

BEHIND THE MASKS- PART I

Author's Note:

As usual, I really do appreciate any and all feedback. This story is set as part of the aftermath of the Dragon War. It is a series of "slice of life" scenes in the every day lives of our heroes. I envision at least one other part, but probably three more "chapters" to it. You can always email me at Cobalt-Blue

Scene 1

Adam lay by his husband, Steve in the quiet afterglow of their lovemaking. After the war, the two had decided to take the opportunity to move out of the headquarters and finally build a life of their own. They were still employees of Murphy's Law, hell, they were in a position to retire if they wanted to. They had spent the last decade of their lives living inside the various headquarters of whatever city Gates was working out of, and now wanted a chance for the house in the suburbs with a white picket fence. So, they bought a nice split level ranch with a pool in North Vegas, still not far from work, and moved in.

"I'm worried about Kym," he told Steve as he lay with an arm across the other man's chest, voicing something that had been eating at him since they'd taken guardianship of the young man in question.

"Really?" Steve asked neutrally, something that told Adam that he had his own concerns but was waiting to see if they were the same as his. They'd been together so long that they could finish each others' sentences.

"He's withdrawn, he doesn't make friends, and he's doesn't go out. He goes to school, comes home, does his homework, does his chores, works out in the garage, and then goes to bed. It's not normal for a teenager," Adam told him. They young dragonborn warrior had touched something deep inside of both Adam and Steve when they'd heard his story from Gates, and then from Kym himself. They both knew what it was like to be on their own with nobody to turn to, to be cast out from family.

"He's been through a lot, Adam," Steve said propping his head up on one wrist. "He's lost his fathers, his first love, been shunted aside by what's left of the dragons and the dragonborn, and now stuck with a couple of crotchety transhuman scientists who long ago decided that they'd rather tinker in the lab than put on spandex and fight evil. What do you expect him to do?"

"I don't know. At least make new friends in school. He doesn't talk about school, or hobbies or anything else. The closest thing to a hobby he has is martial arts, and he's so good with that that I think that he could have eventually given Night Angel a run for

his money. It's just not normal," Adam said, remembering watching Kym go through several combat katas in the large garage gym they'd set up. Adam had been around transhumans for all of his adult life, and had seen men and women like Night Angel, Runeclaw, Anchor, and Shadow Shroud in combat. He knew a master of the deadly side of the martial arts when he saw one, and Kymbrall FeyStone, fourteen year old dimensional refugee was among the best he'd ever seen, if not the best.

"What do you expect him to be, Adam?" Steven said. "He's not going to be normal. He's been trained as a warrior all of his life. He was given one mission: kill the dragons, and taught to be the best of the best when it came to that. Now all the dragons are gone. His training is all he has left. He's trying to hold on to some kind of normalcy in his life, at least normalcy for him."

"And that's where we come in," Adam suggested. "Is that why you were so eager to take custody of him?"

Steven smiled and said, "Some of it. Part of it is because of what I just told you. He's not normal, and is never going to be normal. He's always going to stand out among other people, not physically, except for those golden eyes of his, but kinesthetically. He's a warrior. I talked to Aerin about her conversations with him. She told me that her impressions of him was someone who couldn't let himself fail. He's was very dedicated to not doing anything to embarrass his fathers."

"Do you think they put that kind of pressure on him?" Adam asked. He'd met a few parents in the past that really pushed their kids to excel and not to embarrass the family name. Usually they ended up turning out either really anal-retentive children or hellions bent on rebelling.

Steven shook his head and said, "No. I think he choose that path all by himself, or maybe because he carries the avatar of a much older personality in his head. I don't think he's ever really had a childhood. I think maybe we can give him that, at least when he decides to let us in."

Adam nodded and cuddled up to Steven reveling in the warmth of just being beside him. "So what are your concerns?"

"Huh?" Steve asked.

"You obviously have concerns of your own. What are yours," Adam asked.

"Is it that obvious?" Steven smiled and turned on his side to tenderly stroke Adam's face.

"Only to someone who knows and loves you," Adam told him.

Steve smiled and said, "I'm worried about what other people might say about two gay men raising a gay foster son."

"Huh?" Adam asked.

"There have already been a couple of ugly rumors in the neighborhood," Steve said.

"What kind of rumors?" Adam asked carefully.

"Mainly innuendo," Steve said.

"What kind of things?" Adam asked suspiciously.

Steve frowned and said, "People wondering about the appropriateness of two gay men raising a gay teenage boy."

"They're suggesting other things aren't they?" Adam asked angrily. He couldn't believe that people would be that small minded.

Steve nodded and said, "Yeah, the last time I heard it was at the grocers down the road. I put the woman straight, but the fact that I had to irritated me."

"I can imagine," Adam said echoing the thought. "I can't believe the nerve of some people."

"I think that was why, Kym was always very careful about not embarrassing his fathers," Steve said. "I think that he and probably they, always felt that they had to live a life above reproach. That was why he pushed himself so hard."

Adam nodded and snuggled up to him and said, "And now we're in the same situation,"

"Pretty much."

"Any regrets?" Adam asked.

Steve shook his head, "As Leif would say, we've always lived our lives openly in quiet dignity. We don't have anything we need to be ashamed of. I don't see the need to change much about what we do."

"Except..." Adam said.

"Except what?" Steve asked suspiciously.

"Except maybe cut down on the amount of junk food we bring into the house. Have you seen the cupboard lately? And Kym asked me to take him to Ihop this weekend for bacon and eggs for breakfast."

"I think we can manage that," Steve said. "And maybe one of us should take cooking lessons from Murphy. I don't know about trying to fix all these southern dishes that he likes," Steve said.

"Maybe that too."

Scene 2

Kevin stood looking out the window of the main dining facility as the rain poured down outside. It was well past midnight and most of the base had long ago gone to their homes and or beds. His mom was asleep in her room in their apartment, and he knew that Ethan was there too. That was okay as far as Kevin was concerned. His mother deserved a little happiness. Finding out that Ethan was his father's half-brother however made things a little weird though.

