

Eye Of The Storm

by
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Dawson Sheridan sat back and thought about the enormity of what he was planning. Could a fifteen-year-old boy really pull off what he was thinking? He knew he would have help, but for this to be his Eagle project, HE was the one who had to do the work. He had to do the planning. He had to make the contacts. Most importantly, HE had to be the one to get the donations.

Dawson looked around his room, and, for probably the first time, really took stock of how lucky he had it. He had his own top-end computer system, with all the perks. A 42-inch flat screen TV, hooked up to three different game systems, a large, queen-sized water bed, a nice stereo system, with over two hundred CD's, and of course, plenty of name brand clothes, four different pair of hundred dollar sneakers, and many other things that let everyone know that he had money. 'NO!' he thought to himself, 'his PARENTS had money. He was just a spoiled kid'.

Both his mother and father were lawyers for a huge firm in downtown Atlanta. He'd heard them both say that they didn't need to work anymore, they had more money than they could spend as it was, but they loved their work. Thankfully, Dawson was not one of those kids with parents that didn't have time for him. He was an only child, and while he knew that he wasn't exactly planned for, he never once felt like he was a burden for his parents. They did everything parents could do to make sure Dawson knew he was loved. Even though they gave Dawson just about everything he wanted, they made sure he knew that not everyone had what he did. Dawson briefly thought back to when he was eight years old.

Flashback

'But mom!!!!' Dawson had cried, 'I don't wanna go, I wanna play with my new toys!'

He was throwing a major temper tantrum. Here it was Christmas evening, and he wanted to play with the toys Santa had given him, not going and doing some stupid thing his parents wanted to do. He didn't even really understand it. Something about going to a shelter and serving dinner. Why couldn't they just have dinner here like they always did?

"We're going, and that's final." his father had said, and even by age eight, Dawson knew that when his father used that tone, there was nothing to do. But Dawson let his unhappiness be known as he stuck out his bottom lip, and stomped out of the room.

Fifteen minutes later, and Dawson was still pouting in his room; his father knocked on the door. When Dawson didn't answer, his father, Thomas, walked in. Without a word, his father sat on the edge of the bed and waited for Dawson to sit up. Finally Dawson did. He knew better than to try and outwait his father. Even as young as he was, Dawson knew his father's patience was legendary.

Once the boy was sitting next to him, Tom reached out, put his arm around his son, and pulled him in tight. Dawson knew something was coming, but wasn't sure what.

"Son, I know you don't want to go tonight, but I think there's a few things you're now old enough to understand." His father said, and Dawson sat up straighter. He loved it when his father told him things, and when he said that Dawson was 'old enough', it made him feel proud.

"When I was only a few years older than you are now, I met a boy. He was twelve, like I was, but see, he was different than I was."

"How was he different, Daddy? Was he black or something?" Dawson asked, already entranced in the story his father was unfolding.

"No son, he wasn't black. See, he was a boy who didn't have a home."

"Didn't have a home?" Dawson asked, not understanding how that could be. "But where were his mommy and daddy?" By now, Dawson had wiggled his way onto his father's lap, and was looking up into his daddy's face.

"Well, they died when he was real young... younger than you are now. So he was placed into foster care." When Tom looked down into his son's bright blue eyes, he saw that Dawson didn't understand. Before he could ask, Tom quickly explained. "He got a new mommy and daddy. But they didn't like him, and did some mean things to him."

"Like what?" Dawson asked, not really knowing what the boy's new parents could have done to him that was mean. Mommies and daddies loved their kids, no matter what. They would never do mean things to them. Well, maybe they made him eat vegetables, or took away his favorite toys. Dawson thought it was mean when his parents did that to him.

"They did a lot of bad things to him... they hit him, they called him all sorts of bad names, and... and some other things, that you don't need to hear about." Tom was talking like he was in a trance, and Dawson just knew that he should just stay quiet and let his father speak.

After a few silent moments, Tom spoke again. "When he was twelve, my friend decided he'd be better off living on his own. So he ran away."

"Where did he go?" Dawson asked after a few minutes of silence. "Where did he stay? Did he get a new mommy and daddy?"

"No... he didn't get a new mommy and daddy. See, by that point he wouldn't trust anyone, so he slept where he could, and started to steal food when he was hungry. But things didn't go very well for him. The older kids would take the stuff he had, and sometimes they would beat him up."

"Why?" That was all Dawson could think to ask.

"I don't know why people did that to him, but they did. There were times that he had to sleep in an old abandoned building. Many nights he would go to bed hungry and crying. He... he would cry a lot of times, wondering what was wrong with him... why no one wanted him."

Dawson looked up as he felt a tear fall onto his mop of bright blond hair. His daddy was crying. Daddy never cried. Dawson was scared now. "What... what happened then?"

"Well... one night, he went to a shelter. A place where homeless people can go and have a meal. It was Christmas Day, and it had actually snowed, so it was really cold outside." Dawson sat there in awe. He

knew what snow was, cause his mommy had family that lived in a place where it snowed a lot. But he could never remember snow in Atlanta.

"When he got there, he saw a lot of people were handing out a huge Christmas dinner. He was the youngest person there, but he got into line. He was so cold and hungry that he knew he had to risk being around that many strangers. When he got to the front of the line, and started to get served some food, he saw a few kids in the back. They were playing with brand new toys."

Tom took a moment to collect his thoughts. "When he noticed the boys there playing with new toys, some of them younger than he was, but a few of them were his age, he broke down and cried. All he wanted was someone to love him enough to give him new toys like that on Christmas."

Dawson stayed quiet, even as more of his daddy's tears fell onto his hair. "He made it to the end of the line, and went to eat his food. The whole time he kept his eyes down, so no one could see that he was crying. But one of the boys saw him. That boy had just gotten a brand new winter jacket that his grandmother had sent him for when he went skiing. That boy went up to my friend, and handed him the brand new jacket."

Tom had a small smile on his face as he kept thinking through his memories. "When my friend asked this new boy what he was doing, the boy told him simply, 'I think Santa left this at the wrong house. I'm sure he meant it for you.' Before my friend could say anything else, the boy turned around and went back into the kitchen area. To this day, my friend is positive that that small act of kindness saved his life. You see, that winter it snowed a few more times, and was one of the coldest winters Atlanta had ever seen."

Dawson was again quiet as his father sat there. It was a few minutes before his father shook his head and looked down at his small son. "You see, Dawson, that's what we're going to do today. We're going to a homeless shelter, and help serve food to the people who have no place else to go. I'd really like you to go, but if you don't want to, your mom and I can drop you off at your Uncle Jim's house on the way there. You think about what you want to do. We'll leave in about twenty minutes. Okay?"

Dawson just nodded, and his dad left. He sat there and thought about his daddy's story, and finally made his decision. When his parents called him down twenty minutes later, he had a big bag of brand new toys and his new jacket. When his dad looked at him with a question, Dawson just winked. When they came home later, his bag was empty, but his little heart was full.

End Flashback

Dawson smiled as he came back to the here and now. "Fuck it," he said out loud. "Dad keeps saying I can do anything I put my mind to... so let's do it."

With that, Dawson sat forward in his chair, looking over the 'Eagle Scout Project Proposal' and hit 'print.' He was going to do it, and it was going to be big.

Stanton Taylor ran his hand through his graying hair as he read the proposal that Dawson had given him. In all his years of being the scoutmaster of Troop 811, he had never seen a plan this extensive. It easily surpassed anything he had ever seen or even heard of another scout doing for their project. Just thinking about how much money Dawson would have to raise was starting to give him a headache. He hoped that Dawson wouldn't be too let down if this didn't work.

Stan sighed again as he put his signature in the "approved by" section. The next step would be to give it to the Eagle Scout Review Board and see what they had to say. He knew that if anyone could pull it off, it would be Dawson... that boy didn't know what the word 'quit' meant.

Two days later, Stan was standing in front of the Review Board submitting Dawson's project idea. This was an informal meeting, and one that most scouts didn't even know happened. The 'official' review board meeting would be held the next night with Dawson there. Even though this was informal, Stan still felt really nervous. He could tell by the raised eyebrows of the three-man committee that they all thought the same thing he did... this was huge.

Finally, Jack Perkins, the Committee Chairman, looked up at Stan with an unreadable look. "Well... this is certainly an... ambitious project..." Jack let his sentence die off, as he looked to the two others that made up the committee.

On Jack's left, Jim Tanner spoke up. "Stan... do you really think... uhhh..." Jim looked down at his paper to find the name. "Dawson... that's right. Do you really think Dawson can pull this off?"

Stan sighed heavily and ran his hand through his hair. This was one of the unconscious things Stan did when he was really nervous. "I don't know, Jim... I really don't. However, I will say this. If there's any of my scouts that could pull this off, it would be Dawson."

"That's not really the vote of confidence we were hoping for," Donald MacCaffree said from Jack's right side. "However, I don't think you could have said anything else honestly. I have never seen anything on this scale in the thirty five years I've sat on this review board."

