you're a big one," Logan said, his voice husky. "Very, very nice."

Jimmy was too busy kissing John to say anything, but the feel of Logan's hand and the sound of his voice only served to make him harder. It was almost overwhelming. He found himself trembling.

Byers broke the kiss, panting. He looked into Jimmy's eyes. "Are you okay, Jimmy? Are we going too fast for you?"

Jimmy shook his head. "No, it feels... it feels great. I just..."

Logan stroked Jimmy's cock.

"... uuuuhhh... god, that feels good..." Jimmy let one of his hands stray over to Logan's hip. He looked back at Byers. "I didn't know it could feel like this," he said, then whispered, "I didn't know you could feel like this..." He pulled Byers back in for another kiss. He felt John's hands run slowly up and down the sides of his chest. He wondered if John appreciated the years he'd put into building his body, taking the slow way, without the steroids a lot of the other guys he trained and played with had used.

As the three men moved slowly together, the covers fell away from John's body. Jimmy cautiously stroked a hand down John's back to his hip. He hadn't often seen his friend nude, but he'd always thought John was handsome, if a little thin. Touching him like this, touching Logan, and the two of them touching him was intense. None of them spoke, but their explorations began to branch out, hands and arms and mouths moving over each other. Jimmy tasted John's skin, warm and slightly salt. It was turning him on more than even his occasional fantasies suggested. The slowness of everything was starting to drive him crazy.

When Byers licked, then sucked one of his nipples, Jimmy thought he would die from the pleasure. He groaned loudly. Then Logan started sucking his cock, and he didn't think anything could be better. At least, not until he took John's cock into his own mouth. He watched as John's back arched, and ran his hands up along John's bare chest. Byers took Jimmy's hands and moved them gently to his nipples, and Jimmy caressed them, rolled them gently between his fingers and squeezed them carefully. The reaction from John was beautiful to watch, an expression of ecstasy crossing his bearded face; eyes tightly closed, mouth open, gasping for breath. Jimmy knew he had to have more of this. He had to share this feeling with John whenever he could. And he felt a deep love for his friend rising in his heart.

Logan's tongue teased him, and he had to pause in his own treatment of John's hard cock, afraid he would spasm and accidentally bite him. Then Logan's mouth moved away.

"Do you want to try that athletic bit?" Logan asked, grinning up at Jimmy.

Jimmy sucked hard on Byers, who gasped and moaned, wrapping his fingers through Jimmy's hair.

Panting, Jimmy said, "Are you sure you want to do that?"

Logan nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes. Very sure."

"You'll have to hold him up against the closet door," Byers said, trying to regain control of his voice. "There's no room anywhere else without damaging the pepper vines."
John got out of bed, helping Jimmy move Logan across the small room between them, then Jimmy leaned Logan's back against the door and slid him up a bit.

"You'll need to get my legs up over your shoulders," Logan instructed.

Jimmy did as he was told, with John helping, then gasped as John rolled the condom down over his cock and lubed him up. He wished for a moment that it was just him and John, with John's hands on him just like that, but Logan was warm and handsome and wonderful too, in his own way. He watched as John slicked lube along the crack of Logan's ass, then slid a finger inside his lover's opening.

Logan, eyes closed, gave a humming sigh of approval.

"Okay, Jimmy," John said, "now all you have to do is just slide into Logan. Be careful. You don't want to hurt him. You're a lot bigger than me." Jimmy thought he detected a tiny note of envy in John's voice.

He nodded, sweating slightly as he held Logan up. John's hand guided him up to Logan's hole.

"Are you sure this is okay?" he asked Logan.

"Believe me, Jimmy, it's more than just okay," Logan replied, his arms around Jimmy's neck.

He moved slowly, following Byers' direction, and pressed the tip of his cock up against Logan's opening. The touch was arousing. "Like this?"

"Like that," Logan said. "Now just push a little until you get inside me."

Jimmy pushed, feeling resistance at first, then gasped as the head of his cock entered Logan. He was tight and hot, and the feeling was amazing.

Logan gasped as well, then offered encouragement. "Keep pushing," he whispered, his eyes locked with Jimmy's, "it's okay. I want you deep."

Jimmy pushed slowly in, savoring the tightness and the feeling of closeness. He kissed Logan softly, as he had kissed John, and Logan responded eagerly. The only thing that would make it better, Jimmy thought, was if it was John he was sliding into.

He stood for a minute, motionless. "Is this okay? Am I hurting you?"

"Oh, no," Logan sighed, smiling. "You feel great. Now you should move a bit. Just... oh yeah... start thrusting in and out... oh, like that... yeah..."

Jimmy did as he was asked, moving carefully at first, then with more freedom as he settled into the pleasure of the movement. He leaned his head against Logan's shoulder and moaned softly as he thrust. "Oh, god, that feels good..."

A few moments later, he felt John close against his back, hard cock pressed along the crack of his ass.

"John?" he asked, trying to control his breathing.

"It's okay Jimmy. If you'd like, I'll do what you're doing with Logan. Do you want that?"

Jimmy tried to think, the intense pleasure of his cock sliding in and out of Logan's body overcoming what few brain cells he was managing to bring to bear. Logan seemed to be really enjoying it, and he
knew that being in Logan felt really good to him. Maybe he would like John inside his body, too.
Anything to have John touch him, to be closer to him.

He nodded. "Yeah... please..."

He felt John's warm, slicked hands sliding over the opening of his ass, and after a few moments, something small -- a finger? -- slid inside him. He gasped at the sharp, slight pain, but as the initial shock passed, John's finger began moving slowly. It was an... interesting sensation. The heat of his cock inside Logan was a stronger stimulation, though.

"Is that okay?" John asked gently.

Jimmy panted and whispered, "Yeah... yeah."

Another finger joined the first. It was a little tight and painful at first as well, but actually not at all unpleasant. In fact, he was beginning to enjoy the sensation. "More?" he asked, pushing deeper into Logan's body.

Logan whimpered and asked Jimmy to push harder and deeper. Jimmy, always wanting to please, increased his pace a bit and thrust deeper.

The fingers left, and Jimmy wondered what was next. Then he felt the round bluntness of John's slippery lubed cock pushing at him. John wasn't tall enough to do that, he thought, and looked around for a moment to see that Byers was standing on a thick old phone book.

"Are you sure you want me to do this?" John asked again.

Jimmy nodded, unable to speak with the effort of his thrusts into Logan. He felt John push harder against him as his own body moved back and forth between the two men. There was a harder push, and suddenly John was inside him, moaning with pleasure. He yelped at the pain of penetration.

"Slow," Byers gasped, "just take it slow for a minute."

Logan whimpered as Jimmy stopped moving.

John stroked Logan's hip. "It's okay. We'll get started again in a minute. We just have to make sure Jimmy's comfortable. You okay?" he asked.

The momentary pain faded. "I... I think so," Jimmy replied. It felt strange to have John inside him, but it also felt so... right. John slid further into him, slowly and carefully. He breathed into the pain, as he did when he was working with a strained muscle. It would be okay. If John and Logan liked this, it must not hurt for very long, he decided.

John paused again, then pushed further in. As he went deeper, a sharp wave of intense pleasure hit Jimmy. He cried out and pushed into Logan.

John chuckled. "That's your prostate gland, Jimmy." He slid back out a little and thrust slowly in over the pleasure spot again. "All guys have them. It feels really good when you rub it with fingers or your cock." Jimmy felt his knees going weak, it felt so good. He wobbled slightly, but Byers leaned into him, cock moving in deeper, helping support him as his own body held Logan up against the door.