Kevin had only met the man his mother called the "sperm donor" once or twice. As far as he was concerned, that was once or twice too many. For Senator Edmund Cranston, acknowledging that he had a son by a fourteen year old girl when he was thirty-five would not only have destroyed his political career, it would have landed him to jail. Kevin didn't hold Edmund's sins against Ethan.

He watched as the thunderstorm danced across Las Vegas, a small part of his mind following the ramifications to the local ecology that the sinking of California was having. Flooding was now a major problem in a city that was accustomed to less than six inches of rain a year. The desert was in a state of constant bloom now, and many of the native species were on the brink of dying out. He realized that what this part of the US was going through was the inverse of what had happened to Africa when the Himalayas had thrust themselves up from the Earth's crust. Those mountains cut off rain to Africa. The loss of the Mountains to the West was now allowing vast swatches of desert to receive rain again. It was constructing a fascinating model in his head.

He smiled as he realized what the model was distracting him from; what he was trying to avoid thinking about. What had left him lying on his back looking up at the ceiling as Jake snored next to him. His mother was not the only one who'd had company tonight. He smiled at the thought of Jakes, broad nude form tangled in his sheets.

Again, the thought was a diversion from what was bothering him. Most people who knew him, or at least knew about his intellect, his interests, and of course his sexuality, would be surprised to learn that he was going through a crisis of faith. He realized that

he of all people understood what Spock meant in The Voyage Home aka The Wrath of Greenpeace when he said, "It would be impossible to discuss the subject without a common frame of reference." He like Spock had really gone where no man had gone before.

"What's got you up at three in the morning watching Thor battle the giants?" Leif's question made him jump. How could a man that big move that quietly?

"Thor battling the giants?" he asked turning to see the big man standing at the fridge. He was dressed in a simple set of pajama bottoms and a wife-beater that was stretched taught across his broad chest. Kevin noted that he'd allowed his body to shift to his natural form which meant a set of white tiger's ears sitting atop his white-blond hair and a tiger's tail sticking out from his rather attractive butt. Kevin might be in a committed relationship, but he wasn't blind or dead.

Leif shrugged and grabbed the jug of milk. Looking at it he swirled the contents around and the popped the lid and drank directly from the jug. After a couple of quick gulps, he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, smiled and said "Call it a conceit."

Kevin chuckled and said, "Oddly enough, that was along the lines of what I was thinking."

"Wanna' talk about it?" Leif asked his ice blue eyes narrowing to become serious.

Kevin shrugged and turned back to the window. Placing his open palm on the glass he watched the sheets of rain come down as the lightning and thunder danced across the bay beyond. "What do you think my major transhuman ability is, Leif?" he asked.

Leif began rummaging through the cupboards behind him. He stopped a moment and said, "That wouldn't be quite a fair question. I know what it."

"What?" Kevin insisted, hearing Leif pull a pan out of the pantry.

"Knowledge," he said. "You can see to the heart of any question you set your mind to. That's how you developed the technology to build the Champion Armor."

Kevin smiled and let his mind drift to that question and saw the answer. "Lieutenant Greenbough told you."

"Commander Greenbough," Leif corrected.

"I know, but he'll always be Lieutenant Greenbough to me. He was just an ensign when I met him the first time," Kevin said.

"And yes, Trey Greenbough told me," he said. "We magecats do communicate, you know."

"I know," Kevin said, suddenly imagining a bunch of Nordic magecats sitting around a huge oaken table drinking mead and discussing their latests, "conquests". "But what kind of limits do you think are on it?"

Leif shrugged and said, "I don't know. It seems like a pretty awesome power to me."

Kevin smiled at that comment. Leave it to the Norse party boi to be able to see the value of knowledge. "There are very few questions I can't see the answer to," he said. "It's not instantaneous, and it takes time to follow all of the questions that the answers generate to find my way to the end of a conundrum. Sometimes I end up twisting my mind into so many knots that I forget where I started. And I can't see the future. That's the real limitation to it. That, and that I can only follow one question at a time."

"Doesn't sound like much of a limitation," Leif said.

"Also remember there's a difference between knowing the answer to a question, and having the wisdom to know what to do with it," he said smelling the cocoa that Leif was mixing into the milk in the pan.

"That's a rather astute observation for a fifteen year old," Leif said. "Exactly what can you find the answer to?"

He turned and smiled, "With a little work, I might could tell you what Odin whispered into Balder's ear."

He watched as Leif stiffened. Turning he said, "I wouldn't start messing in the affairs of the Gods, if I were you. That has been known to get a body killed, or worse."

"I know. It would take some work, and I'm not sure I would like the answer. I was just making a point," Kevin said. "On a more personal note, I could tell you who your father is. I know that's a question you're afraid to ask your mother."

Leif chuckled and said, "No. That's okay, she'll tell me when the time's right." He stopped and asked, "What can you not tell me? What could you not find the answer to, no matter how hard you looked?"

With his back still to Leif he said, "I can't tell you when Loki will break his bonds and sail out of Helheim on a boat made of dead men's nails. I can't tell you when Gabriel will blow his final trump. I have to have some basic piece of information to begin working with. I can't just pull things whole cloth."

"That's still a pretty wide range of power," Leif said.

"I know," Kevin said. "I can also tell you where I've been for fifteen years and what it was like," he said softly.

"And that's what had you up late tonight?" Leif said from the range.

Kevin nodded. "I was never raised to be religious, and by nature I tended to be irreligious, but lately..."

"Lately you've been wondering how you could have ended up there," Leif said.

"Yeah."

"I was wondering when we were going to have this conversation," Leif said stirring the pot.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, when my mother told me where you were and explained how you got there, and just how many people were there, I was outraged," Leif said.

"That is one area where I don't have a lot of information. Following the lines of thought take so many winding paths that getting to bottom of just one point of view is hard enough," Kevin said. The sheer magnitude of understanding the politics of Heaven, Hell, Asgard, Limbo, and the myriad of sub realms of Sheol was beyond even his grasp. "What did she tell you? How did so many end up there?"