Jack spoke up, and Stan knew what was coming. Jack was a good man basically... but everyone knew he was a coward. "I don't know if I really like this. See, I'm afraid he'll get into the middle of this, and realize it's too big for him, and it'll collapse. Something like this could bring a LOT of bad press our way."

Before Stan could respond, Don replied. "Oh screw the press, Jack. You know how I feel about that shit. I'm more worried about Dawson. If this fails, I would think he would be heartbroken."

Stan sighed in relief. Jack might have been the committee chair, but when Don spoke, they listened to him. "I'm worried about that too, Don," Stan said as he played his trump card, "But I really think he can do it. As I said, if anyone can get something this big done, it's Dawson." He paused a moment as he got the courage to really jump in with both feet. "Tell you what guys... here's what I am willing to do...."

Five minutes later, Stan got done explaining his idea.

Don stared at him for a few seconds, before smiling. "That's all I need to know. Dawson will get his approval." A few seconds later, the other two nodded.

"Don," Stan started, trying to make his voice sound as firm as he needed it for this. "I not only believe in Dawson, but I believe in what he wants to do. What he's trying to do is something this city needs badly. I have no doubt he can get what's needed."

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST, Dawson!!! You don't do anything small, do you?!?!" Jesse asked his best friend after Dawson got done explaining what his project was going to be. Dawson couldn't help but fall back on his bed laughing. "I'm fucking serious here, dude; have you even begun to think about how much work this'll take?!?! Not to mention how much fucking money?"

Dawson sat up, his laughing done with; now he was serious. "Yeah... I know how much this'll take. It's all I've been thinking about for the last two months, when the idea first hit me."

"Okay, so lay it on me. You know I'll help, but you're the one that's gotta direct everything... so let's see what you got so far?" Jesse asked, now getting serious as well. He knew this would be a lot of work, but he figured it would be a hell of a lot of fun as well.

Dawson got up off the bed, and took the chair that Jesse was sitting in, after he got up. He turned towards the computer, and started to open up a few files. "Okay, first thing I need to do is see how many contractors we can get to help. After the board approved my idea on Sunday, I sent out an e-mail to all the contractors in Atlanta asking for help. So far I've got three different companies' reply that they would help, giving me a total of thirty-two guys that will help. It's only been three days, so I'm hoping I'll get more."

"Second," he said as he opened up another file, "this is a list of all the scout troops in the city. I'm going to go to every one of them over the next two weeks and see how many I can get to do the grunt work. I figure if I can get enough help, we can do this in three weekends, maybe four... depending. I'll ask that they all bring things like brooms, mops, things like that. And any of the dads that will help, to bring tools and the like."

"Third, I just got the approval this morning from the city. They'll be dropping the keys to the building off to my dad in the morning. I was also told not to worry about permits; everything will be handled by the time we're ready to start work."

Dawson opened up another file and started to explain that one. "This next e-mail will be going out to a bunch of different stores asking for donations. I don't know if the big ones like Wal-Mart or Target will help, but I really hope so. If the others can't help with supplies, I've asked them to see if they can't help with donations, so we can buy anything we need. Dad's already started an account at the bank just for this, and started us out with a thousand dollars. We all know I'll need a LOT more than that... but... I've also asked a few of the food places to see if they would be willing to help feed everyone that's there to help."

"God damned, Daws.... you really got this worked out. And here I thought you were nuts thinking about doing this, but hell... it just might work," Jesse said slightly in awe of his friend.

"No ,Jesse... it's not a 'just might work...' this WILL work." He said it with such conviction that Jesse couldn't help but believe it would be true.

The next night, Dawson stood up in front of his own troop, ready to outline his plan and ask for volunteers. He had set up a Power Point presentation that he would repeat twelve times over the next two weeks. This would be his first time doing it in front of others. He'd gone over and over it in his head hundreds of times, so he was sure he had it. That didn't help... he was still really nervous.

"Hey guys... as you all know, I'm starting my Eagle project, and I'm here to explain what help I'll need." He began, and immediately little Billy shouted out from the back of the room.

"Yeah! I hear it's BIG!" He spread his arms wide and everyone got a laugh from the troop's jokester.

"Yeah, Billy... it's a pretty big deal... but with enough help, I think I can do it. I know if we can get it done, things'll be a lot better around here for us kids."

Dawson used that to launch into his prepared speech. He reached down and started the presentation. Thankfully, the church they were using had a multi-media screen which he was able to plug his laptop into. So instead of everyone trying to see things on his little fifteen-inch screen, they could all see it on the sixty-inch screen behind him.

The screen lit up, and on it was the picture of a large three-story building, looking much the worse for wear; next to it was a rather large open field that was massively overgrown. "Most of you know what we're looking at, but for those that don't... this is the old Murphy Building, which used to hold the city's only teen rec center. That was until almost five years ago when the city stopped being able to fund it. The rec center closed down, and everything in the Murphy building moved out. Since then, the three-story building has been left vacant."

Dawson hit his remote, and the picture changed to a close-up of the front door, which was boarded over. However, a few of the boards had been pulled off and just left hanging there. "As you can see, the place has seen a lot of traffic. Most of us kids know that druggies like to go in there to have some fun." He hit the button again, and the picture changed to a shot of the entry way. "One of the architects who has volunteered to help with this project went through the building with me." He started switching to picture after picture as he explained what they were seeing.

"I've been assured that the building is still sound; however, it needs a very good cleaning, as well as needing to replace most of the drywall. Most of the windows need to be fixed or replaced, as well as almost all the doors."

Dawson continued to flip through the pictures, showing them all every room in the building. Finally, he came to one that was just a floor plan of the different levels. "As you can all see, we've gone through and labeled each room as to what we think it would work out best for. We got game rooms, TV rooms, study rooms, three different computer rooms, one on each floor, as well as a few rooms to be set up like classrooms, so kids can get tutoring after school if they need it."

Everyone seemed to be rather impressed with what Dawson was describing. He hit his remote again, and the picture changed to the lot outside. "This is going to take almost as much work as the inside. First thing we'd have to do is clean the entire lot. I've been in there, and it's a mess."

"Once it's cleaned up, then we need to mow the entire thing down. I've already talked to a lawn care agency, and they said they would be happy to come out and mow the whole thing down; we just need to clean it first. After that's done, I'm hoping to turn the thing into a football field/baseball field, with a track around the outside. Don't know if we can, but that's what I'm shooting for."

He hit the button again, and this time it changed to a overgrown concrete pad right next to the building. "This is hopefully going to be a set of basketball courts. After talking to the contractor, he said the whole thing would need to be pulled up and relaid. I don't know if we can do that, but again.. I'm hoping to."

When he got done with the slide show, he put the remote down, and turned to face his troop head on. "I know this all seems like a lot of work, but I think with enough help, this would be something that not only could we all be proud of, but we could all use. My idea is to split it into three different weekends. The first we'll do all the cleaning. Second, we do the remodeling that's needed, and the third we put in all the furnishings needed."

He looked around and saw most of the kids nodding, and all the parents looking thoughtful. Not even his own parents had heard all of his idea. They told him from the beginning that this was his project, and they would help out, only if he asked. So far he hadn't needed to ask for much.

"On the table by the door, there is a packet of things that you'll need to know if you are willing to help. I hope to start a month from this coming weekend. But I'll let you know if it changes." Dawson looked up one last time, and that's when he noticed something strange.

Standing by the door was a kid, about twelve years old. The problem was, Dawson didn't know him, and he was sure he would have remembered this boy's face. He had short blond hair, bright green eyes, and a splash of freckles across his nose. His face was alabaster white, and Dawson almost expected him to have pointed ears, but he couldn't see them. Next to the boy was a woman that was obviously his mother. They looked almost identical.

Dawson was interrupted from his study of the two new people by a question from one of his scout mates. It was one of the older boys who asked this one. "Dawson... who's going to be staffing this thing once it's done?"

"Well Tommy, I've already got commitments from both Catholic Charities and the Big Brother/Big Sister program to help with the staffing, as well as some teachers who said they would come in to help with the tutoring. Not to mention about twenty people who have volunteered themselves, which Dad's starting the background checks on." Everyone was nodding at his explanation, and by the time he looked back, the two strangers were gone.

Two weeks later Dawson was happy. He had been to twelve different Scout meetings, and had been able to secure help from every single one of them. When he added up the numbers, he had just over two hundred scouts that were going to help. The only thing that really bothered him was the 'elf boy' as he had started calling him. The boy and his mother had been to every single one of the scout meetings, always showing up at the beginning of his speech, and leaving right when he got done. He had run out one time to see if he could talk to them, but they were gone. He didn't think they were dangerous, as he had gotten smiles from the boy every time he looked at him... but he knew something was off.

He couldn't dwell on it though. He had a meeting with Dan Gosh, and he was already late. He was about to do the normal teenage 'elephant down the stairs,' when his parents' voices caught him.

"Tom, I really think it's time to tell him?" His mom, Mary Ann, said. Dawson knew they were trying to be quiet, but he was still able to hear everything.