"Oh, man..." Jimmy whispered, "...feels so good... John... god..."

Settling into a rhythm for their pleasure, the three men thrust together, moving into and against each
other. They moaned and caressed each other, kissing and nipping, thrusting harder, urging one another closer to the peak.

Jimmy felt Byers' arms around him, John's body hot and close against his back. This was better than he'd ever imagined. No wonder the guys had wanted privacy last night. After being away from each other so long, it must have been incredible to be together again. He didn't know if John would want him when Logan was away, but if John did, he wouldn't let the man spend another night alone, ever again. There was no need for John to be lonely anymore. Or for him to be lonely either, for that matter. If John would have him...

The thought of being with Byers at night, making love to him, being inside him, being penetrated by him was intensifying the physical sensations beyond belief. He heard Logan calling out as he came, felt Logan's come between their bodies as Jimmy thrust hard into John's lover. He was pleased that he could do this, that he was doing it right the first time, and neither of the other men were telling him to do anything differently. It felt good, and having John inside him, hitting that sweet spot, was bringing him closer and closer to his own peak.

"Please, John... more," he panted, and John's thrusting grew deeper and harder. He could hear John's ragged breath, feel it against the back of his neck, feel the sweat slicked between them. Breathing in the musky scent of sex, he heard John whispering and gasping, felt his friend's cock fill him. He wished the pleasure would never end, but as John drove into him again and again, Jimmy was finally pushed over the edge, slamming himself into Logan as he came.

He could feel John spasm against him as his orgasm rocked them both, John calling out breathlessly. The three trembling men clung together for a few minutes before John's legs started to give out.

"Have to... move," he panted, sliding out of Jimmy. Byers wobbled to the bed and fell into it.

Jimmy moved very carefully, carrying Logan the few steps to the bed and letting himself slide down onto it as well, watching Logan's legs to make sure they weren't caught under his body. Logan, panting, pulled himself off Jimmy, and Byers took him into his arms. Jimmy curled up with them, cuddling Byers as Byers held Logan.

They all looked at each other, still breathing hard. Byers peeled the condom off of himself, depositing it in the trash can next to the bed, and Jimmy followed suit.

Byers got his breath back first. "Oh god."

Logan nodded. "Hoo yeah."

"So how did it feel, Jimmy, your first time?" John smiled at him.

Jimmy held John close. "That was awesome." He paused, then kissed John as he'd done earlier. Byers kissed him back. "I... I hope we can... we can do that again..."

Byers looked into Jimmy's eyes, blue reflecting in blue.

"Are you sure you want that, Jimmy?"

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah. I'm sure. I..." He stopped, unsure of what to say.

"It's okay," Logan said. "Say whatever you like. We're okay with it."

Byers nodded in agreement.
Jimmy closed his eyes. He was afraid to tell John how he really felt. "I'm not sure I can," he said.

"Is something wrong?" Byers asked. Jimmy could hear the concern in his voice.

"No. Let's just... later," Jimmy said.

There was a knock at the door, and Frohike's voice rang out. "Are you guys ever gonna get out here? We've got work to do, and we're on a deadline!"

***

"Six teabags?" Byers asked.

"Yeah, but I traced down a source," Langly replied. "No thanks to Doohickey over there. He almost blew it when he offered them three porn tapes."

Frohike glared at Langly over the last minute work he was doing on the ancient 286 they needed to trade for Yves. "Fuck you, Langly. They were good ones."

"What?" Logan asked. "You offered a source porn tapes?"

"Woulda worked, too, under normal circumstances," Frohike said, "but it turns out we're dealing with the dyke couple a few blocks over. You know 'em Byers. Mar and Louise."

Byers rolled his eyes. "Why on earth would you offer Mar and Lou porn tapes?"

"Because he didn't know it was them, dude," Langly said. "We were dealing anonymous online. They're gonna give us a break on the tea though, 'cuz I told 'em it was for Yves."

Byers let himself smile a little. "Well, that's a relief. What was the final price?"

Langly picked up a baggie and waved it at John. "Half an ounce of primo weed. Had to drag it out of my personal stash of Ringo's Primo Pokalolo."

Frohike grimaced. "Hell of a sacrifice, the way he guards that stuff. It's funny though, that this kind of 'tea' is cheaper than the stuff that comes from China these days."

"'Specially when you grow your own," Langly observed.

Frohike shook his head and snorted. "You can get all the recreational substances you want, but you can't get a goddamned cup of tea."

"At least they weren't looking for coffee," Jimmy observed.

The other three Gunmen shook their heads in unison. "Ain't that the truth," Langly sighed.

"What's the deal for the pickup?" Byers asked.

"They said to send you over," Frohike replied.

Logan looked over at John. "Mind if I go with you?"

John nodded. "You sure you want to go out in this weather? It's a lot colder than what you're used to in Seattle at this time of year."

"I don't think a little snow is going to hurt me," Logan replied.
John smiled. "Great, then let's get going." Langly tossed him the baggie, which he tucked in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He went to the coat rack and took his and Logan's coats from it. "Jimmy, we're going to need your help getting Logan up the stairs."

"Hey man, don't stay too long over there. Remember, we gotta be at the rendezvous by 10 am, or we're gonna have a hella trouble getting Yves back," Langly snapped.

Byers sighed and turned to Ringo, pausing before he started out the door carrying the wheelchair. "Don't worry. We'll only be a few minutes. It's only three blocks, and I'm not going to stay and hang out."

"Get a move on," Frohike growled, rummaging in the 286 box. "Langly, where's that damned tweaker I put down a minute ago?"

John chuckled and followed Jimmy and Logan up the stairs to the alley. Once Logan was settled in his chair, they set off down the alley and into the maze of warehouse district streets as a light snow fell from the dim, overcast sky. The streets were cluttered with moving bicycles. The edges were crowded with tarp shelters, shacks of scrap wood, 50 gallon drum fires for warmth and cooking, dead pre-Collapse vehicles serving as homes or temporary shelters, and a lively street trade in the things of daily life. Sometimes people greeted Byers with a nod or a wave as he and Logan passed, while others stared at Logan and the wheelchair.

John suspected it wasn't so much the chair that people were staring at as Logan's clothing -- obviously of better quality than anyone else in the street had seen in some time. Better than his own had been for the past couple of years, in fact. He'd have to talk to Logan about it when they returned to the office. The conspicuous nature of Logan's attire could put a serious hitch in the meeting with the people who had Yves. If they were typical black marketeers, they'd probably jack the price, thinking that Logan could afford it.

They cut through a couple of alleys, taking half a block's walk off the distance of their trip. It didn't take long before the men found themselves at the back of a ratty three story office building. A chain hung near the ground-level freight door, and Byers tugged it twice. A few minutes later, the familiar growl of a freight elevator sounded, then the freight door opened. A short, rather round dark-haired woman of about 45 appeared, dressed in black leather pants and a thick, cream wool fisherman's sweater.

"Hey Mar," Byers said.

Mar looked at Logan. She looked up at Byers with an odd expression, then smiled at him. "Buenos días, Byers," she replied. "This the hot young thing you were telling me about this summer?"

John blushed as Logan looked up at him. "Hot young thing?" Logan asked, a grin on his face.

"Those were not my words," John insisted, with a warning look at Mar. "Logan, this is Mar Fuentes. Mar, Logan Cale."

The two shook hands briefly, and Mar said, "Come in before you freeze your cojones off."