"Let me finish this, and I'll join you at the table, okay?" Leif said.

Kevin smiled and peeled his hand away from the window and padded over to the table in his bare feet. "Okay," he said pulling out one of the chairs.

Ten minutes later he was sipping hot cocoa while Leif leaned back in his chair. "Okay, from what I understand, that realm has become sort of an overflow area for souls with no place to go."

"No place to go?" Kevin asked.

Leif nodded, sipped his cocoa and looked deep into Kevin's eyes. "Just how much do you want to know, Kevin?" he asked. "Some of it is not pretty and it doesn't help if you have blind faith in any of the Gods."

Kevin smiled and said, "The fact that my faith isn't blind is part of my problem."

"Okay," Leif said sighing. "But like I said, this isn't going to be pretty. It basically boils down to this. Gods can be bullies too and sometimes they don't give a crap what happens to humans they create. All races of men were created using the same blueprint, but by different Gods. I guess a Christian would say it is what was meant by "Let us make man in our image."

"Each race belongs to their creator, and when we die, our souls go to them for disposition. But when the Desert God drove out the worship of the indigenous Gods it sort of left souls who are not aligned directly to him in limbo. You were raised in a land where the Desert God holds sway but it is not his indigenous land, and you are from a people who belong to yet a third group of Gods."

Kevin nodded and asked, "By Desert God you mean the Christian God?"

Leif nodded and smiled saying. "Yes the God of the Christians, the Jews, and the Muslims . Your people, our people, were created by the Gods of Northern Europe. But you are in the lands of the various incarnations of the Native American Great Spirit, and you were raised to be religiously neutral, and the worship of the Desert God holds sway here. Since you didn't fit the Desert God's criteria to be one of his, nor did you belong to any of the others, your soul was taken out of the process and placed in limbo. The Gods will decide what to do with those there when the Universe either burns down to nothing, or contracts into a new Big Bang."

"What if I had been raised to follow the Desert God as you call him?" he asked Leif.

"Depends on whether or not you met the criteria he lay down," Leif told him.

"Following the ten commandments and such?" Kevin asked.

"If you were Jewish, if you were Muslim, then there were other criteria you had to meet, and the same thing for being Christian. If you didn't meet the criteria, then there would have been nothing Mother could have done to help you. You would have belonged to him, and he would have cast you away into eternal torment." Leif said.

"How is it that a magecat knows so much about this kind of thing?" Kevin asked.

"I didn't until I asked Mother to help you," Leif said.

Kevin sipped his cocoa and asked the question he'd been wanting to ask, "Exactly what did that entail?"

"Mother owed me a boon," Leif said neutrally.

"A boon?"

"I was misled on a mission by people I was supposed to be able to trust. Someone important to me died on that mission, died because we both had been given false information. My mother offered me any boon to make up for it," Leif said.

"And you used it to bring back a soul you didn't know?" Kevin asked in awe.

"I had no plans to use it. Our need was great, and it had been confirmed that you are more than worthy," Leif said thickly.

"I am in your debt," Kevin said.

"No!" Leif said with a force that surprised Kevin in its intensity. For some reason that boon was still a reminder of pain to Leif. "You're not," he said more calmly. "The price was paid by Ridvin. If you feel the need to repay any kind of debt, then do it by living your life honorably, openly, and with dignity."

"Not convert to Asatru?" Kevin asked.

"Only if you feel called," Leif said. "The Elderkin do not demand the oaths of those who are not theirs to call, or who would give it freely."

Kevin nodded and thought about what the man had told him. "Can I ask one final question?"

Leif nodded and said, "I'll answer it if I can."

"How do your Gods look on people like me?" Kevin asked. "Gay?"

Leif smiled, "Each by their actions. It is not something that is encouraged, but not something that automatically condemns you eternal torment. Our first duty is to reproduce, to have children so that we can be reborn in our family line later. Unless called to Valhall, or Folkvang, we go to the halls of our ancestors in Hellheim, and await to be reborn into the line of our children. Gay sex doesn't procreate- yet, so it's a dead end as far as that goes." He smiled at some hidden idea. "Depending on who you talk to, it can be seen as a sign of weakness. There is an old term for those who choose their own sex: kottrin inn blauthi or soft cat. It has been suggested that the Allfather himself has taken part in same sex relations as payment for the magic he learned from various sources. So to answer your question, our Gods look more at our actions than whether or not we prefer steak to fish so to speak."

Kevin thought about what he'd been told. In this case, it was easier to ask someone that focus his mind down the myriad paths of questions that would be required to reach this level of understanding. "Thank you Leif," he said.

"Any time," the bigger man said rising from his chair. He placed his cup in the dishwasher and said, "Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to seek my own bed for the rest of the morning. Your mother has us hunting down Hardcase. We're getting some disturbing chatter from our sources concerning her. Something big is in the works."

"I think, I'll turn in too. Jake's going to wake up and wonder where I went," Kevin said.

Leif raised an eyebrow and said, "That didn't take long."

Kevin blushed and said, "We just picked up where we left off the night I was murdered."

Scene 3

D'an'a looked down at the uniform she was wearing and smiled. It had taken some modifications to make it fit right- the water wings caused all kinds of problems, and she'd had to convince Ms. Kendricks that cold weather didn't bother her- but in the end they'd got it work. Cheering was the only sport she and Corey were allowed to participate in, and then they weren't allowed on the competition squad.

Most states had rules against transhumans and nocturnals from participating in organized sports, Title IX rules about equal opportunity notwithstanding. Cheering was a gray area, and as long as they did not participate in competition it was allowed. D'an'a found the whole exercise to be an interesting merger of cultures. According to Bonnie, being a cheerleader would place her near the top of the school's social pecking order. Oddly enough, it wouldn't do the same for Corey.

Carlton Junior High was the only public high school in the nation with a furball team, but the coach and Corey's mom had decided that it wouldn't be a good idea for them to be involved in that either. Shifters being what they are, and the fact that both she and Corey generated pheromones whenever they used their powers, meant that if they were in a game, it could very easily turn into an impromptu and unintentional game of "pin to the bottom". That was not something they thought would be good for the public image of transhumans and shifters.