"What do you want me to tell him? 'Hey Dawson, I just thought you should know...'"

Dawson knew most of what his father was talking about already. He had heard his father talking to one of the homeless charities he worked with about his own experience as a homeless youth. Dawson had become nosy in the way that only a lawyer's son can. He found out everything he could about his Dad's childhood. However, hearing the details from his Dad's own mouth was stunning. So many things fell into place at that moment and it staggered the boy. He quietly sat on the steps and ran a hand through his blond hair, as yet more of his parents' conversation reached him.

"I'm so damned proud of him for this, Mary Ann," his father said, and Dawson could hear the emotion in his father's voice. He could picture the tears that ran down his father's face... matching his own. "He doesn't need this to bring him down right now. Maybe when this is all over, but I couldn't bear the look in his eyes when he hears this, at least... not right now."

"Oh come on, Tom, you know your son won't hate you for that." Dawson's mom couldn't have been more correct, but Tom couldn't understand that right now. "But I told you a long time ago, it's your story to tell, not mine. When you're ready, I'll be with you, but I don't think... no.. I know... you don't have anything to worry about."

Tom said something that Dawson couldn't hear, then the door shut, and his father's car started up. Dawson took a second to wipe his face, then ran downstairs. Without stopping, he told his mom he was leaving, and jumped on his bike.

Dawson started to pedal as fast as he could. He was running on auto pilot by this point; he couldn't think about anything other than what his father had just said to his mom. Things like that are not something you think about hearing your father talk about. It normally took him about twenty minutes to get to the Murphy building, but today it only took him about fifteen. He almost rode right by it, but Dan waved him down.

Dan Gosh, the lead architect for the project, was taking time away from his wife and two kids for this, and Dawson didn't want him to waste any more time than he needed to. "Hey, Mr. Gosh," Dawson said in a winded pant, "Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay, Dawson," Dan said as he put his hand out for Dawson. "And please... call me Dan. I know I said that before." He said it with a grin, but he already knew what was coming.

"Oh no, sir, I couldn't call you by your first name. Daddy would have my butt in a sling if I did that." Dawson was grinning as he said that and shook the man's hand.

Dan just laughed, and they started to walk into the building. Dan put his arm over Dawson's shoulders as they walked in. Dawson sort of melted into the man's embrace, and was all smiles. Dawson was a very physical kid, and he loved to be touched by others.

"We got us a lot of work to do here, Dawson," Dan started as he rolled out the blueprints he had with him.

"Yes sir, I know we do," Dawson said while meeting the man's eyes.

Dan studied Dawson for a second to make sure the boy had the commitment he knew it was going to take. Once again he was impressed with the boy. "Okay, here's some things you really need to think about. You're going to be the foreman of this project. That means you have to do a lot of work, but it's work most people won't see. You've got enough people that your full time job is going to be directing them. I don't want to see you lift a finger to do anything. You need to delegate and oversee."

Dawson was about to protest, but Dan stopped him. By the time Dan got done explaining what all would be involved in Dawson's job, even he was starting to wonder if he hadn't had an impossible dream.

Atlanta Georgia, Saturday Oct. 2nd 2004, 0530

Dawson jumped off his bike at the old Murphy building. He was the first one there, just like Mr. Gosh had said he should be. The first people would be arriving around six thirty, and working in four-hour shifts. They'd go until it was dark, or they got everything done.

He'd been there the night before as a bunch of people came by to set up the stuff they would need for today. One of the companies was nice enough to let them use a lot of fencing, so they could fence off the area around the building. That way they didn't have to worry about tools and equipment "disappearing".

He looked around, seeing the five roll-away dumpsters they had delivered over the week before, as well as all the new drywall and lumber they would need. He went over to the fields and made sure that all the equipment was still okay. They had a bunch of the big lawn mowers that another one of the companies had donated to him. He knew none of the scouts would be working those things; as a matter of fact, he was under strict orders that none of the scouts could use anything other than hand-held equipment. That was fine, because the company also had a few guys to come out and do the mowing, and then the trimming that would be needed.

The scouts would be responsible for all the cleaning up of the area, before the mowing, and then helping with the actual construction of the fields. That part would be next weekend, though.

He sat down at the table he would be using and started to make sure all his notes were in order. He still remembered Mr. Gosh's speech about how he had to be the one in charge, always at the same place so people could find him. For most of this project, he would be chained to the table, making sure everyone knew what they had to do, and handling any problems that came up.

"Hey, Daws!" Dawson jumped as Jesse came up behind him. Jesse couldn't help but laugh. "Sorry, dude, didn't mean to scare the shit outta ya."

Dawson just shook his head and grinned. "What are you doing here this early?" Jesse wasn't supposed to show up until the second crew, which was at eleven.

"I told you before, dude, I'm gonna help out as much as I can. That means being here whenever you are." Dawson couldn't help but smile. Jesse was the best friend a kid could ask for. There was never any doubt that Jesse had his back. The two boys had been friends since they first met when they were six, in cub scouts. Had it not been for that, they would probably have never met. The two boys couldn't have been different in the way they grew up. Dawson grew up with the silver spoon, while Jesse grew up in a trailer. Dawson had almost everything he wanted given to him, while Jesse relied on church charities. Dawson's parents loved and cared for him, Jesse's father was a drunk. That didn't stop them from being best friends though, with Jesse spending more time at Dawson's house than he did at his own. Jesse even called Dawson's parents 'mom and dad.'

Dawson's mind wandered back to what Jesse had told him when he showed up for an extended stay several months ago...

Jesse found the trailer empty, as usual. Hell, he had seen the clerks in the video arcade more than his father for the last two months. He felt like trashing the place again. It was becoming almost an obsession. He couldn't understand how his father could manage to never be home. Literally his father was home only two evenings out of the week. He and his girlfriend were always going somewhere. Sheila wasn't so bad. She actually spoke with him, unlike his father.

Yep, there it was. The note. It simply gave the number of the place that she and his father would be staying. It asked him to call her cell when he got home. He picked up the phone and wondered if he should call. He had heard the fight they had last time he had called her like she asked. Jesse would never forget what she had told his father and what his response was.

"Monty, what is wrong with you? This is your only son. Don't you even care a little bit about him?"

"Whatever." His father had said with indifference as he threw an empty beer bottle at the wall next to Sheila. He laughed when she jumped. "Get me another beer!"

Jesse picked up the phone and called her.

"Hi Sheila. It's me... Yeah I know. What's up? You said you needed to talk to me. WHAT! You will be gone for a month?! You guys are where? You are getting married, and he just left me here and said nothing? Fuck HIM! I'm sorry, Sheila, but he doesn't care if I live or die. You know it is the truth. Thanks, Sheila. I will stay with Dawson. The neighbor, Mrs. Lawson? She won't have to do a thing for me. No, tell her I won't be around. Tell HIM that... On second thought, I just wanna let you know I won't be home when you guys get back. Oh, come on. You know that he won't give two shits about where I stay as long as I don't interfere with his life. Thanks, Sheila. I know you do. I do too. I don't understand why you put up with him though. Bye. Have a good time."

Jesse hung the phone up. He scribbled a note saying that he was at Dawson's like he had done so many times in the past. Leaving the note was the only thing his father cared about. He didn't pack anything, because he already had everything that he needed at Dawson's already. He had his own key. Most of all he had Mom and Dad, Dawson's parents.

Dawson shook himself from his thoughts and said, "Thanks, man." Then he took time to fill Jesse in on what was going on. Jesse knew almost as much about this project as Dawson did, and Jesse decided he was going to be Dawson's assistant.

A short time later, the other kids started to show up. Dawson was shocked when almost all of the two hundred kids showed up. They were supposed to be split up into shifts of fifty, but most of them showed up right away. Time for some re-planning. It looked like the field was going to be done this weekend instead of next.

Two hours into the project, Dawson had to recruit managers... he just couldn't keep up with everything everyone needed to know. Mr. Gosh said that nothing would work out as planned, and he was right. Fifteen minutes after they started, they ran into their first snag. Some of the walls had rotted lumber behind the drywall. All of it had to come out and be replaced before they could put the new stuff up.

The city Code Inspector, who graciously volunteered his time to make sure there were not problems with the city, started in on Dawson only about thirty minutes into things. He wasn't being mean, but he was bringing up things Dawson never even knew about.

Alister Storm looked away from the mirror over to where his 'mother', Cynthia was standing in the doorway. "Are you ready yet?" She asked.

"Yeah." He said as he finished drying his hair. Sometimes he hated his hair, but he couldn't imagine it being anything different. It felt like a life time ago when he was forced to wear his head shaved, and he vowed never to do that again. He paused for a moment, and then sighed deeply. Sometimes he really hated being a teenager, or an almost teenager.

"You really sure you wanna do this, Ali?" Cynthia asked.

"You know me better than that, Cynthia. This guy is really trying to help out. It's what I do." Alister walked over to a side table, and put his right foot up on the chair. He grabbed the four-inch bladed knife, and slid it into the sheath that was sewn into the inside of his boot. He then did the same thing for the left boot.