As Logan wheeled into the storage bay, John helped Mar close the door. The room was loud with banging, whooshing sounds and the roar of a large fire. Byers looked over and saw Louise at her forge, busy building metal fence sections of old rebar. Off to one side, a very buff young man was pedaling hard on a stationary bicycle, shirt off, his upper body glistening with sweat. His ride was for more than exercise, though, as the cycle powered the bellows that fed the forge with forced air to make the fire hot enough for working metal.
"What's all this?" Logan asked.

"Lou's forge," Byers replied, raising his voice to be heard over the sound. "She's a blacksmith; does welding and carpentry too. Makes a lot of useful stuff. Repairs things."

Louise looked up from her work for a moment, waving at Byers, hammer in hand as her tongs held a short section of rebar in the forge coals. She wiped sweat from her forehead with one muscular forearm. "Hey dude!" she shouted.


"Oh, that's Harold," Mar replied, heading for the elevator. "Come upstairs, we can talk for a few minutes where it's quieter."

Byers and Logan followed her. Mar pushed the button for the third floor.

"I didn't see Jane," Byers said.

Mar shook her head. "Three months ago, Lou said Janie'd earned her journeyman status, and Janie took off for a commune up in Vermont. They still let us marry up there, you know. And even if the State didn't approve, nobody there would care. I hear they're going more and more Anarchist in northern New England these days. Hell, me and Lou, we're thinking about making the trip ourselves, come April or so when the weather there's better."

Byers nodded. "Yeah, the guys and I are talking about Pennsylvania. So Harold's the new apprentice, I take it?"

"Oh yeah," Mar said as the elevator cage opened. They all moved into the hallway. "It's great. Everybody thinks Harold's in bed with Lou. It's been great cover. Makes things a little easier, poco a poco."

She indicated a tiny bit with her thumb and forefinger. "These days, anything helps. It doesn't hurt that Lou's the most gorgeous blacksmith in three states, don't you know." She grinned.

Two kids ran down the hall. "Mama," the boy, about ten, shouted. "Mama, Ximena hit me!"

Ximena, a girl of about fourteen, whined, "He stole my makeup!" She turned to her brother. "Puto!"

Mar launched into a Spanish diatribe that sent her son and daughter both running back up the hall. "Kids, man. You think you raise 'em right and they turn out like this."

John smiled. He knew that Mar's kids were actually pretty good about most things, and that this was just very typical sibling dispute territory.

The trio entered the kitchen. "Sit down, Byers. Let me heat up some water, I'll make you two some nice orange peel and cinnamon tisane. Good for a cold winter day."

Byers shook his head regretfully. "Sorry, Mar. We're working on a tight deadline here. We really only have time to make the trade and run."

Mar nodded, disappointed. "Sí, sí, bueno. You need to come over later this week then. You been busy too long and haven't come to see us. It's terrible news about what happened to Yves. I'm glad we can help her out like this. She's helped us before. She's one good amiga, and ooooh, is she hot."

Byers laughed. "There are days when you sound just like Frohike."

"Hey, I know what I like. But you're right. If you guys are on a tight schedule, we should get down to
Byers pulled the half ounce of home-grown marijuana from his pocket and handed it to Mar for inspection. She opened the baggie and sniffed deeply.

"Oh, that Ringo, he grows some mighty fine weed." She smiled and sealed the baggie, then tossed it on the kitchen table. "Here Johnny, I'll get you that tea." Mar turned and rummaged in the back of one of the kitchen cabinets, emerging a moment later with a small tea tin. She opened it and took out eight teabags. "I know you need six for my chica, but you take these other two for yourself and your new sweetie. Then you bring him over for a visit while you still got him here, or I'll send Lou after you." Mar deposited the tea bags in two small baggies and handed them to Byers. "It's not good to piss off my Lou."

John grinned. The gift of two tea bags was quite an expensive one. "Thanks Mar. I really appreciate it. I haven't had a cup of real tea in..." he looked up, puzzled. "I can't even remember. If there's anything the guys or I can do for you, just let me know. I owe you one."

She nodded. "You bring your pretty boy over here," she smiled at Logan, "and I'm willing to call it even."

Logan laughed. "Sounds like you have a deal," he said.

John gave the tea to Logan, who put it in a small leather bag hanging from one arm of the chair. "We need to be going," he told them both. He looked impatiently at his watch, knowing that Frohike and Langly were probably fidgeting back at home, waiting for his return.

"It's nice to meet you, Logan," Mar said, hugging him. "And don't forget Byers, you bring this boy by soon." She gave Byers a brief hug as well. "Let me go down to the door with you."

As Byers and Logan retraced their path down the alleyways back to the street, John looked around briefly. He scanned the sky for hoverdrones, and, seeing nothing that caught his attention, leaned down and kissed Logan on the cheek. Logan looked up, smiling, and returned the rapid kiss. John knew it was risky, but he hadn't seen anyone who might have witnessed the display.

A rattle from a fire escape above their heads startled him, and he and Logan looked up. "Oh, shit," John whispered. He'd been careless. He should have known that lack of obvious observers didn't mean there weren't any. Where the hell had his faithful paranoia gone? His gut knotted as he realized that this mistake might be his last.

Two figures emerged from a pile of blankets about two stories up. He hadn't noticed them in his quick scan. They hadn't been moving. John damned himself for his stupidity.

One man, who looked in his mid-20s, said. "Hey, it's a couple queers."

The other man, not much older than the first, laughed. "Open season, man. They won't even lock us up." The two men started down the fire escape.

"Yeah," the other replied. "Like they'd bother to even look for us."

Byers' heart stopped for a moment, then he turned and ran, pushing Logan in front of him.

The younger man shouted after him, "That's right, you pansy assed wuss! Run!"

John heard their laughter behind him and pushed himself to run faster, but with Logan's weight in the chair in front of him, and the slippery, freezing slush on the ground, he didn't have much traction.
Logan's spinning the wheels wasn't helping their progress much either. He could hear the men as their feet hit the ground. He had no idea what kind of weapons they were carrying, but he had no intention of being around long enough to find out.

"Get out of here, John," Logan said. "I can cover you."

"No," John panted, stumbling. He stayed on his feet due only to having both hands on the handles of the chair. Getting his feet under him, he pushed again and started running. The young men were getting closer fast.

Logan opened the bag the tea was stored in and reached in.

Byers' foot met a slick of black ice and he went down hard. As he staggered to his feet, the men caught up. The older one, wearing a Redskins jacket, shoved Logan's chair over, tossing him to the ground, while the younger pulled a bicycle lock chain from out of the pocket of his torn wool coat. Both turned to face John, moving in different directions to flank him.

John knew better than to leave home unarmed. He refused to carry a gun, but there were other useful weapons out there that he was willing to use. He reached into his coat pocket as the man with the chain swung at him. He tried to block the blow with one arm, but the chain wrapped around it, and the lock struck hard near his elbow, shocking the arm into numbness. Byers grunted, then pulled out his extendable baton and took a swing of his own.

The man with the chain danced back as he pulled the chain away from Byers and drew his arm back for another strike. John's arm swung back in a sharp, wide arc that kept the metal baton extended, backhanding the other man with it. He had to keep them away from Logan. He didn't care much what they did to him, as long as he gave Logan time to get out into the street, where he could try to lose himself in the crowd and get back to the office to send help.

"Fucking fag!" the man shouted, doubling over and grabbing his ribs with one arm. There was something in his other hand, and before Byers realized what it was, the razor blade of the packing knife slashed past his open coat, through the front of his suit jacket and shirt, and dug a bloody trail across his chest and down his abdomen. John yelped in pain and stumbled.