So, now they found themselves on the cheering squad, and for the most part she was happy about it. Corey's mom wanted them involved in some kind of extra curricular activity, and Corey had nixed the idea of them joining the band, although he could have easily made first chair. He said he wanted to do something physical. He'd been out of commission for two years in that coma and that he felt the need to for physical activity.

Chris was on the regular football team. Their friend 'Bit was on the furball team- turns out he was a werelion, and something of a surprise to most of the shifters in the school- and Bonnie was on the cheering squad with her and Corey. Everyone in the family was involved in some kind of activity at school, and for some reason Corey's mom was very happy about the whole thing. D'an'a did notice that the more time she spent in human culture the more she began to identify with her female side.

"Hassan, get your head out of the clouds!" Ms. Kendricks yelled at her as the rest of the squad was gathering around to hear what their sponsor had to say. "Hope everyone has their homework caught up. I've got a report from all of your teachers on your progress so far, and some of you and I will be having a talk about keeping your grades up, or you won't be cheering. We've got a furball game to cheer for on Tuesday night and a football game on Thursday night. The furball game is away- way away, but we've got transportation arranged. Those of you who have signed wavers from your parents about not being transported by mystical means are excused from having to participate."

"Yes, ma'am," several girls said. Corey had told her that there were some parents who were not comfortable with either the school having a furball team, or having nocturnals in it. However, those kinds of issues were still working their way through the courts.

"Leight and Hassan, I want to talk to you two," she said. D'an'a wondered what that was about. She knew that both of them were caught up on their studies, although to be honest, it had been touch and go after the Dragon War. They'd missed a lot of school, and although they knew the material covered, they still had to work their tails off to get all the work assigned during that time finished. The two of them had spent a couple of nights with their heads together getting caught up.

As the rest of the squad headed toward the locker rooms, she and Corey came up to Ms. Kendricks. The woman was tall, blonde and extremely good looking, even for being in her mid forties. She was the school's biology teacher and was something of a legend among the faculty. She'd actually served as part of a presidential administration when she was younger, and looked on teaching as a pleasant retirement. But then again, after eight years in that White House, lion taming would be a pleasant retirement. "Yes, ma'am?" Corey asked when they were alone.

"I just wanted to say that I'm glad to have you on the squad. I know you were late joining us because of your recent transfers, but I'm genuinely looking forward to working with you this year and next," she said.

"Thank you, Ms. Kendricks," D'an'a said politely.

She smiled at D'an'a and asked, "Are you comfortable with using the girls' dressing room?" she asked. "I mean I know what your records say about your gender."

D'an'a smiled, "Ms. Kendricks, I'd be comfortable changing in the hall. I'm Shan, we don't have the same cultural taboos about nudity as you do. I've spent all of my life in a culture where clothing is not worn."

"I understand that D'an'a but there might be issues concerning your intersexuality becoming public knowledge. That could cause you social problems. If you felt more comfortable, you could change with Corey. He is after all, the only boy on the squad."

D'an'a shrugged, "Is that what you want me to do?"

Ms. Kendricks shook her head and said, "I want you to be comfortable, to feel like part of the squad. I just want to make sure that you don't feel out of place."

"Most of the student body thinks of me as a girl. I'm okay with that," D'an'a said.

"Just wanting to make sure you were okay with it," Ms. Kendricks said. She turned to Corey and said, "As for you, I'm afraid you're going to be stuck changing with the male players."

"It's okay," Corey said. "I don't think it will be a problem."

She nodded and said, "As long as you're comfortable."

"Ms. Kendricks, I'm just glad to be alive, and I've spent enough time in Illia that like D'an'a I'd be comfortable changing in the hall," Corey told her. D'an'a couldn't help but smile at that. On more than one occasion, his mother had commented that she was afraid that with all of his trips to Illia that he was likely to go native. D'an'a had her own concerns about those trips. She knew that he was growing rather attached to a couple of Shan youngsters there. She also knew that as far as Ant'l and S'vann were concerned, Corey was a friend, and a playmate but there wasn't a romantic interest there. She was worried that her brother may get his heart broken.

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure. I have get dressed and head out," Ms. Kendricks said checking her watch. "'I've got an appointment."

D'an'a smiled and headed into the locker room to get changed. She grabbed her bag, unzipped the back of her cheering costume and stepped into a bathroom stall and dropped it to the floor. She may be comfortable with who and what she was, but the other girls may not be, so it was best not to make too many waves so to speak. Stepping into her jeans, she zipped them and then stepped back out of the stall.

"Ooh, aren't you going to shower before changing?" Marissa, the head cheerleader asked.

D'an'a shook her head and asked, "Why?"

"So you're not all hot and sweaty, when we all go to Burger Meisters," Marissa said.

"Shan don't perspire," D'an'a told her. Our bodies are cooled differently from yours. Besides, I haven't exerted myself enough to need cooling."

"Huh?" Tracy asked.

"Shan don't sweat," Bonnie said with a smile as D'an'a pulled on a tee-shirt with holes cut in the sides for her water wings. "She doesn't need to wear deodorant, or take a shower as often."

"Oh," Marissa said.

"What else is different about you?" Cassie asked. "If you don't mind my asking, that is." D'an'a could read a genuine curiosity from someone who meant no insult, but was unsure about how to ask.

D'an'a smiled, and asked, "Do you mean about Shan, about defenders , or about me personally?"

"I'm not sure," the girl said.

Bonnie stepped in and said, "How about we stick to generalities? That way things don't get to personal."

"Sounds good," Marissa said warming to the subject. How about we ditch your brother and go boy watching and have a nice girls' bonding session?"

"You want to put Corey in a ditch?" D'an'a said. "I can't agree to that."

"She means not take him with us," Bonnie said. "Human girls don't feel comfortable talking about themselves with boys around." She gave Marissa a strange look and added, "But, I happen to know that Corey has other plans this afternoon, so it won't be a problem." There was an implied warning that if things were different, that she *would* have a problem with it.