Next was the Glock 9mm pistol that went into the holster sitting on the small of his back. Its twin went into the shoulder holster he wore under his jacket. Three small throwing spikes went into the wrist holder on his right wrist, and the two throwing knives on the left. Finally the two expandable batons went into the hip pockets of his cargo shorts. He turned around, and made sure everything not only felt comfortable, but were not easy to spot. "Okay... let's go."

"You really think you need all of that?" Cynthia asked while cocking her head slightly.

"Of course I do... I know you got almost as many as I do," he said with a snicker, then his face dropped. "Not to mention that Thaker got attacked recently... I don't want to take any chances."

"It wasn't recently... it was over..." Cynthia started to say, but Alister stopped her with a look.

"Come on, let's get going." He adjusted the leather trench coat he wore, and walked out the door past Cynthia. She could only sigh as she followed him out.

About nine AM, a large van pulled up, but Dawson couldn't see who was in it. A few minutes later, some of the kids came down and started to unload a whole ton of food. They were laying it out on the table, and that's when Dawson was able to see the people who brought it. It was the "elf" boy and his mother.

Dawson just stood and stared for a moment as the boy seemed to flow around all the people there. He was giving orders on where to put the food, and how to set everything up. He had a confidence about him that Dawson had never seen in anyone that young before.

It wasn't long before the boy made it up to Dawson, and that's when he got another surprise. The boy's accent was all Irish... and very thick at that. "'ello... I take it ya the one in charge 'ere?"

Dawson just nodded, he didn't really know what to say.

"Well then...I be Alister, and I's 'ere to help. Ya need anythin' and I'll see what I can do." Alister grinned at the confused look on his face.

"I take it you don't like the accent." Alister said with no trace of his accent. "No worries, boy-o, I'll talk normal around here."

"Ooooookk..." Dawson replied, still not sure how to take this new kid.

"Well... you got lots of work to do, so I'll go make myself busy. See ya around." Just like that he was off.

Dawson didn't have much of a chance to think about the kid for a while after that because as soon as Alister left, he got bombarded with things that needed his attention.

Dawson only caught glimpses of Alister through out the remainder of the day; however, every time he was able to see the strange boy, Alister was taking command of boys and getting things done. Dawson saw the difference in how much stuff he had to handle right away. Because of Alister and Jesse, Dawson was actually able to take a deep breath every once in a while. Now Dawson only dealt with the really big issues.

There were plenty of big issues he had to deal with. First one was the fact they had to replace a lot of the flooring they didn't anticipate. It wasn't that big of a problem, because they had the people there who could do it, and do it quickly, but it was an expense they hadn't anticipated.

Second was the insulation. They had planned on replacing a lot of it, but not anywhere near what they ended up having to do. Thankfully, Dawson had secured over five hundred thousand dollars for expenses just like this. However, by the end of the first day, they had already dipped into over forty thousand

of it. By ten o'clock at night, Dawson was exhausted, and everyone but Jesse had left. Alister had left sometime, but no one seemed to know when.

"So what did you think of that Alister kid?" Dawson asked his best friend.

Jesse chuckled and shook his head. "He's strange... I'll say that much, but he seemed nice enough. I don't know... there's just something about him."

"Yeah... I thought so too. But he seemed to be really helpful today," Dawson said while cleaning off his table.

"Oh God, yes. He was doing just as much as you and I were at keeping everything going. I didn't know you spent so much time bringing him up to date on what you wanted."

Dawson stopped and turned towards Jesse. "That's the thing... I didn't. I only talked to him for a few moments, before he ran off to work."

Jesse's eyes bugged open. "You mean you didn't tell him everything that needed to be done?"

"Nope..."

"Well, shit... how'd he know then?"

Dawson simply shrugged. Before either of them could say anything else, Sheila pulled up, and Jesse had to go. After securing a promise that Jesse would be there again in the morning, Dawson also took off.

Atlanta Georgia, Sunday Oct. 3rd 2004, 0530

Dawson showed up early again, only this time he wasn't the first one there. Even though the sun hadn't risen fully yet, there was still enough light to see Alister's van sitting in front of the house as Dawson rode up on his bike.

He rode up to it, seeing that Alister's mom was leaning against the van. She smiled as he got off his bike and walked up to her. "I didn't get to meet you yesterday," he said as he stuck out his hand, "I'm Dawson."

She smiled a gorgeous smile, and Dawson couldn't help but really 'notice' her beauty. She looked to be in her late twenties, but Dawson couldn't help himself, she was stunningly beautiful. She gently took his, and her smile broadened, revealing perfect, brilliantly white, teeth. She responded in a voice as smooth as silk, "I know... Alister told me all about you and your project. This is a very good thing you're doing here, young man. We're just glad we can offer what little help we can. Oh..." she said with a bit of a giggle, "how rude of me. My name's Cynthia, and please call me that. Mrs. Storm makes me feel sooo old."

She let out a soft giggle, and Dawson couldn't help but join in. He said a brief prayer of thanks that he wore loose fitting shorts, since his tent would have been very obvious had he not. Before he could say anything else, she spoke again. "I'm sure you're wanting to find Alister. He's out back looking at something in the field."

Dawson grinned, trying hard to get himself under control, turned and ran off in the direction she indicated. His face burned brightly when he heard her giggle a bit as he ran off. When he got around the corner, he stopped for a moment to adjust a large problem he had in his shorts before heading around to the back.

All thoughts of Alister's mom left Dawson's mind when he got around to the back and found Alister. The young boy was standing there with his back towards Dawson. His shirt was on the ground next to him, draped over a small gym bag. His blond hair and alabaster white skin made a beautiful contrast to the early morning orange glow.

He was standing there, one knee raised, with his foot placed on the inside of his other knee. His hands were splayed out in some form of martial art stance. Dawson stood transfixed and Alister seemed to melt into the next form. Dawson had never seen this type of grace or fluid movement anywhere other than in a movie.

He'd seen his mother at Yoga class, but that was a bunch of rampaging bulls compared to the beauty and grace that Dawson was seeing there. He watched Alister as he moved from position to position, always holding the position for a few moments before flowing into the next one.

"Do you know that in Japan it is common for the manager of a company to teach his employees a form of martial arts. They are like his family, so he teaches them his family's version." Without a pause, or a break in Alister's moves, he continued his monologue. Dawson found it kind of strange as the tone of voice the young boy was using was something akin to someone in a trance, not to mention he had no idea how Alister even knew he was there.

"Every morning before starting their shift, the manager would lead his employees in an exercise routine based upon the Martial Art taught to them. Not only did it help to keep the employees physically fit, but it also brought them together as a family. They work harder and are much more loyal to their company simply because it is no longer simply an employee/employer relationship, but it is truly a family. Do you know where this comes from?"

Dawson was still spellbound, and only half heard the question. When it registered, he was able to stumble out a "n..no."

"It came from an ancient sect of warriors called the Samurai. They had a code called Bushido, which simply meant 'Life in Every Breath.' Do you understand what that means?"

Dawson was stunned speechless as Alister turned around after he finished his last stance. He bent down and picked up his shirt, and started to put it on. For a brief instant, Dawson was able to see the tail end of a wicked looking scar in the dim sunlight. He only saw part of it, but it started somewhere below the young boy's waist, and went up until it disappeared around his right nipple. He was sure it went up further, but Alister's shirt stopped him from seeing anymore.

Without even noticing that Dawson had seen anything, Alister spoke softly as he reached down and picked up his bag. "It means something a little different for everyone, but for me, I can simplify it by saying it like this." He met Dawson's eyes for the first time, and Dawson was sure he saw the boy's eyes glow ever so slightly. "Live your life like every moment is the last one... for it just might be."

Alister stepped past Dawson, who was still stunned. Once he was a few feet past him, Alister called out over his shoulder, now sounding like a twelve-year-old. "Come on, Dawson... time to get to work." With a giggle the boy was gone, and Dawson was left totally stunned.

Dawson didn't have more than just enough time to tell Jesse what he saw before the kids started to show up to work. The day was even busier than the day before, and Dawson wasn't sure that was possible. By the end of the day, Dawson was sure he had never been this tired before in his life. It seemed that every time he handled a problem... another one came up. It was only the end of the first weekend worth of work, and they had already gotten into half of the donations that they were given. Dawson was starting to worry.

The only real saving grace to the day was Alister and Jesse really jumping in to help take some of the burden off of Dawson. By the end of the day both boys looked just as tired as he did. Dawson's father and Alister's mother didn't look any better; of course, Jesse's father and stepmother weren't there. By the time Dawson went home, Jesse had to go with him, since his parents never came to get him. Not that big a deal Jesse had more and better clothes at Dawson's house. Hell, he had his own room there by now. Sheila did call to check on him, though. She was whispering, which could only mean one thing. His father had gone on a drunk and finally passed out. Jesse just couldn't wrap his head around why she stayed with him.