The younger man took advantage of Byers' shock and loss of balance and struck him again with the chain, this time hitting him cleanly in the head with the lock. John went down, hitting the pavement hard, face first.

"We're gonna cut your dick off and feed it to your crippled up boy toy, faggot," the older man growled.

The younger one laughed. "You tell 'im, Sam. Make him watch."

Byers struggled, trying to get up to defend himself and Logan. He knew that the men intended to make good on their threat, and that he and his lover might be dead in a matter of minutes. He didn't even make it to his knees, however, before the young man struck him with the lock end of the chain again, this time across his shoulders. Byers rolled to his side with the force of the blow, trying to dodge as Sam moved in. Instinctively, his arm came up to cover his head, and this time the razor slashed into his exposed wrist.

There was blood everywhere, all of it his. Byers was terrified, knowing that even if help came, he might bleed to death before anyone could get him to a clinic. Sam leaned down and grabbed John's belt, apparently intending to cut his pants open, when two muffled shots sounded. Both of his attackers fell. Sam dropped across Byers' body, still conscious.
"Gonna kill you, fucker" Sam snarled, panting in his own pain. He leaned into Byers, opening another long cut with the knife. John wailed in agony. The back of Sam's head exploded from the impact of a third shot.

"John!" Logan shouted. He dragged himself the short distance over to Byers, pistol in hand and panic in his eyes.

Byers blinked, then squeezed his eyes shut as tears of pain ran down his cheeks. "Phone..." he gasped. "Speed dial... one..." The words had taken all his energy, and he slumped into the slush, barely conscious.

He felt Logan's hands on him, pulling the phone from his pocket. A breathless moment, and Logan was shouting into the phone. He could hear Logan, knew that he was talking to one of his partners, but he was dizzy and nauseous from the searing pain of the razor wounds, and his attention was flickering. The last thing he remembered as he slipped into the dark was the pressure of Logan's hand clenched hard around his bleeding wrist.

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The microbus turned into the alley through a gathering crowd of people, and slid to a halt. Jimmy had the side door open and hit the ground running before Langly could get the passenger door open. Jimmy's eyes were fixed on the scene before him, and what he saw scared the hell out of him.

Logan was propped against his toppled wheelchair, leaning into Byers, holding his coat down over John's bloody body. John's tie was wrapped tightly around his arm, slowing the bleeding from a long wound. Lying slumped next to Byers was a man with the back of his head blown off, and a few feet away, another man, bleeding, but apparently still alive.

"Get over here, guys!" Jimmy shouted. Langly ran toward him, carrying a blanket to use as a stretcher.

Logan turned toward the other Gunmen. "He's lost a lot of blood," he said, fighting back tears. Jimmy was on his knees next to them, and Langly skidded to a stop just before he tripped over Jimmy.

"We gotta get him to a doctor," Jimmy said, frantic.

Langly rolled the blanket out and he and Jimmy slipped Byers' limp form onto it.

"Get Logan into the van, Jimmy. I'll get Byers." Langly grabbed the top corners of the blanket and skidded Byers across the slick pavement toward the van as Jimmy picked Logan up.

Logan wrapped his arms around Jimmy's shoulders and Jimmy could feel him shaking hard. "Oh God, oh God," Logan was muttering.

"He's gonna be okay," Jimmy whispered, "he's gotta be." He ran for the van, sliding Logan across the floor in the back, then helped Langly lift Byers up and into Logan's lap. Logan once again began applying pressure to John's wounds.

Langly stayed to help Logan as Jimmy ran to grab the wheelchair, folded it quickly, and slid it into the back of the van beside the three men. With a jerk, he slammed the side door, then climbed into the passenger seat next to Frohike and slammed the passenger door.

"Dammit," Frohike growled. Jimmy looked up and saw a hoverdrone approaching, probably drawn by the growing crowd. Frohike reached into a pocket, pulling out a small electronic device. He
pointed it through the window, pushed a button, and the hoverdrone let out a squeal then crashed to the ground. Stuffing the device back into his pocket, Frohike jammed the old van into gear and made their getaway.

"This whole day is fucked," Frohike snarled. Jimmy knew that Frohike was scared for Byers and worried about being able to get to the meeting location in time to get Yves. "Everything's fucked. We're fucked."

"Shuddap and drive," Langly snapped from the back. "We gotta get Byers to the clinic, fast."

The five mile trip seemed endless. Frohike worked hard trying to negotiate the crowded streets as quickly as he could, honking and cursing at the people blocking the way. Jimmy sat quiet next to him, twisted around in his seat to watch Langly and Logan in the back as they tried to minimize John's bleeding. Langly was pulling blankets out of a storage space and wrapping them around Byers, then tossed one over Logan's shoulders as well.

He could see Logan was on the verge of tears. Since Byers never carried a gun, Jimmy assumed it was Logan who had shot the other two men in the alley. His guts knotted, and though he'd always felt he would never be able to kill another person, he realized that if he had been faced with a similar choice, to shoot another man, or watch John die in front of him, he would shoot just as Logan had. He remembered how he felt a few years ago, when he thought that the guys had died inside a collapsed missile silo, and how he'd spent hours trying to dig through tons of concrete and rubble to get to them. He was feeling the same way now, frantic and terrified. He prayed for the man who, just a few hours ago, had shared a bed and the closeness of sex with him.

"What happened out there?" he asked.

Logan looked up, his face and arms blood-spattered. There was exhaustion in his eyes. "It was our fault," he said. "We weren't being careful enough. I didn't realize how dangerous it really is out here."

"How can you say this was your fault?" Langly asked, his voice shaky. "You didn't do this to him."

"We looked. We looked all around, and didn't see anything. And John kissed me." Logan's voice cracked. He took a deep breath and started again. "Then these two guys dropped down off a fire escape, and the next thing I knew, I was on the ground and they were beating John, cutting him up. He was bleeding everywhere." Logan paused, trying to collect himself. "He... he..."

Langly leaned reached up to lean into the wound that Logan covered, and Logan released his pressure. Choking back a sob, he wrapped his arms around John's unconscious body.

"Oh, man," Langly muttered. "God."

"That doesn't sound like your fault, or John's," Jimmy said. "I don't understand why these guys would attack you just for kissing each other."

Logan opened his mouth to reply, but couldn't speak. He buried his face in John's shoulder, weeping silently.

"It's because of the people in charge of the government right now," Frohike said. "They hate anybody who's different than they think people should be. That includes guys who love other guys, and women who love other women. People who aren't committing any kind of a crime, except being different."

He pulled up in front of the house that held the free clinic they usually visited. Frohike turned to
Jimmy. "C'mon Jimmy, let's get Byers inside."

Everyone moved but Byers, and Logan, who remained huddled with his lover on the floor of the van. Within moments, Jimmy had Byers in his arms. He ran for the clinic door.

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FREE CLINIC
1709 CHESTNUT STREET
TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND
9:14 A.M.

Jimmy lay his friend on the examining table in what had once been a bedroom. A tall black man and a heavyset black woman, both in greying lab coats, helped him ease John into position.

"What happened, Jimmy?" the woman asked, not bothering to look up at him as she took Byers' pulse and timed his breathing. Her patient was soaked with blood and dirty, melting slush, and his skin was freezing.

"You gotta help him, Sonya," Jimmy said, pleading.

Sonya turned to her partner. "Mark, I need a saturate saline IV and Ringer's lactate, stat. Then get his chart and check his blood type. He's gonna need some, from what I can see here." She turned back to Byers and started cutting the clothes from his upper body. "Help me with this, Jimmy, and tell me what happened."