Marissa nodded catching the warning and said, "If you don't mind that is."

D'an'a smiled and said, "You can ask what questions that you want, I'll answer what I can and what I feel comfortable with; and maybe ask a few of my own."

The girls laughed and all rushed to get dressed. D'an'a leaned over at Bonnie and asked, "And what plans does Corey have? He didn't mention them to me."

Bonnie smiled and said, "He doesn't know about them yet. Chris wants to introduce him to someone."

"Who?" D'an'a asked.

"A new student, that we think will be just perfect for him," Bonnie said.

"Good," was all D'an'a said.

Scene 4

"I have a meeting with the UN Ambassador first thing in the morning," K'hori told his pod as he drifted into neutral ballast after their lovemaking. Adam was had his strong arms wrapped around him from behind, and Jord'n and Randi had both released him and were now floating away in opposite directions. This had been one of the rare evenings when they'd all been at home simultaneously and decided that dinner could wait. Their need for each other, their need to strengthen the psychic bonds of the pod, was more important. K'hori knew that Miranda was still concerned about that she had not been able to protect them from the effects of the UN's psychic assault on the city.

"Where and what about?" Randi turned and asked him. K'hori knew that she was also irrational as far as the UN was concerned. Perhaps not irrational, she had good reason for her distrust and dislike of the UN, she was just intense about it.

"Again, it concerns our petroleum exports," he said.

"Can we discuss something other than affairs of the state after such a wonderful evening?" Jord'n asked.

"And what would my wife wish to discuss?" Miranda asked with a smirk. K'hori knew that she took an unusual pleasure in the fact that she belonged to a pod.

"Perhaps, we could discuss the concept of adding to our family, now that my wife and husbands have agreed to to send our child to live with the humans for a while," she said.

"Do I detect a rebuke?" Adam asked still snuggling K'hori. That was the biggest surprise of all to K'horal. For a warrior, for a man trained in dealing death and destruction on massive scale, Adam was a very gentle lover who reveled in the simple act of touching.

Jord'n shook her head, and said, "No, not a rebuke. I agreed that it would be best for D'an'a to learn magic with those who can best teach her. I simply miss my child."

"And what do you propose doing about it, love?" Randi asked.

"Our quarters are empty. I would fill them again," she said with a gleam in her eye.

"Are you trying to tell us something?" Adam asked.

"Only that I wish another child," Jord's said.

K'hori looked at Miranda and Adam and asked, "How do you two feel about another child?"

Adam squeezed him tightly and said, "I think it's a good idea. D'an'a grew up way too fast."

"D'an'a is not grown up," Miranda said defensively.

"I know. But I missed having a little one around. The little tyke aged so fast in such a short amount of time. Human's aren't used to it," Adam said. K'hori knew that he was only voicing a concern that Miranda had put forth in the past. It was the nature of defenders. In the first three years of their lives, they grew at a rate of almost four times that of a human or even a baseline Shan.

"Actually, I wish for more than one child," Jord'n said looking over at Miranda. What she was suggesting was not that unusual in Shan pods- for more than one of the females to be pregnant at a time. It was said to strengthen the bond between the women and the family as a whole. It was however, as the humans were wont to say, hell on the males.

K'hori smiled as he pulled away from Adam and jetted over to the Jord'n. Pulling the other defender into his arms and laying his body along the length of hers, he said, "But to address our husband's concern, then we would have to ensure that at least one of the children was not a defender. That would mean either genetic manipulation, or a child that was not both mine and his. How would you feel about that?"

"Do you think I love D'an'a any less because he doesn't carry my genes? Do you think the bond we share is lessened because of that?" she asked running a strong hand down his body. A child that carries both your and my genes will be a defender, and there is no way to get that child without Adam's genetics, period. A child that carries only Adam and Randi's genes may not be able to live with us here. I'm afraid that a baseline shan child is going to be almost out of the question, not without some help from the biogenetics department of the med center."

"I'm just making things clear to my beloved wife before we embark on this endeavor," he said. Turning to Miranda who had drifted over to him, he asked, "And how do you feel about bearing another child?"

"I am more than willing to become pregnant again," she said.

"In spite of your concerns about another 'avad'a child?" K'hori asked. He knew that being a telepath, had made it difficult for Miranda to watch D'an'a grow up, and witnessing the discomfort her intersexuality caused with her age mates. The Shan were not by nature a prejudiced people, but there were those that said, that D'an'a's condition was a result of her human or transhuman parents. They conveniently forgot that 'avad'a children were not *that* rare among the Shan.

Miranda shrugged, "In spite of those concerns. I love my D'an'a, no matter what, and I would love another just like her." She shrugged and grinned adding, "Well, maybe one a little less moody."

K'hori watched as Adam swam up to Miranda and kissed her gently as if to allay her fears. He knew that these two had loved each other from afar for a very long time, and it was only after he came into the picture that they'd been willing to let each other act on it. Adam's family had taken in Miranda at a very young age and raised her as their own after her parents had been murdered for daring to convert to Christianity- the whole concept of religion still confused the Shan, and he, their commander was no exception. The attraction had always been there, but they were always afraid cross the line. Only during the stress of that first contact mission had they finally started to deal with those feelings, and the growing feelings of attraction between all three of them. Eventually, Jord'n came into the picture, and their pod was set.

K'hori watched Adam stroke their wife's soft skin and move against her body. As she wrapped her long shapely legs around his waist, the two sank to the floor of the flooded dwelling. There was a reason it was called "pin to the bottom". In an aquatic environment involving buoyant bodies, a certain amount of either speed, or "pinning" was necessary to maintain both contact and friction during lovemaking. She smiled at him and said something in a language that K'hori did not speak. "What was that?" he asked from across the room while Jord'n was beginning to do the most interesting things to his own sex with her webbed fingers.

Randi began to kiss along Adam's neck as she said between gentle touches of her lips, "Just a couple of spells."