Atlanta Georgia, Saturday Oct. 9th 2004, 0500

Dawson rode up to the site on his bike. He was a half hour earlier than he had been last weekend, wanting to make sure a few things were in place before people started to arrive at 6. He had heard, through many of the different troops, that most if not all the boys that were there last week would be here again this week. Some of them said they were going to bring others. Dawson was starting to worry if he would have enough work for all of them to do.

Once again, when he got there, Cynthia was leaning up against the van, only this time she was smoking a cigarette. Dawson never thought he would see someone smoking a cigarette and think it was sexy, but somehow this lady pulled it off. "He's out back again... something about wanting to show you the family Art."

Dawson was actually sort of excited as he ran off to the back of the building. When he got back there, he saw Alister slip something long and thin into his bag, and then pull off his shirt. Without turning around, he spoke to Dawson. "I am sure you have several questions... now is not the time to ask them. Step up here next to me."

He spoke in the same voice that Dawson remembered from the week earlier, a voice that, while soft, commanded to be obeyed. Without really thinking about it, Dawson did as he was told, and stood next

to the smaller boy. He really wanted to ask about the scar that Dawson could now see started out somewhere below the belt line on his jeans. It ran from his left hip all the way up to his right shoulder. It was obviously old, but he couldn't help but wonder how such a young boy could have a scar like that... not to mention one that looked that old. He wanted to ask, but he wouldn't.

"Please remove your shirt, and your shoes and socks." Dawson bent to comply while Alister kept talking. "What I am about to show you was developed by my family many generations ago. It has since been passed down from father to son, or from one who knows to one he finds worthy." Alister gave a brief smile as he knew the question Dawson was about to ask. "The reason you were found worthy is not something to ask, but something for you to find for yourself. This is more than just a Martial Arts lesson; it is a lesson in finding your true inner self. Your mind must be clear, all worries left behind. Time has no meaning here, nor does anything else. You will understand. Now, stand next to me, and copy my moves. At first it will be hard for you, but if you stick with it, it will become easier quickly."

Dawson watched as Alister struck a position, very similar to the one he first saw last week. The younger boy waited until Dawson was in the same position, then effortlessly flowed into the next one. Dawson had never felt anything like it before, but he just seemed to know what to do next, and he more felt his body move, than commanded it to move.

Dawson closed his eyes and just went with the motions; he had no idea how he knew what the next position was, but he moved into it effortlessly. He also wasn't worried that he didn't know what he was doing, he was just doing what felt natural.

Time didn't mean anything to Dawson. Nothing really did. For the first time in his memory, his mind was clear, and he was able to see so many different things. Things about his life, things about people he knew. It was almost like he was flying, flying through time and space. As funny as that sounds, that's what he thought it was like. He was starting to feel that this project was too much for him, but at that moment in time, he knew... not just thought, but KNEW, he could do it. Nothing was going to stop him.

He had no idea how much later it was, but when he opened his eyes, he was shocked to see that the sun had risen slightly. He figured he had only been at it for about 30 minutes, but at the same time it felt like an eternity, and not nearly long enough.

He was shocked when he looked over and saw Jesse there too. He was shirtless, as were the other two boys, and judging by the sheen of sweat on his chest, he'd been at it almost as long as Dawson had. Not a word was spoken by anyone as they towed off and put their shirts and shoes back on. Alister didn't speak, and neither of the other two boys felt it proper to talk.

They walked back up to the front just in time to see Mr. Gosh drive up. "We got a lot of work today, guys, and Dawson, you're gonna need to be on the top of your game. Come back early again tomorrow and we'll do it again. Okay?" Both boys nodded, then Alister jogged off to where his mother was waiting.

Alister had been right. Just about everything that could go wrong went wrong that day. To start it off, about an hour after the work got going for the day, it started to rain. It wasn't a hard rain, but it was just enough to put a damper on everyone's attitude.

The next thing was when he got told that the entire load of flooring that they had brought in was bad. The City Code enforcer brought that bit of bad news to him. It wasn't thick enough, plus that fact that it was soft wood instead of hard wood meant it was all useless. Since it was all donated, Dawson really couldn't send it back to get the right stuff.

Almost half of the remaining money they had left went out the window getting the new flooring. Thankfully they were able to get it quickly, and it didn't put the project behind schedule.

Alister, Dawson and Jesse had another 'session' Sunday morning, and it was needed. The problems that started the day before continued again that day. The problems that day, though, seemed to revolve around the playing fields. There was a miscalculation from the surveyors, and Dawson was told they needed to raise the entire field up by three inches so there would be proper run-off for rain water. Now three inches may not seem like that much, but when you're talking about an entire field... that became a lot of dirt.

Thanks to Mr. Gosh, they were able to get the topsoil they needed delivered right away, and at a discounted price... the problem was, of course... they were running REAL low on funds. If this kept up, they weren't going to have anything left to leave for the operational expenses. The plan was to have just over 100 thousand dollars sitting in the bank to run this place; now they barely had 200 thousand left to complete the project. This was not good.

All week long Dawson was out of it. He didn't see it, but his teachers knew what was going on, and left him alone. Every single one of them knew Dawson, knew what he was capable of, and knew there would be no issue with him making up the work he was missing even though he was there. To the last, all of his teachers collected his homework, graded his quizzes and test, but not a single one of them made it into their grade books.

They all knew he might have been there physically, but he was nowhere near the school mentally. Had it been almost anyone else, they would not have worked so hard for him, but Dawson was a good kid, and they all knew it. Not to mention that many of them had donated to Dawson's project, even though he didn't know that.

Everyone was pitching in, in their own way.

Atlanta Georgia, Saturday Oct. 16th 2004, 0500

The next weekend, things started to look up. The three boys started the morning off in their normal fashion, and then got to work. This was the day that they would be putting the finishing touches on the rooms, so that the furniture could be delivered the next weekend. They were almost a full week ahead of schedule, and during the week, his father actually came and pulled him out of school.

There was a courier at his law office that needed his signature on a check. It was a one million dollar check made out to Dawson and the revitalization project. Dawson just about fell over when he saw the check. His father traced down the name on the check, and it pointed back to a lawyer for a large conglomeration of companies. Dawson immediately wrote out a thank you letter, and sent it off.

They set up for the dedication ceremony to happen on the 30th. He got back a whole lot of letters saying that many important people would be attending. Dawson was starting to feel the excitement of a project soon to be finished.

Saturday morning, around ten o'clock, something strange happened. Next to the field they were working on was an old abandoned warehouse. While Dawson, Jesse, and Alister were working on the field, a convoy of buses, pick-up trucks, and large trucks, some with containers on the back, and others with heavy equipment, showed up.

Being the curious boys they were, the three of them went over to see what was happening. Out of the lead pickup truck stepped a man in a suit. As the three boys walked up, the man in the suit grinned and walked up to them. Walking right up to Dawson, he stuck his hand out. "Howdy there... you must be Dawson Sheridan."

Dawson stopped as his jaw hit the ground. Finally he was able to nod his head. "How.. How'd you know?"

The man smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Well, my boy... you've impressed some pretty important people. My name's Dan Garrett, and I'm a lawyer from New York City. I've been hired to get this building up to snuff in two weeks so that it can open up the same time as your teen center."

Dawson was stunned. "What... what's it gonna be?"

Mr. Garrett smiled. "A homeless shelter. Once it's done it'll be donated, along with all the costs of running it, to the corporation you and your father set up to run the rec center. Some very important and VERY rich people heard about what you were trying to do down here for the youth, and figured out this would be the best way to help out."

Dawson was speechless, but it didn't matter. Mr. Garrett had to repeat everything again as his father came over about then, and wanted to know what was going on.

The three boys were all smiles when they got back to the field to keep working. "Can you believe this shit, Daws?" Jesse asked, almost bouncing around with excitement.

"I... I got no fucking clue what to think right now. This whole damned thing is like a dream. I don't know who would do so much just for one kid." Dawson sat down in the middle of the field, and the other two boys sat with him.

"Dawson," Alister said, his voice as soft as always, "I don't think you get it, man. They're not doing this for you, but you've inspired them to do this for everyone... just like you're doing this. Haven't you figured out the miracle you're making here?"

Dawson looked at him like he had three heads and Jesse laughed. "Nope.. he never figured out what he can do."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm nothing special," Dawson said forcefully.

Both boys laughed at him when he said that, and all he did was glare at them. Finally Alister had to say something. "Dawson, look around you. Has any other fifteen-year-old in the history of this STATE tried to do something like this? More so, how many people do you know could get this kind of turn-out? I mean, you've got almost three hundred and fifty people here giving up their weekends to bust their asses... all for nothing other than your dream. My God, man, give yourself some credit."

Dawson sat there just stuttering; he couldn't grasp what they were saying. Alister decided to let him have it with both barrels. "Do you know of a boy named Cory Short?"

"Yeah... he's the kid that started up that Vulcan Clan thing in Orlando. I overheard my parents talking about him. They said he was causing some real waves in the legal community with his use of the Safe Haven Act. Personally, I say good." Dawson was now sitting cross-legged in the grass; everyone else seemed to know to stay away and let the three of them talk.