She turned and shouted into the hallway. "Tom, warm blankets, now!"

Jimmy took the scissors Sonya shoved in his hand and started cutting away at the sleeves of John's coat, suit jacket and shirt, peeling them quickly away from his friend's slashed wrist. "I... Logan said they got attacked in an alley. John got all cut up. I'm not sure what happened, but Logan will be here in a minute. He can tell you."

Sonya pulled away the last of the clothing, leaving Byers' smooth, slender body exposed to the waist. Jimmy stared at the long, bloody slashes across his friend's chest and abdomen, and noted with a start how pale the man had gotten during the drive. Byers' face was ghostly white, lips nearly blue, and his breath was ragged. John looked so... fragile, Jimmy thought, like those delicate Italian glass animals he saw once when he visited Venice with his family as a kid.

"Get me the Betadine, Jimmy," Sonya snapped, pointing to the bottles on a side table as Mark returned with two IV bags. As swiftly as he came, he dashed out of the room again.

"Be right back with the chart," he said, disappearing down the hall.

Tom, a short Asian man, entered carrying an armload of warm blankets. As Jimmy handed Sonya a large bottle of Betadine, Tom arranged two of the blankets over Byers' legs and packed two more along his sides, tucking his uninjured arm under a fold. He left the hand exposed for the IV.

Sonya swabbed down Byers' hand with the Betadine, then prepped and inserted an IV needle, hooking the bleeding man to the IV fluids. She grabbed a penlight, lifting Byers' eyelids and testing quickly for pupil response. "Did he get hit in the head?" she asked.

"I don't know," Jimmy said.

Logan's voice interrupted from behind. "Yes, he did." Jimmy looked over his shoulder to see Langly
“How is he?” Langly asked.

"Don't know yet," Sonya said, "everything looks superficial except the blood loss, from what I can tell so far." She began irrigating Byers' wounds with the Betadine. "You Logan?" she asked.

Logan nodded. Sonya continued. "What happened to him? What kind of weapons were used?"

Logan took a deep breath. "Bicycle lock chain. He got hit several times, once in the head. It knocked him off his feet. The other guy had... I think it was a packing knife.” Logan's voice was unsteady, wet trails on his cheeks where tears were falling.

"Okay. That helps. Wounds are probably going to be shallow then."

Mark hurried into the room past Logan's wheelchair, carrying Byers' chart. "Type A positive," he said. "I've got Tom checking the fridge for that and O positive right now."

"Great," Sonya said. She handed Mark the Betadine. "Get the wound on his arm." Sonya grabbed the blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around Byers' good arm, inflating it, then watched the dial carefully for the results.

She shook her head at the reading. "90 over 60," she said. "Not good." She jotted some hurried numbers in Byers' file then turned back to her patient to start examining the wounds in his exposed chest and abdomen.

Jimmy stood back from the commotion, huddling next to Langly and Logan. The three were silent as they watched Sonya and Mark work on their friend.

"I want you guys out of here," Sonya snapped when she noticed Frohike entering the room. "It's too damned crowded to work."

Frohike turned to Langly. "He gonna be okay?"

"They're not sure yet," Langly said.

Frohike grimaced. "We can't afford to wait here and find out. We've gotta make that meeting." He turned and spoke to Jimmy. "We're gonna leave you and Logan here. You take care of them, okay?"

Jimmy nodded. Frohike and Langly turned and ran back out to the van.

"You two. Out!" Sonya snapped, staring at Jimmy.

Jimmy started to protest. "But --"

Logan took Jimmy's wrist. "She's right. They need space to do their work. Let's go back to the waiting room."

Jimmy looked down and saw the fear in Logan's eyes. "Okay," he said. He turned and took the handles of Logan's chair, and they returned to the waiting room. He found an open spot for Logan, then sat on the floor next to the wheelchair. The clinic was in a fairly large house that had been hastily converted into medical offices shortly after the Collapse. The "waiting room" had once been a living room, and there were about three dozen people crowded into it, sitting on chairs, couches, or the floor. Sonya and most of the rest of the small staff lived upstairs or in the converted garage, on call for emergencies at any hour. Jimmy knew they were at one of the few places in the region where
people could get help for their ills and injuries without having to produce identification and proof of church membership, or answer any political questions, and they wouldn't be turned away for being too poor. The clinic worked on barter, or for medical supplies, and he and the Gunmen had been coming here for three years now. Most often, the Gunmen paid for their health care in produce from their hydroponics, or by servicing the clinic's computers and medical equipment.

Kyle, the clinic's receptionist, came over and crouched next to Jimmy. "I saw Byers, man. You okay? Either of you guys want some peppermint tea or something?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I think I'll be okay," he said quietly. "How about you, Logan. Did you get hurt when the guys attacked you? You want some tea?"

Kyle looked up at Logan. "You were attacked as well?"

Logan nodded. "I didn't get hit, though, just tossed out of my chair. I doubt I have anything but a couple of bruises. But I'm freezing, so yeah, I'd really like that cup of hot peppermint. Maybe a warm blanket."

Kyle nodded and stood. "I'll be right back." With a sigh, he turned and disappeared into the next room.

Jimmy leaned on the side of Logan's chair. "You're not really all right." He took Logan's hand. It was cold, and Logan was still shaking. His clothes were soaked, as Byers were. "You should take off that wet blanket. It'll be easier for the new one to warm you up that way," he said.

"No, I'm not," Logan admitted, as Jimmy helped him peel the cold, damp blanket from around his shoulders, then lifted it up and out. Logan settled back again, and Jimmy set the sopping cloth on the floor next to him. "I just want to be back in his room, holding him, like we were a couple of hours ago," Logan whispered.


Kyle returned with two warm blankets, and Jimmy helped him wrap one around Logan's back and shoulders, and the other around his legs.

"Tea will be ready in just a minute," Kyle said. "In the meantime, Jimmy, are you and the guys going to be able to come up with anything to pay for Byers' treatment? Looks like it's going to have to be more than just some produce this time. From what Tom said, he's going to need antibiotics and pain meds. That stuff's expensive."

"I don't know," Jimmy replied. He wasn't the one who negotiated these things. That usually fell to Byers, who wasn't going to be doing any dealing today. "Byers usually does that," he said quietly.

Kyle nodded, sympathetic. "Yeah, I know. Why aren't Frohike and Langley here with you?"

"They... they had something real important they had to do," Jimmy said. "They'll be back later, though, if everything goes okay."

"I can pay," Logan said.

Kyle turned to him. "I don't know you." The words were spoken kindly, but Jimmy knew that who a person knew was real important in a place like this.

He spoke up for Logan. "He's okay, Kyle. He's... he's a real close friend of John's... and mine. He's visiting from out of town."
Kyle nodded. "What do you have to offer?"

"Northwest creds," Logan replied, *sotto voce*, "and, if you need it, a connection to a reliable medical supplier who can get things into the area."

Kyle's eyes widened. "Come back into the office," he said in a whisper, standing, and heading back to the room he'd emerged from moments earlier.

Jimmy got up and retrieved the damp blanket from the floor as Logan followed Kyle. As they passed through the kitchen, Kyle handed Logan a steaming mug, then led them out through the hallway toward the back of the house.

As they passed the exam room, Jimmy opened the door a crack and looked in. He heard John moaning and whimpering quietly, then saw that his eyes were open, but they didn't look focused. Sonya and Mark were stitching him up. He and Logan paused at the door.