He shook his head as Jord'n reached out and pulled him to her. "She is making sure she catches this night, my love. From at least one of you. As am I." K'hori knew that Jord'n meant that she was choosing to become fertile at this time, something over which Shan women had complete control. As for Randi, he suspected it was more of her gifts with magic- something he only understood slightly better than religion. Jord'n

reached out and ran a webbed finger along the circle of sensitive skin where his water wings opened at his armpits. He felt an almost electrical surge run down his spine to stimulate his response, and the length of flesh between his legs hardened, and he felt the rings of muscles in his anus contract forcing Adam's seed closer to where it needed it be.

He pulled her to him and kissed her gently, letting his hands run along the sides of her body and move up and along her hardening nipples. She placed a hand at his chest and pushed him downward while holding to the ring under his arm. She had other ideas, and kissed the side of his neck and pulled herself to him, wrapping her legs around his waist. In a single motion she impaled herself on his hard member and began to kiss him furiously. He felt his manhood slip deep inside her, pushing the foreskin back, rubbing its sensitive head against the soft warm folds of the insides of her sex as their pubes ground against each other.

As his bottom hit the floor of the dwelling, she began to rock up and down his length in long powerful strokes. Each upward stroke pulled his foreskin back over the head of his own sex until it almost left her. Then as she settled back down, the foreskin was pushed back and he felt the head rub delightfully against her most intimate areas.

There was a great deal of power in her driving strokes and K'hori was glad that the floor to their dwelling was reinforced. This was a level of sexual aggression, he'd seldom seen in his pink haired wife. The idea of having a baby seemed to inspire her to greater depths of passion. She leaned into him and began to bite at his neck and shoulders, her hands roaming across his broad chest pulling tightly against his nipples and sending charges of pleasure through his body. The water around them became a flurry of bubbles and sonar signals their bodies moved against each other.

K'hori felt the pressure in his testicles began to build. He could feel himself build to climax, as his wife's movements became harder and more intense. Smiling to himself, he jetted up from the floor and flipped her onto her back. With a vicious grin, he kissed her hard and began to drive his manhood deep into her sex in powerful piston like motions. If she wanted it hard, then he could oblige. He felt her legs tighten around his waist with bone crushing force- that is if he had bones- as their lovemaking became more and more frenzied. Suddenly, her sex began to spasm around his manhood setting off a chain reaction in his own body. With a final thrust deep inside her, he felt himself explode sending his own and seed combined with Adam's deep inside their wife.

As the water around them cleared, he looked over to see Randi, pulling off Adam, a long strand of Adam's seed pulling taught between their own sexes. With a wicked grin, she floated over to Jord'n and kissed her. The two women seemed to participate in an unspoken exchange- which considering that Miranda was a very powerful telepath was very possible- then smile. K'hori watched as Jord'n jetted over to Adam and snuggled up against him running her hands down the length of his body. K'hori knew that between their wife's ministrations, and pheromones that both he and Jord'n had

generated that their his husband's recover time was going to be very short indeed.

Miranda in the meantime ducked her head and took the shrinking length of K'hori's manhood in her mouth. He felt himself begin to harden again.

He understood now. The women didn't want to know who was the father of the children they hoped to conceive this night. They wanted nothing to come between them. He suspected that they would simply ask Mother to check on the children's development and only interfere if something was necessary.

Before long, K'hori felt himself beginning to respond to Randi's rather talented oral ministrations. He felt his manhood begin to grow again, and soon was discover that both his and Adam's enhanced endurance was going to be put to a serious test this evening. He would wager that the dwelling would need to be drained and flooded again to remove the last vestiges of the pheromones that his and Jord'n's bodies were flooding into the area.

Scene 5

Kym stood in at his window watching the rain come down. Outside the sun had yet to rise over eastern horizon. The house was quiet, Adam and Steve having long finished their lovemaking and fallen sleep. Kym found the early morning hours, when the world was quiet and even the lights of Vegas in the distance seemed to be somehow muted to be a balm to his troubled soul.

He did not speak, he refused to speak to the trouble in his heart. He'd done as his Aunt had demanded. He'd survived the fight and had given her a complete, blow by blow report, perfect in its detail and beyond the reproach of even the high standards of his grandfather. Then without awaiting any further instructions or comments had turned on his heel and left the room not daring to speak nor wishing to hear anything she had to say.

He'd then stayed pretty much sealed up in his apartment until his conversation with Ms. Murphy about moving in with Adam and Steve. He was hurting. He was honest enough with himself to admit that; and even if he wasn't the avatar of Tyr would have reminded him of it. He was hurting from the loss of his fathers, he was hurting from the loss of Matthew. He was hurting over losing Tommy to Elizabeth, although again he was honest enough to admit that Tommy had never been his; but that didn't mean the hurt was any less. He was hurting from being denied the opportunity to take back what was left of his fathers.

It was the last that hurt him the most. Cain had slain his fathers and taken their phyre- their life essence- and his aunt simply turned that over to Drake as if it meant nothing to her. Well, it may not have meant anything to her, but it meant something to him, something vitally important. Now it was too late. There was nothing he could

do about it but rebuild and go on. The very last part of the most important men in his life had been shunted off in some women's game of "you have a greater right to it than I." After all it was only her brother and brother in law. It was Drake's child, Matthew who'd been killed by Cain. But it was Kym's fathers.

Kym would have turned over Matthew's phyre to his mother without being asked to do it. But this abandonment of his fathers' very essence to the dragons had been the last straw. Even if none of it still existed when Cain had been destroyed, he still wanted to know for himself. They'd taken that away from him over some kind of estrogen-fueled game of mutual respect.

He sighed and watched the rain come down, the tears on his face matching the tracks left on the glass pane. He sat down on the padded seat of the dormer and pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. Sitting there, he cried for his fathers, now gone beyond anyone's ability to reach. He cried for Matthew, his essence now returned to Drake. He cried for all those who died when his universe was spun into nothingness when Merrick's void shift met with a nuclear blast over Los Angeles in his world. He cried because he'd finally brought peace to the 'born and the dragons, but the cost had been his very universe. He cried this night, like he had every night since moving in.