"Look around you, Dawson, you got your own Clan going here. You guys might not be Vulcan, or any of that other shit, but you got your own Clan, and they follow you. I know you don't see it yet, but you better start looking around. You've got a gift man... a gift that can either do a lot of good... or a whole LOT of bad." Alister was leaning forward trying to 'force' Dawson to understand, but it didn't look like the boy would.

"I.. I just can't see myself like that. Yeah, I know how to get shit done, but, man, it's them doing the work.. not me." Dawson was emphatic about this, and Alister just sat back seeing defeat.

"Alister, he don't get it yet... someday he will, though," Jesse said as he stood up. "We still got a lot of work to do, let's get to it."

Both boys nodded and stood up. Jesse and Alister had to pick up the slack that day; Dawson's mind was a million miles away trying to comprehend what his two friends were saying. Yeah, he might know nothing about Alister, but he still considered the boy one of his best friends.

Atlanta Georgia, Sunday Oct. 17th 2004

Things were really going great for Dawson. That morning's Martial Arts lesson was like none of the others; it felt like he'd been doing it all his life, and it really helped to calm him down for the day. He'd been starting to do the routine every morning before school and found that he could actually concentrate on things easier. To him it was almost like a drug... a VERY addictive drug.

He still had trouble understanding what his friends were talking about the day before, but he really didn't have much time to dwell on it. Right now everything was flying along, trying to get the finishing touches on everything. They still had the following weekend, but that was going to be used to place all the furniture and get all the last minute things done.

The three boys did spend some time watching the goings on next door, and all three of them were astounded at how much work was getting done. They only had maybe a hundred people, but these were all professionals, and as near as they could tell, they were working 24/7.

However as always happens... when something is going good, Mr. Murphy must drop by to say Hi. However, this time when he stopped by, he did so in a very dramatic way. About four in the afternoon Dawson's problems got a lot bigger.

Dawson's father came walking up to the group holding his cell phone, and with a very distraught look on his face. Without a word, he handed the phone to Dawson. After he identified himself, he listen for a few moments before his face fell. He thanked the person on the other end of the phone, and then closed it.

"What?!" Jesse couldn't stand the suspense.

"That was the president of the company that had donated all the furniture for the project..." He made the quote signs in the air with his hands, "'due to current economic conditions, we are not able to give you the donations we had promised. However, we could give you a discounted price if you so desired.' In other words... we're screwed."

Tom Sheridan put his hands on Dawson's shoulders and looked him right in the eyes. "Dawson... you've dealt with setbacks before... this is just another one of them. You'll figure something out."

He looked around at his friends nodding. It was at times like these that Dawson wished he had as much confidence in himself as everyone else had in him.

All week long, Dawson was trying to figure out what to do about the furniture. With the money they had, they could afford to buy all of it, but that would leave them next to nothing, and certainly not everything they had wanted. The other problem is, they wouldn't be able to get it in time.

By Wednesday, he was dealing with the fact that while they could still have the opening ceremonies, the place would not be ready for at least another two weeks. That's how long it would take to get all the furniture there. He was sitting in his room when an idea hit him. It wasn't much, but as he looked around, he saw a lot of things there that he didn't need. He grabbed his phone and started to make calls.

By the next afternoon, he had enough old furniture to equip a few rooms. Hopefully that would be enough for the opening ceremonies, and to tide them over. He was even going to donate his brand new pool table, and the big screen TV that he gotten for his birthday. It wasn't much... but it would have to be enough.

Atlanta Georgia, Saturday Oct. 23rd 2004

The last weekend for work, and Dawson was both excited and beyond exhaustion. He hadn't gotten much sleep over the last month, and even less over the last week. They were on schedule to actually be

totally done on Saturday, with only a select few coming in on Sunday to make sure everything was hooked up and ready to go.

Both Dawson and Jesse had been allowed to take the entire next week off of school as they would both be needed to get all the finishing touches in place before the opening, scheduled for the following weekend. Jesse didn't bother talking to his parents, and even though the two boys didn't go to the same school, Jesse's school knew enough about what was going on with Jesse's home life that Dawson's mother was able to talk to them.

That morning started busier than any of the others. The boys were there at 5am for their normal "warm-up routine," and by six they were all busier than hell. Dawson was doing his normal supervising of everything. Jesse was helping the people that were finishing up the fields.

He had to make sure that all the lines were 'painted' properly; that the outside locker rooms were fully functional, with both boys' and girls' lockers; and finally that the pool was filled, and the fence around it was intact and lockable.

The pool came as a total shock to everyone when they got there that morning. His father was still looking into it, but no one yet knew who had it put in. Dawson got the idea to talk to Mr. Garrett, the guy who was in charge of seeing the shelter next door was being done according to their plans.

When asked, all Mr. Garrett could say was that Tuesday, some guys showed up and started working. He never thought anything of it, because of everything else going on, but by Tuesday night, they had the hole dug, Wednesday they had the cement poured, and Thursday they finished up, and put the start of the fence around it. Now, they had an Olympic-sized swimming pool, complete with diving boards, and racing lines painted in the pool. Jesse was ecstatic, Dawson was happy, but confused. He really wanted to know who had helped them out like that.

Alister wasn't having the good time that Jesse was, though. Making sure the woodwork was done throughout the entire building, making sure the carpet was installed properly, and the bathrooms were all done right, was just as important, but nowhere near as much fun as the pool. Alister's other job was to make sure all the kitchen equipment was hooked up and running. Yes, they lost all the furniture for the rooms, but they didn't lose all the appliances that went in the building, as well as all the bathroom furnishings. Those still came through.

All morning long, Alister was running from one room to the next, making sure everything was going smoothly. He got a smile on his face when he heard the large trucks roll up, and a few minutes later, one of the boys came running in, saying that Dawson needed him.

He grinned as he flew down the steps as only a kid can do, and ran outside. Looking around, he spotted Dawson, Jesse, and Dawson's father standing by one of the trucks. The driver climbed down at about the same time Alister got there. He was only expecting three trucks, but there were six here. He schooled his face as he got there, not wanting to give anything away.

The driver got up to the little group, and looking at his paperwork said "Dawson Sheridan?"

Dawson stepped forward with a "I'm Dawson."

"Great!" the driver said as he pulled out a pen, and offered both the pen and the clipboard to Dawson. "If you'll just sign here, we can start getting everything unloaded."

Dawson was shocked, and just stood there, but his father stepped forward to take the clipboard. The driver just shrugged as Jesse spoke up. "What's in the trucks?"

"Well... my buddy read the manifest on the way over here, and it looks like the first four trucks are loaded down with furniture." Everyone standing around gasped, all except Dawson who was still in a state of shock, and it just got even worse. He was trying to say something, but nothing would come out.

"The last two trucks," the driver continued, "are filled with enough games to make most shopping mall arcades jealous as hell."

Dawson felt so faint that he literally fell back on his butt. His father looked up at the driver and asked the question that was on everyone's mind. "Who sent all of this?"

The driver shrugged and took back the clipboard, and started to leaf through the pages. Finally he got to the end and looked up at Mr. Sheridan.

"Not a clue, but it does say 'paid in full,' so if I could just get a signature, we can start unloading everything." The driver was grinning as he once again offered the clipboard to Dawson. It took the boy a moment, but when he finally did sign it, a cheer went up from all the kids assembled, and even most of the adults.

The guys that came with the trucks thought it would take most of the day to unload everything. However, when you have close to four hundred people there working to help out, things go much more quickly.

Atlanta Georgia, Saturday Oct. 23rd 2004, late afternoon:

Alister was watching as the last of the trucks got unloaded. He smiled slightly knowing just where everything had come from.

'Wrath!' A voice said from inside his head. 'Get ready for emergency transport... we need you right now!'

Alister didn't even respond; he'd been in this position many times. He looked around, found an empty room, and slipped in. He sent to Cynthia where he was at, and then responded to Leo.

'I'm here... what do you need?' Alister sent the thought.

Alister's jaw tightened as he listened to 'the boss' give him the details. This was going to be hell for some people... and he would make sure of it.

He didn't respond as Cynthia burst into the room with a grave look on her face. She had been listening in to what was going on,

"We need to leave," he said to her; she simply nodded grimly, and they left.

About an hour and a half later, Dawson went looking for Alister. Everyone he asked said that he hadn't been seen for a while. He kept looking, though; the work site was large, and there were any number of places he could be. When he made it outside, though, he was starting to worry. He made sure that the van Alister's mom drove was still there, then headed over to where the adults usually hang out. That's when he got the news... or saw it would be better, as they had a TV going.

He got there just as three 'people' walked up to the group of kids in front of the camera.

"Sir, I have a report," The boy in the center said as he moved up to the figure sitting in the middle and saluted.

A young boy interrupted the other's response. "Cory, with your permission, why not have Commander Casey introduce himself, and the others with him, and give his report directly to everyone?"