"Do you... do you want someone here for him?" Jimmy asked.

Sonya looked up, startled, then went back to her work. "Yeah, I think he needs that right now. You can come in and hold his hand while we work on him, Jimmy."

"Okay," he replied. Logan and Kyle continued back to the office as Jimmy entered the exam room. Mark handed him a surgical mask, and he put it on. He pulled up a chair and sat at Byers' head, stroking a hand through John's wet hair.

"Why is he awake?" Jimmy asked.

"He started coming around once he got sufficiently rehydrated," Sonya said, not looking up from her work. "He's not really aware of much right now, though. We gave him some morphine for the pain, but we have to keep him awake because of the knock he got on his head. We'll have to x-ray his skull to see if there are any fractures, but we have to get him stitched up first."

Jimmy nodded, leaning his face close to John's. He spoke to him quietly. "It's okay, John. It's Jimmy. I'm here. Logan's close by. We're here for you." His voice seemed to comfort John, and the moans quieted, replaced by the sound of Byers' ragged breathing.

"That's good, Jimmy," Mark said. "Keep talking to him. He needs to know he's got friends nearby. You need to help us keep him calm and awake, okay?"

Jimmy nodded. "Will he... will he be okay?"

"Yeah, as long as there aren't any complications, he should be good as new," Mark replied as he worked. "He's going to hurt for a while, probably feel pretty sick for a few days. Might run a fever for a bit while he's recovering, but it should be minor. The worst thing will be the headache. It'll be a mother. When Frohike gets back, we'll tell him what to do to take care of him, don't worry."

Jimmy nodded and turned his attention back to John. 'I should have told him,' he thought. 'I was too scared to tell him, but I should have told him.' He knew that he could never say the words here, not in front of anyone but John himself, and maybe Logan or the guys. John lying here was proof enough that admitting to loving another man was dangerous. It could have been deadly, and he would never intentionally put John at risk. He watched his friend's vacant eyes, whispering to him, telling him that he would be all right, that he'd be home soon, safe, that everyone would take care of him.

For a moment, John's blue eyes cleared and focused on his own. "Jimmy..." he whispered.
Jimmy couldn't hold his tears back anymore. "I'm here," he said. "I'm here." He stroked John's cheek softly. "I'll always be here for you."

Byers blinked and moaned again softly. "Hurts," he mumbled.

"I know," Jimmy said. He sniffled behind his surgical mask. "I wish I could make it stop." He stroked John's shoulder gently.

Byers' eyes lost their focus again, and he drifted. Jimmy leaned his forehead on John's, and let his tears fall.

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DOCKSIDE WAREHOUSE
LOCATION UNKNOWN
10:04 A.M.

Frohike and Langly watched nervously as they waited next to the microbus for their contact to show himself. Melvin shook his head impatiently.

"They should have been here five minutes ago," he growled. "If they screwed us, I'm gonna find these guys and rip their nads off with my bare hands."

"I'll hold 'em down for ya," Langly said. "This sucks." He shivered in the cold. "I'd rather be with Byers, man."

Frohike looked at his tall, wiry companion. "You and me both. God, I hope we didn't make a mistake, leaving Jimmy there to watch out for him and Logan." He wasn't sure if Logan was in much shape to watch out for himself right now, and it had been obvious that Byers wasn't. Someone had needed to stay with them, and he wouldn't trust Jimmy to make the exchange, even with Langly's help, so he had been the only logical choice to stay at the clinic. He looked around again, waiting for something -- anything -- to happen.

He and Langly turned in unison as they heard a vehicle approach. It was a black electric van, as described by their contact. Frohike held his breath as the van rounded the corner and pulled into the alley, stopping next to Gilgamesh.

The driver's window rolled down partway. "You got the stuff?" a man's voice asked.

"You got our merchandise?" Frohike asked gruffly.

The driver snorted. "Yeah." The door of the black van opened and the driver stepped out, an Asian man in his late 50s, wearing a warm, very new-looking wool coat. Frohike felt a pang of jealousy. "Let's see it."

"We want to see the girl first," Langly said.

The man looked up at him and shrugged. He motioned for them to follow him around to the other side of the van. The men all scanned the sky for hoverdrones as the black van's side door opened. Frohike and Langly looked inside.

On the floor of the van, bound and unconscious, lay Yves. A second man sat on a bench seat above her, gun in hand.

Frohike leaned in to look her over.
"Hey, careful," the Asian man said.

"We just have to make sure she's not going to die on us five minutes after you drive off with our stuff," Frohike said, projecting his best 'tough biker' vibes.

"Not like we wanna pay for damaged goods," Langly added.

The armed man looked at the Asian, who nodded. "Certainly," the Asian man replied. "We don't deal in damaged goods."

Relieved, Frohike and Langly crowded into the door next to Yves. Frohike took her pulse. Strong but slow, as was her respiration. There were some bruises, but most of the cuts they'd seen in the graphics file were already healing. He took out a pen light and shined it into her eyes, looking for pupil response. Yves' responses were healthy but appeared drugged, as he expected.

"Okay?" Langly asked.

Frohike nodded. "We accept the trade," he announced.

"Where's the merchandise?" the Asian man asked.

"Just a minute," Langly said. He started around the van. The Asian man started to follow him.

"I have the tea," Frohike said, pulling the plastic baggie from his pocket. He handed it to the man. Melvin didn't want the Asian getting a good look at the equipment in the back of the van, and fortunately, the tea distracted him.

Opening the bag, the Asian quickly eyed the contents, sniffed the tea and nodded. "Satisfactory," he said, as Langly rounded the corner carrying the loaded 286 box.

"Set that in the seat," the Asian said. He pointed at the box, and his assistant brought out a laptop, hooking it up to the older box. Langly disappeared again as the assistant plugged the 286 into a power source, and ran basic diagnostics on it.

"Tomato starts," Langly announced, carrying the dozen young plants in a cardboard box. The Asian examined them as carefully as Frohike had examined Yves.

"Very nice quality, gentlemen." He slid the starts into the back of the van, past Yves' head.

Frohike nodded. "We provide the best," he said, a hint of pride in his voice.

"And the night-vision goggles?"

Frohike pulled them out of a deep pocket inside his leather jacket. "Best military surplus in the business."

The Asian smiled, and reached for the goggles.

Frohike pulled them back. "Get the chick, Blondie." He looked at Langly, then at the Asian.

The Asian man looked to his assistant. "Is the box as advertised?"

"Yeah, checks out," the assistant said.

"Take her," the Asian said to Langly. Langly picked Yves up in his arms with a grunt, and carried her to the van.
"Here you go, pal. Use 'em in good health." He handed the night-vision goggles to the Asian, then hurried back to the van.

Langly had slid Yves into the bench seat, between himself and the driver's seat. As Frohike climbed in, he was working on releasing her bonds. "Let's get out of here, dude. This is fuckin' creepy."

"I'm with you," Frohike agreed. He put the van into gear and took off, watching the rear view mirror in case their contact decided to welsh on their contract. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the black van take off in another direction.

"Thank God that's over," he said.

Langly nodded. "Like, I hope Yves wakes up soon. She's drooling on my shoulder."

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FREE CLINIC
1709 CHESTNUT STREET
TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND
11:21 A.M.

"You okay?" Frohike's voice rang across the waiting room as he approached.

"I will be in a while," Logan said. He looked for Langly, but he wasn't following Frohike.

Frohike nodded. "Where's Jimmy?"

"In with John. They're checking his x-rays right now to see if there was any serious damage to his skull." Logan shifted restlessly. "Is everything all right?"