Near dawn, when the storm had broken and the sun was peeking over the eastern horizon, he uncurled himself from his seat and slipped into the shower. As he lathered up, he looked down at the dragon marks on each of his wrists; symbols of the two Orders to which he'd belonged and he felt something inside of him break.

He quickly finished his shower and dressed. Listening to the noises of the house, he realized that neither Adam nor Steven were awake yet and smiled grimly. He had time. Going to the mirror of his closet, he dropped his towel and looked at his naked form standing there. With a practiced ease he summoned the armor that had been a gift to him from the dragons. After it took form, he first pulled the heavy sword on his back off and tossed it onto the bed, and then began peeling the stuff off piece by piece.

When he was once again nude, he reached into his closet and dressed in his usual jeans and a polo shirt. Then grabbing his jacket and a pillow case he stuffed the armor down into the pillow case and put on his jacket. Looping the sword over his shoulders, he slipped down stairs and then out into the back yard and took to the sky.

It didn't take long for him to reach his destination, the Pacifica School on the East Coast of Haiwee in what was left of California. He dropped down from the sky on the east side of the building where he saw Elizabeth Drake- no Elizabeth Bishop, he reminded himself- was standing at window of the apartments she shared with his cousin, Tommy- her husband. Hovering over the balcony, he dropped the armor and the sword.

The clattering sound drew both of their attention. As they entered into the foggy cold morning air, Tommy called, "Kym? What's the matter?"

He took a deep breath and said, "You might as well have this too." Then without another word, he turned in the air and began to fly away.

"Wait! What's this about?" Tommy demanded. "This is your armor! Your sword! You earned these!"

Without turning around he said, "I want nothing from the dragons or the born that I haven't taken by right of combat. The sword was grandfather's before it was Cain's.

Keep it, give it to your mother, or give it to Elizabeth. I don't care. The armor was a gift from a dead dragon for a peace that didn't hold. I was a pawn, a tool to be used by Tyr, to be used by the orders, and eventually to be used by Drake and Nicole to keep the dragons off their back while they divided up Cain. I've discovered I don't like being a pawn, or rook, or even a knight. If, I'm going to be in a game, then I'm going to be a player, not the piece. I won't be used by anyone again, Tommy."

Without waiting for a reply, he accelerated away. With a little luck he could make it back to Vegas before Adam and Steve knew he was gone.

Scene 6

Ethan North had slept in, something he'd only rarely allowed himself occasion to do. Of course the fact that he and Gates had been awake late last night- first working, then talking, and eventually making love, with more talking later gave him reason to sleep late. When he'd finally awakened, Gates was already up and gone. Of course since they both were transhuman, that meant that they had more stamina than the average person, their bodies had to have energy to be able to power their abilities. Still, it was a rare morning that he allowed himself the luxury of sleeping past dawn.

As he left Gate's bedroom, he suddenly wished that he'd picked another morning, because he ran smack into Gate's son, Kevin. He found himself blushing deeply as he stared at the blond young man. "Mornin' Ethan," Kevin said.

"Morning Kevin," Ethan replied.

"Sleep in?" Kevin asked with a grin.

"Yeah. We had a late night last night," Ethan said.

Kevin smiled and said, "I can imagine."

"Smart ass," Ethan accused.

"Guilty," Kevin said back.

"Uh..." Ethan said. "Maybe we should talk." To be honest he hadn't had much of a chance to speak to Kevin one on one since the boy had been resurrected by the Wrought. He was a little nervous around the young man for a number of reasons. The first was that Kevin was his brother's offspring. He refused to call him Ed's son because Ed was anything but a father to the boy. The second was that he knew the boy knew what was going on between his mother and him, and that made him feel just a little self conscious. Finally, he was trying to give both Kevin and Gates a chance to sort out their lives again; trying to stay out of the way.

"Okay," Kevin said. "How about I fix us some breakfast here instead of going down to the dining facility?"

"You can cook?" Ethan asked.

"Jake's mom made sure we both knew how to cook. She said that she didn't want us getting married to some girl just so we could have a decent meal," he said with a smile.

"Really?" Ethan asked with a smile.

"Yeah, really. Sometimes she was sort of clueless, but in a nice way," Kevin said. "Come on, my specialty is bacon, cheese eggs, and home-made biscuits. I think we've got the stuff I need in the kitchen. Cooking is just chemistry applied to food."

Ethan followed the young man into the kitchen and settled into one of the stools at the bar and watched. It was funny in an odd sort of way; his nephew cooking for him. "So, what do you want to talk about?" the blond asked him.

Ethan shrugged and said, "How're you settling in; coping with a changed world?"

Kevin shrugged and said, "Okay, I guess. It's been sort of a pain in the butt with getting my ID straightened out. That death certificate sort of caused all kinds of problems. We had to create a whole new identity for me. The fact that so many records in California have been destroyed helped somewhat. It's a little easier to fake a record that was lost in the catastrophe."

Ethan smiled and said, "That's about right. Covert organizations have been using that kind of thing to build identities for years. I've been told that vampires do the same thing."

"That's right, you used to work with the DNA, didn't you," Kevin said as he set about making them breakfast. Ethan liked that idea. Leif swore by the value of sharing a meal with someone as a way of breaking the ice so to speak.

"But as for your original question, there's been quite a bit of change. Cell phones have become a lot more common these days, and standard internet speed is much faster. Mostly the changes are cultural- Nine eleven; Orlando getting nuked, California being sunk, the arrival of the Shan, the destruction of Mecca, the return of Atlantis. the world has gone through hell and back since I died. There's a lot to catch up on. Aerin did a good job of putting it into my head, but not all of what she considered relevant is the same as what I consider important. Somehow I don't think I need information on the changes dress styles over that time."

"I guess she meant for you not to be out of fashion," Ethan said.

"No, when I said dress styles, I didn't mean fashion. I meant the styles of dresses that have been popular," Kevin said with a smile. "I don't have a lot of use for that kind of information."

Ethan chuckled and said, "I guess not. Do you mind if I ask you a more personal question?"

"Go ahead," Kevin said as he put the bacon in the pan.