The boy named Cory nodded weakly. "Proceed with Kyle's suggestion, Commander. Governor Jacobs of Iowa will be accepting your report for the world to hear."

'Commander' Casey, who looked no more the fourteen, nodded, squared himself up, and looked directly at the monitor. "Sir, my name is Commander Adam Casey. I am the commanding officer of the Clan Short Special Forces Division, or, more commonly called, The Unit. Beside me is Amur Kahn, the Head of the Feline Assault Team," he said, indicating the bigger of the two. "Also with me is Vishnu, a member of the Feline Assault Team, and current commander of the Reynolds Security detail. At approximately twelve hundred hours this afternoon, we received a distress call from one of my team members. We were all on our way to Montana to enjoy some R&R and do a bit of training. Upon receiving the call, I ordered my teams to gear up for a possible hostile encounter." The boy took a deep shuddering breath before continuing.

"When we arrived, we found a terrorist style attack underway. The apparent target of this attack was the Reynolds family. The enemy combatants were engaged with members of Clan Short as well as Cadets who came in to help defend the Reynolds residence. We acted quickly to push back the assault, and had hoped that, with the arrival of air support, they would break off their attack."

Although the boy remained stone faced, tears were starting to stream down his face. "That did not happen, and soon we were engaged in an all-out battle. After approximately forty-five minutes of intense fighting, the terrorist element attacking us called a retreat. When it was all said and done, their dead number more than nine hundred and fifty. Casualties on our side number sixty-one Unit members dead, and more than one hundred wounded. Of the dead, the oldest, at seventeen, was Private First Class Andrew Shoemaker. The youngest..." The boy paused, fighting to keep his emotions in check. "The youngest was Recruit Mark Little... he was only nine years old."

"Holy shit!" Dawson said, and a quick look showed many people with tears in their eyes... tears that matched his own.

Commander Casey then leaned in extremely close to the monitor. "I heard what Kyle has said, and I agree. The FCC will soon find out that war is what my brothers and I were made for. There is no place

you can run and hide. But please... try... all that will mean is you'll die tired." With that he stood back up, did an about face, and marched off.

"Amur Kahn." Governor Jacobs stated, his voice cracking under the stress of trying to keep his emotions in check, "As of this moment, I am placing the Iowa National Guard at DEFCON 1 and under the command of the Clan Short Special Forces. Inform Commander Casey the full resources of Iowa are at the disposal of all divisions of Clan Short."

Khan stood even straighter if that was possible, saluted, and said in a voice like rolling thunder "As you wish, Sir." He and Vishnu then performed an about face and followed Adam out of the room.

Governor Jacobs paused as a slip of paper was placed in front of him, then added, "The State of Iowa mourns with you for these unnecessary losses of life, Cory. For as long as I live, I will do whatever is necessary to ensure these events will never repeat themselves. I shall be contacting the Vulcan Embassy for assistance in setting up a proper system to enforce the new laws which we now operate under. I just received notice from Florida and Montana that they are declaring themselves Safe Haven states also. Under the authority granted me by the President of the United States, I will deploy all available active duty Iowa-based U.S. Military to Montana to assist with neutralizing the remaining hostile FCC forces. I have more to say to you, Cory, but I will say that in person shortly." He then paused as a robed Vulcan dignitary walked up behind Cory.

"Your request for assistance is approved," the Vulcan announced flatly. "Retribution for the needless acts of violence perpetrated by the FCC shall be performed in the most expedient manner. It is time for Patriarch Cory to attend to his own needs and those of his family. All further communications shall be through the Vulcan Embassy."

"Understood and agreed, Ambassador Sarek," Governor Jacobs replied. Sarek nodded, then the right side of the screen went blank.

Governor Jacobs stared into the screen. "Citizens of Iowa, this is no longer something we can stand by and watch. Do not let our borders limit you; as a Safe Haven state, we have a responsibility to the world to protect youth wherever they may be. I am leaving immediately for South Carolina to assist however I can; those of you who are qualified in any way and not already on standby for assistance are asked to join me if at all possible. This day has started as the worst day in the annals of humanity; it is our duty to prove that humanity will not stand for such actions." With that, the screen went black.

"Oh my fucking God." Jesse said in shock, and that's when Dawson saw almost everyone that was watching the TV had tears in their eyes. All of them had the same look of shock on their faces. It was at that point that Dawson realized the world would never be the same.

Atlanta Georgia, Sunday Oct. 24th 2004:

Dawson looked over at Jesse with a worried look. Both boys had been there for over twenty minutes so far, and Alister hadn't shown up.

"You think he was involved with the stuff yesterday?" Jesse asked Dawson.

"I don't see how he could be, but yeah, I think so. You know we know absolutely nothing about him, or why he's here," Dawson answered while staring across to the apartment building that was almost completed.

Jesse felt like he had to defend his friend. He wasn't sure why but he really liked Alister... he REALLY liked the young boy. "True, but he has busted his ass to help us out."

"Oh! Of course he has... I ain't taking nothin' away from that... I'm just saying we know all of shit about him." Jesse couldn't help but smile. Everyone thought that Dawson was this angel of some kind... but Jesse knew better. Dawson had a downright potty mouth when others were not around.

They didn't have more time to chat, as the kids started to show up, and this was going to be a busy day. It was the last day that there were going to be people there to help. Jesse and Dawson had the entire week off of school, but it would only be the two of them working to finish everything up.

It was about halfway through the day when Jesse caught sight of Alister. It was across the field, and he was out there showing some of the other kids how to get the place set up. When Jesse got close, he could see that Alister was wearing a bandage on his right arm, and limping slightly.

"What the hell happened to you?!" Jesse asked as soon as he got up to the younger boy.

Alister just shrugged, "Nothing big, I'll tell you later."

Well, later never came, and before they knew it, everyone was leaving, and Alister was already gone.

"Dawson..." Jesse said after everyone had left, "I think he was involved."

"What do you mean? Who?" Dawson asked, not knowing what he was talking about. It had been almost ten hours since they last talked about Alister.

"Alister... I saw him today. He was all bandaged up, and was limping. When I asked him about it, he said he'd tell me later, but he didn't." Jesse said in a rush, tears almost falling from his eyes.

Dawson had a sudden rush of insight and looked at Jesse in shock. "You like him, don't you?"

"Of course I do..." Jesse said in a rush, his face starting to blush. Dawson took that as all the confirmation he needed.

"No.. I mean you REALLY like him, don't you?" He was smiling now, his suspicions being confirmed.

Jesse started to stammer, and his face exploded in a red blush. Dawson busted out laughing, and grabbed Jesse into a tight hug. He laughed until he heard Jesse start to sob. Dawson immediately let his friend out of the hug and held him at arm's length. Jesse couldn't look up, but Dawson saw the tears streaking down his face.

"Hey man, it's okay. I ain't gonna hurt ya or.. or.." Dawson said, not quite sure what to say. He'd known Jesse was gay for about two years, just never knew how to bring it up. Now that he had, he may have done it in the worst possible way.

"How'd... how'd you know?" Jesse sobbed out.

"Dude... I've known for a while..." Dawson said softly pulling the smaller boy into a hug again.

"How? I've tried not to act gay," he sobbed out.

"Come on, Jesse... I've been your best friend for years. You're like a brother to me. Do you really think I give a shit if your a sausage smoker or not?" Dawson said grinning.

Jesse jumped back out of the hug with an almost unbelieving look on his face. Finally a small smile appeared on his tear-streaked face. A few seconds later he collided with Dawson, both of them laughing hysterically until they fell to the ground.

"Well... that was interesting," a voice said from above, making both boys jump apart while scrambling to their feet.

Jesse stuttered a bit at seeing who it was. "Al...Alister... What are you doing here?" It was rather plain Jesse was hoping that Alister hadn't heard the earlier conversation.

"I think we need to talk," he said, and Jesse's face immediately dropped. Alister walked over next to Jesse and wrapped an arm around the older boy. "Come on, let's talk." Alister said, then led the sulking Jesse away.

Dawson looked up and saw Cynthia leaning up against their van, and walked over towards her. "This should be interesting," she said as he got close. His concern for his friend momentarily overshadowed his normal teenage hormones. For the first time since he met Alister, he wasn't gawking at his mother.

"I hope Jesse'll be okay," he said softly, then it hit him. "Wait... You know what they're gonna be talking about?"

Cynthia wrapped one of her long arms around Dawson's shoulder and pulled him tight to her side. "I've known about Alister for a very long time. And he loves who he loves, nothing else matters."

Nothing was said for a few moments till Dawson looked up and spoke softly. "So.. you don't mind that Jesse likes Alister... you know... like that?"

She softly chuckled, "It's not my place to say anything. If the two of them are okay with it, then why should I say no?"

"But... well... Jesse's like three years older than Alister.. aren't you worried..." Dawson started, but Cynthia's laughter caught him off guard. She uttered something under her breath, then squeezed Dawson in closer.