"Went off smooth as a baby's bottom," Frohike replied. "How's Byers, and why is Jimmy with him instead of you?"

"They said John would be okay, and the x-ray room is upstairs." Logan sighed, frustrated. "Jimmy was a little better equipped for the trip than me."

Kyle joined them. "Hey, Frohike."

Frohike looked up. "Hey, Kyle. What are we going to owe you for all this?"

"It's taken care of," Kyle said softly. "Actually, if everything works out, Langly should be getting his asthma meds for free next year, and if anything happens to Byers again, he's covered, anytime."

Frohike's face opened in astonishment. "What the hell did Jimmy promise you?" he asked, incredulous, with obvious worry in his voice.

"It wasn't Jimmy," Logan said, "it was me. And don't worry, it's taken care of."

Frohike stared for a moment, then smiled. "Thanks."

Logan shook his head. "Don't mention it. I needed to do this."

Sonya came into the room carrying several sheets of paper. "Oh, Frohike, I'm glad you're here." She reached out and shook his hand. "Looks like your boy's going to be just fine. We've got him on IV Rocephin, his blood pressure's back up to something vaguely approaching normal, and while he has a concussion, there's no serious damage. You're just going to have to keep him awake for the next 24 hours or so, then you can let him sleep. He'll need it. I've got full instructions for you for taking care
of him at home. We'll release him to you in about fifteen minutes." She handed Frohike the papers she'd been holding.

"You sure he's okay to travel?" Frohike asked.

Sonya sighed. "Other times, other places, I'd put him in a hospital for observation, but we don't have any beds right now, and I know you guys will take good care of him. Besides, you can call Dr. Scully, right?"

Frohike nodded, smiling. "Oh, yeah. Any excuse is a good one."

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IN THE VAN
12:26 P.M.

Yves groaned and stirred.

"Hey girlie, welcome back," Langly said.

Yves' eyes opened and she looked at him. "Oh my God. What in bloody hell are you doing here? And where is here?" She looked around.

"We rescued you from the bad guys," Jimmy said.

"Bad guys?" Yves asked, confused.

Logan watched from the back of the van, cradling Byers carefully in his lap. He held him close to cushion the roughness of the van's bouncing as they made their way through the last mile back to the Gunmen's offices.

"We'll tell you about it later," Frohike said. "Now, what we want to know is, where the hell have you been for the last three weeks that you couldn't bother getting a message to Max?"

"Max was trying to contact me?" she asked, confusion evident in her face.

"Yes," Logan said. "And we couldn't find you anywhere."

"Logan?" She blinked. Everyone looked at her but Byers, and Frohike, who was watching the road.

"I was... I was out of the country for the past three weeks," she said, "following up on a lead I was chasing for some reward money. I got back... what day is it?"

"The fifth," Langly said.

Yves sighed. "Christ, a day and a half ago now."

"How did you, of all people, manage to get grabbed?" Frohike asked.

Yves blushed.

"Come on, Yves, you gotta tell us," Langly insisted. "We had to pay a 286, a dozen tomato plants, some night vision goggles and six tea bags to get you back!"

"What?" Yves shouted, "a 286? You cheap bastards, you know I'm worth at least an Octium IV machine --"
"Yeah," Frohike interrupted, his annoyance clear, "but don't bitch too hard, babe." He pointed over his shoulder into the back of the van. "Byers paid the highest price for you."

Yves turned in the seat and saw Byers lying in Logan's lap, an IV line in his hand. His eyes were half open, unfocused.

Logan looked up at Yves. "This happened when we were out trading for the tea bags we traded for you," he said quietly, knowing she could hear him over the rattle and whine of the microbus's engine. John whimpered as the van hit yet another pothole, and Logan turned his attention back to his blanket-wrapped lover. "It's all right, John," he whispered, "we'll be home soon. This will all be over soon."

"Oh my God." Yves lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry, boys. I... I had no idea."

Frohike pulled the van into the alley near their stairs. "Okay folks, all out."

Jimmy and Langly opened their doors and started to move Byers gently out of the van.

"Please," Yves said, "let me help."

Jimmy and Logan looked at each other. Logan nodded.

"Okay," Jimmy said.

Yves picked Byers up effortlessly. Langly took the IV and followed her up the stairs to the living quarters to settle Byers in his room.

Jimmy carried Logan up the stairs after them, leaving Frohike to watch the van until Langly could make a second trip for the wheelchair and to help Frohike carry medical supplies in.

Logan leaned into Jimmy's arms, putting his own around the man's broad shoulders. "Take me into John's room so I can be with him," he asked.

"Don't worry," Jimmy said. "That's where we're going."

They entered Byers' room as Yves was carefully laying him on the bed. Langly hung the IV bag from a hook holding part of the grid of strings that supported the pepper vines. Logan watched as she and Langly unwrapped the blankets from around John's body and carefully stripped the rest of his still-damp clothing off. Langly pulled a pair of worn flannel pajamas from one of the dresser drawers, and they slipped him into the pajamas. John moaned as they moved him, and Langly's forehead creased with concern. He ran a long, thin hand across Byers' forehead and sighed.

"I'm gonna go help Fro get the rest of the stuff in," Langly said. "Could you warm up a couple clean blankets for him, Yves? He's kinda sweaty. I don't want him to get a chill or anything."

Yves pulled the covers up around Byers. "As soon as I find them," she said. She left the room to look for blankets as Langly hurried out to help Frohike.

Logan settled himself as Jimmy gently set him on the bed next to John. "Jimmy, can you help me get my shoes and pants off? It'll help keep John warm if I get into bed with him." In truth, it wasn't just for warmth that Logan wanted to lie naked next to his lover. He needed the comfort of John's heartbeat in his ear, to press himself to the man's slim form. He needed the warmth of John's body as much as he suspected that John needed his.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. As Logan unbuckled his belt and slid the zipper down, Jimmy untied his shoes...
and pulled them off, then pulled the damp socks from Logan's feet.

"Here," Logan said, lifting his hips from the bed by putting his weight onto both hands. Jimmy tugged the pants and briefs down over Logan's legs and tossed them into the corner, where he'd tossed Logan's shoes.

Logan unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it into the pile as well, then Jimmy helped him slide under the covers with John, avoiding the IV tube attached to the man's hand. As Logan adjusted his weight, Jimmy started peeling his own clothes off too. Logan looked up at him.

"If one body's good, maybe two will be better," he said.

Logan nodded. "Maybe it will, Jimmy." Jimmy slid in on the other side of John's quiet form. The two men curled themselves carefully around their exhausted, injured friend, arranging the covers carefully.

John rolled his head to look at Logan. He blinked, and his eyes focused again. "So tired," he whispered. "Hurt so much..."

Logan's chest tightened. He ached for his lover, wishing he could stop the pain and let him sleep. He ran his hand carefully along John's chest, avoiding the dressing over the two long wounds. "You need to stay awake, John. You have to stay with us for a while before you can sleep."

Jimmy ran his hand gently down John's injured arm. "We're going to make sure you get better," he said. Byers turned his face to his friend. He tried to speak, but couldn't summon the energy. Logan watched as Jimmy leaned in and kissed John softly. Byers sighed and Logan could feel some of the tension seep out of John's muscles.

"I should have told you earlier," Jimmy whispered. "We could have lost you. I was just... I was afraid to say it."

"To say what?" Logan asked.