"How do you feel about me and your mom?" Ethan asked.

He could see Kevin become very still. For a moment he wondered if he'd crossed a line. Finally, the teen turned and smiled, "Actually rather good."

"Really?" Ethan asked.

Kevin nodded and said, "Yeah, really. Outside of a few friends with benefits, my mom hasn't had a lot of time for someone in her life. I'm glad to see you two together. You make her happy, and I'm happy about that. Even if it's kind of weird."

"Weird?" Ethan asked. "How?"

"Don't get me wrong, Ethan. I don't know you very well, but what I know, I like. It's just weird on a lot of different levels, and a few of them might even be Oedipal," Kevin said.

"That's a surprising admission coming from a teenage boy, especially a gay one."

"Not really. It's not a sexual thing. It's a space thing. Like I said, my mom has had a few lovers in her past, and for the most part I've liked them all," he said. "I don't

think she'd get involved with someone I didn't like. But at the same time, I was always central in her life. Now, I've been gone for a while and other people have moved in. I'm sort of having to share space that I didn't before."

"I'm not trying to push you away from your mom, Kevin. I'd never do that," Ethan told him.

"I know that," Kevin said. "Like I said, it's an adjustment."

"That's one way it's weird. You said there were several. What's another?"

Kevin blushed and said, "Size." Ethan actually laughed at that one. He understood where he was coming from. "I never thought much about the mechanics of my mother having sex. The fact that you're smaller than I am, and that she stands two meters tall, sometimes makes me feel uncomfortable when my mind starts to wander into areas that it has no business being."

"I'm not going to discuss bedroom activities with your mother with you," Ethan told him.

"Good," Kevin said. "Like I said, it's just weird, but it's a weird I don't mind."

"What else?" Ethan asked pushing the envelope.

Kevin broke two eggs into a bowl with grated cheese and a touch of water and dill. He smiled and said, "I think the last one is one we both feel weird about."

"Ed," Ethan said.

"Ed," Kevin replied.

"Is it a problem?" Ethan asked.

Kevin shook his head and said, "Not really. It's just you're an unexpected connection to a family I never thought I'd know, or would want to know."

"Do you want to know?" Ethan asked. "The rest of your family that is."

Kevin shrugged and said, "I don't know. Most of them think I'm dead. Maybe it's better if it stays that way." Ethan could kick his brother's ass for the way he handled things with Gates. First off sleeping with a fourteen year old girl was way out of line. Trying to force her to have an abortion was even worse. Finally, he at least did the right thing and at least supported Gates and Kevin, up to the point where Kevin started making money of his own with his patents. Then he turned around and threatened to sue to get access to the rather large bank account the boy had accumulated before he

died. Fortunately, Gate's lawyers pointed out that if he did, then his relationship to Kevin would come out into the open and would ruin his rising career.

"I know Mother, your grandmother wasn't happy with him," Ethan told him. "She wasn't happy that she never got to meet you." She'd told Ethan that in her last days before the cancer took her. It was her one regret in life.

Kevin didn't say anything but simply beat the eggs with a ferocity usually reserved for transhuman bad guys. Finally, he shrugged and said, "I don't know. It would have meant all of those embarrassing stares from Ed, and from his wife, and daughter. I don't like being on display."

"This is coming from a guy who pilots a three hundred foot anthropomorphic robot," Ethan teased him.

"Nobody sees me up there. My leathers and helmet hides my face when I'm transport mode, and armor hides my face in the battlemodes," Kevin told him. "It's strange to have a sister who hates the very sight of me."

"She doesn't hate you, Kevin," Ethan told him. "And actually you have two sisters. Elaine had another daughter not long after you died."

"Actually she does. The one time I met her, she told me so," Kevin told him.

"You met Krista?" Ethan asked. "When?"

"I was about twelve, I guess. Elaine wanted to see where all the money Ed was sending Mom was going. She and Mom had a long talk and so did my sister and I. She told me exactly what she thought of me, and it wasn't pretty. Bastard was about the kindest word she used."

"I didn't know that. I'm sorry," Ethan said. "I know she cried when you died."

Kevin looked up and smiled weakly. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Don't say anything, Kev," Ethan told him. "But if you ever want meet either of your sisters, or your niece, I'll help you any way I can."

"I'll think about it, Ethan," Kevin said pouring the eggs into the now heated pan.

"You know, you have another uncle, too?" Ethan said.

Kevin nodded his head, "Yeah. He was in the navy."

"He's retired now. He was a SEAL," Ethan told him. "He's my baby brother."

"What is it with all the men in my life being in the Navy?" Kevin asked, his voice just a little husky.

"It's a good place to see the world," Ethan said.

"What about you? How did you end up in spandex and a cape?" Kevin asked.

Ethan smiled and said, "I'll have you know, I've never worn a cape." He sighed and poured himself a cup of coffee. "But my powers kicked in about your age. I did the superhero thing for a while, and in college, I got approached by the DSI. I went to work first with them, and then as a liaison between them and the DNA. I got to work with Runeclaw and Avalon, with Midean Knight an Dreamweaver, although when we first met, she was calling herself Mind Bow. She didn't start going by Dreamweaver until after she was resurrected by Midean Knight and Runeclaw."

Kevin spun on him. "Someone else died and came back to life?"

Ethan nodded and poured himself a cup of coffee from the maker on the counter. "Yeah. She was murdered by Richelieu Factor too. Midean Knight went just a little insane after that. When her body was stolen by Kamal Khan, he went stark raving berserk. He and Runeclaw chased the body down to New Orleans where they fought a pack of werewolves to bring her back."

"Where is she now?" Kevin asked.

"Officially or unofficially?" Ethan asked.

"Both," Kevin said.

"Officially, she and Midean Knight are listed as missing in action," Ethan told him. "Unofficially, they found an old cache of Atlantean technology and left the planet. Beyond that, I can't say. There's a rumor among some of the more powerful telepaths on the planet that the Mideanite Mindsong can still be heard in the depths of space, so I suspect they are doing well."

"I guess that bodes well for me then," Kevin said.

"I guess so."