Jimmy looked up at him, then back down to John. "I... John, I love you. I have since I met you. I know you don't love me back, but that's okay. I don't mind. I'll always be here for you anyway. I won't --"

Byers moved slowly and painfully, placing two fingers over Jimmy's lips to silence him, then taking Jimmy's hand in his. "Never... never knew," he said.

"Don't talk," Jimmy said. "It's okay."

Logan's eyes met Jimmy's as he looked up from John's face. "I'm sorry," Jimmy said, his voice filled with sadness. "I don't want to mess things up for you guys."

Logan shook his head. "I don't think you will," he said. He felt a stab of jealousy, but the feeling that overwhelmed him was, strangely, relief. "I'm... I think I'm actually relieved to know that he has you here with him." He looked back down to John, stroking his cheek. "We're both here for you," he said gently, "whatever happens."

Byers leaned his head on Logan's shoulder, still holding Jimmy's hand, and nodded weakly. The three men lay together, silent.

A few minutes later, Yves entered, carrying blankets. "Well, aren't we a charming sight?" she said. "Three boys in a blanket." She set the blankets down on Jimmy's hip. "I'll let you two take care of
these. Put them over Byers under the covers." She turned to leave.

"Petra," Logan said. She stopped and turned to him.

"Yes?"

Logan pointed. "In the bottom of John's closet, on the right hand side, there's a brown duffel bag. In the zip pocket along the front, there's a disk for you. It's from Max. She asked me to bring it to you."

She opened the closet and found the disk. "What's on it?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. She said you were the only one who should see it."

Yves nodded. "Thank you, Logan." She pocketed the disk and left.

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LONE GUNMEN OFFICES
DECEMBER 12, 2003
5:17 P.M.

Byers sat in his bed, propped on pillows. Jimmy was perched on the edge of the bed, while Logan sat in his wheelchair next to them. John was tired, achy and sore from his wounds, and they'd begun to itch like crazy. He'd had a mild fever for three days, but it had broken five days ago, and he'd been getting up for a little while every day since then, to build up his strength.

Dana Scully, a doctor since the F.B.I. had gone from a criminal investigation organization to a paramilitary unit shortly after the Collapse, had visited at least once a day since the incident. She brought antibiotics and pain medications for him, along with news of how she was getting on, and Mulder's continuing strange adventures.

Logan and Jimmy had been sleeping with him every night, one on either side. Despite the pain, he found a great sense of security and comfort in their presence. Their touches, the sound of their breathing in the night, and the kisses and caresses they all shared made him wish that Scully would release him for... strenuous activity.

Among the caresses and kisses, there had been a lot of talk, as well. In the first two days, he hadn't had energy for it, but he'd at least been able to give a response now and then. Over the past several days, though, he'd been able to participate rather more actively. Jimmy had been afraid that John wouldn't want to be close to him again after Logan left, while Logan admitted to jealousy at the idea of Jimmy being so close while he lived on the other side of the continent. John felt that if the two of them could work it out with one another, he was willing to try being with both of them. That led to Jimmy and Logan spending a lot of time talking on their own while he rested.

He'd slept a lot in the last week as well, and knew from his conversations with Langly and Frohike that Logan had been spending time engaging in shop talk with them. Langly had come into his room yesterday, all excited, and told him how Logan had helped them set up some new equipment. He refused, however, to give any details. John had felt some annoyance, but was glad that Logan and the guys had hit it off so well. After what had happened, he would have been angry if they hadn't accepted his lover.

John's emotions were in flux after being attacked. He felt a terrible need to isolate himself from the world, to steep himself in the paranoia he had cultivated for so many years, shutting out his friends and lovers. He felt unsafe even thinking about going outside. He doubted his own judgment now, worried that he would make yet another error, this time fatal.
Yet, through his fears, Logan and Jimmy encouraged him. Their constant company eased the anxiety he felt. In the last week, they’d never been far away. But Logan had to leave in only a few minutes, and John wasn’t ready for him to go. He was just starting to feel well enough to actively enjoy Logan’s company again.

"It'll be all right, John," Logan assured him, "I'll make sure to contact you as soon as I'm back in Seattle." Logan took his hand and squeezed.

John sighed and squeezed back. "It's not the same, Logan. I wish you could stay longer. I wanted to be able to spend time with you, but not like this," he said. Jimmy slid an arm around his shoulders, and John leaned into him.

"He'll be back," Jimmy said. "Soon, I hope."

Logan nodded. "I will, don't worry."

Frohike stuck his head in the door. "Sorry guys, time for Logan to go. I'll go get the van ready. Jimmy, you bring Logan down. And let's keep the sniffly goodbyes to a minimum, eh?" He grinned.

"Okay, Frohike," Jimmy said. "We'll be just a minute." Frohike nodded and ducked out.

John slid forward on the bed as Logan opened his arms. The two embraced tightly and kissed each other deeply. The kiss was long and sensual, and both were breathless when they finally parted. "I'll miss you," John whispered in Logan's ear before releasing him.

"I'll miss you too," Logan said. He drew something from his pocket and handed it to Byers.

John opened his hand. A key lay in his palm. "What's this for?" he asked.

"My apartment," Logan replied with a wink. "I want you to use it as often as possible. Come on, Jimmy. Frohike's likely to rip my lungs out if he thinks we're going to be late."

"I'll be back in a minute, John," Jimmy said. He and Logan left the room. Byers slumped back into his pillows, depressed.

A few seconds later, Langly came in carrying a small TV. "Hey, man, I got something for you."

"I don't want a TV in here, Langly," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Just bear with me for a few, okay? It's a surprise."

Byers rolled his eyes. "Let me guess, you've managed to find half a dozen Godzilla flicks and you're going to wire up a marathon for everyone tonight."

Langly grinned as he hooked up the TV. "Hey, Godzilla flicks are an art form. But in this case, it's way better than that."

"God, I hope so," Byers said, a little of his sadness lifting as he engaged in their familiar banter. "I'm not in the mood to watch him stomp Tokyo yet again. But I suppose I could live with a couple of Errol Flynn movies, if you can find them."

"Yeah, right, like I'm gonna go looking for some swashbuckler flick made by some Nazi spy."

Byers smirked. "Okay, so he was a Nazi sympathizer, but you've got to admit, he made some great movies."
Langly plugged the TV in. "Well, maybe, but I liked Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. better. He ruled, dude. I mean, how can you possibly beat The Black Pirate?"

Jimmy came back and sat next to John. "Are we gonna watch TV?" he asked. "I mean, it's not like they play much that's any good anymore, but maybe they'll have some Bugs Bunny or something."

Langly flicked the TV on. The picture resolved to show a heavily censored local news program.

"Nothing new there," John said, feeling impatient. "Where's the surprise you were talking about?"

Langly stood and examined his handiwork, then laughed. "You just keep your narc ass parked right there, Byers. You'll see soon enough." He continued his delighted chuckle as he left the room.

"What's supposed to happen?" Jimmy asked, climbing over Byers to lean against the wall. John waited until Jimmy settled down, then snuggled up next to the bigger man. Jimmy wrapped his arms around John's waist, careful not to press too hard and hurt him.

Just as they were getting comfortable, the screen went black. Jimi Hendrix's riff on the Star Spangled Banner blasted from the speaker, and an American flag waved across the screen. John and Jimmy looked at one another, then back at the screen. The volume of the music lowered, and an electronically distorted voice began to speak.

"Do not attempt to adjust your set. We control the horizontal. We control the vertical. We are the Lone Gunmen, and for the next sixty seconds, you'll hear about what's really going on outside your door -- the stories the government goons won't tell you..."

John laughed.

End

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