"Don't worry about Alister. He's a very.. unique individual. I'd be more worried about...." she paused for a second, and Dawson felt her stiffen. He followed her gaze and saw Jesse being led back towards them by Alister. "Oh crap. I knew I should never have let that little shit out of my sight." She released Dawson, and turned around. Reaching inside the van, she pulled out a medium sized duffel bag, and started across the lawn towards the two boys. Dawson's hormones raged again as he watched her walk

away from him with very tight jeans on. Shaking his head, he ran to catch up, just as she met up with Jesse and Alister.

"Ali... are you sure about this?" she asked, now sounding a bit worried.

"Yes, I am... he deserves to know the truth. Not to mention they have already both passed the first tests." Dawson caught Jesse's eye; they were both totally lost.

"Leo's gonna be pissed," she said softly.

"I don't give a shit if he is or not. This is MY decision," Alister stated, leaving no uncertainty that whatever it was he was planning WOULD be done.

"Okay... it's your call.. but I think you should let them in on it," Cynthia said while indicating Jesse and Dawson, both looking extremely lost. For the first time either boy remembered, Alister blushed heavily.

"Uhh.. yeah... sorry about that," he said to the two older boys. Taking a deep breath he ran his hand through his long hair. "Where to start?" he almost whispered to himself. After being silent for a few moments, he finally looked up and met both boys' eyes for a second. "It would be very difficult to explain properly..."

"What?" Dawson asked.

"The truth..." The smaller boy said almost distantly.

"The truth about what?" This time it was Jesse.

"The truth about me."

Both boys stood there starring at Alister. Neither of them really knew what to say, and were both just waiting for the smaller boy to explain.

To buy himself some time, Alister reached into the bag that Cynthia had brought over, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He sighed heavily as he lit one up, then turned his back to the boys and stood there staring at the stars.

"I know both of you are convinced that I had something to do with the fight in Montana yesterday... you're right. I was sent in there with two missions, the first and more important was to back up Clan Short, and help out where I could. The second mission was more simple. None of those attacking Clan Short were allowed to live." That hung on the air for more than a few seconds.

"But... how?" Jesse asked softly.

Both boys jumped when the bag the Cynthia was carrying started to float away from her. It landed right behind Alister, who was still staring off into the stars. Both boys watched in awe as the zipper slowly opened. They gasped when, finally opened, they could see what was inside. Sitting on top of some sort of folded white cloth were weapons. Lots of them. Everything from two samurai swords to knives and

guns. "I am a member of a group that, for the last two thousand years, we've been fighting to protect people who can't protect themselves."

"But... but how... I mean.. you're just a kid!" Jesse said, still staring at the weapons inside the bag.

"That's not quite true... I may look like a kid, but... well... I'm over a thousand years old."

"But... But how's that possible?!" Jesse breathed out, clearly in shock.

Alister turned around and withdrew a cell phone from his pocket. "Come on, I wanna show you something." He pushed a few buttons on the cell while lifting it to his head. "Kenneth... please transport all four of us." He paused for a moment listening to the person on the other side. "JUST FUCKING DO IT!" he said into the phone, then slammed it shut. Less than a second later, Dawson and Jesse both got to experience their first transport.

The four of them appeared on a trail high in the mountains. Both Jesse and Dawson knew they had to be real high as the air was thinner than either of them had ever felt before. Dawson looked up and saw clouds close to them, maybe only a hundred feet or two back up the mountain they were on. It was mid-morning, which Dawson figured out quickly meant they were on the other side of the Earth.

Looking around, he saw some of the largest trees he'd ever seen in his life. The smallest of them could have fit three or four of him inside the trunk. For the first time in his life, Dawson saw something he'd always wanted to: real ancient growth forest, in pristine condition.

"Come on... I'm sure you'll have enough time to play up here later if you want," Alister said as he walked down the trail. Obediently, both boys followed, with Cynthia bringing up the rear. Only after about fifty feet, Alister came to the end of the trail and stopped. Dawson and Jesse stood there looking around, trying to figure out where to go. The canyon ended right behind the big tree in front of them.

With a smile Alister led them around the tree to a hidden break in the rocks. The rest followed down a large natural tunnel. When they exited the tunnel, Dawson and Jesse stood there with their jaws on the ground.

They found themselves standing high on a cliff overlooking a huge forest. Way off in the distance they could see more mountains rising up; obviously this was a huge mountain valley. Looking up, again all they saw were mountains reaching up into the clouds. Looking down, they saw trees that stretched hundreds of feet into the air. The place was alive with birds flying here and there. Off in the distance, rising out of the trees, was a huge medieval-style castle, complete with huge towering ramparts, high towers, and thick walls.

"Holy shit!" Jesse breathed out. "Where the hell are we?"

"Welcome to Sawa Fumetsu... The Dale of the Immortals... My home," Alister said almost reverently. "Come on, we have a long walk ahead of us."

For the first time, Jesse and Dawson actually looked down and saw the long winding trail that was carved out of the side of the mountain, that would take them down to the valley floor.

After almost thirty minutes of walking back and forth down the switchbacks on the trail, they reached the bottom. They didn't say much on the way down, as it took most of their concentration to navigate the windy path, and the rest was used to stare out into the new world they were descending into. When they reached the bottom, it opened up into a lush ancient forest.

They were on a trail that led off into the distance, under the huge canopy of trees. The undergrowth was sparse since the trees blocked most of the sun from getting down to the forest floor. As they walked into the forest, Dawson and Jesse were both captivated by the sheer amount of life in the forest. Almost everywhere they looked, they saw some sort of forest creatures: some being birds, but others large cats, lazily flipping their tails in the trees as they watched the new comers.

Up ahead they were met with yet another surprise. Almost right in the middle of the path, they saw what could only be called a very old cottage. Jesse thought it looked like it could have come right out of one of the fantasy movies he loved to watch.

They were almost to the clearing that the cottage was in when a large striped cat jumped down from the tree right in front of them. Jesse and Dawson both fell on their butts when it let out a loud roar.

Before either boy could get back to their feet and start running, an older boy jumped out of the trees to stand next to the cat. "DOWN THUNDER! It's okay," the boy said, stroking the large cat before he walked up to the group. While he was standing up, Dawson had a chance to size this person up. He was an older teen about Dawson's age, wearing a leather vest open at the chest, and a pair of pants that looked like they were made from animal hide. He had long dark hair that was tied back by strips of leather, and was wearing a necklace that looked like it held teeth from a number of different creatures. He had a long knife strapped to his side, and a bow, along with a quiver of arrows slung across his back. Dawson would not have been surprised if the boy had pointed ears by this point.

"Alister?! Is that really you?" The boy asked in surprisingly perfect English.

Alister grinned, walked up to the boy, extended his arm, and they grasped at the wrist. "Yeah Franco... I'm back for a bit."

"That's great to hear. Who are your friends?" He asked while once again stroking the big cat, who seemed to purr.

Alister stepped back and put his hand on Dawson's shoulder. "This is Dawson," then he went over next to Jesse, "and this is Jesse."

Franco seemed to stare at Jesse, then to Alister, then back to Jesse. "Oh no... not again... Alister..." Alister fixed him with an icy glare, and after a moment the boy wilted. "Hey.. it's your ass, not mine." he said, then turned around. "Come on, I'll show you in."

Dawson was about to ask what just happened, but Cynthia caught his arm and gently shook her head, clearly saying not to bring it up. Dawson figured he'd get an explanation at some point.

Not a word was said as they walked for the next hour. Jesse and Dawson were busy watching the sights, and trying to stay away from the big cat that was walking next to Franco.

Finally they broke out of the trees and both boys again stopped dead. This time they were awestruck by the huge walls in front of them. The open plains ran for maybe half a mile, then met with huge walls that had to be fifty to sixty feet tall. There was a small stream that wound its way around the castle, and acted like a small moat. Neither Dawson nor Jesse noticed when Franco gave Alister a hug, then he and his cat went back to the cottage.

As they made their way around the castle, they could clearly see herds of animals grazing on the huge plains and fields that stretched out from the front of the castle. They saw horses, cows, and even some animals that the two boys had never seen before.

As they rounded the first of the castle wall corners, they started to run into the village that was crowded around the front gate. At first Dawson was stunned at the dichotomy that he saw. Intermixed between the mud huts with thatched roofs were brick one-story buildings, Viking-style longhouses, and Chinese-style one-room huts. After a second of looking, though, he realized that in a weird way, they all fit together. Behind almost every house, he could see small gardens, some with people working in them.

Another thing that surprised him was how clean the area was. He had thought that a village like this would be dirty and muddy; this one wasn't. Even though it looked to him like they had stepped back in time several hundred or even thousand years, the place had a very clean, almost homey feel to it.

As they walked down the 'streets' which were more like cobblestone paths, Dawson and Jesse got another surprise. Alister quickly ducked into a smallish brick building. He stopped just inside the doorway, and smiled softly as he looked around. He turned back to Jesse and Dawson, "make yourselves at home, we need to talk." Jesse and Dawson sat down at the small table in the middle of the room, while Alister went over to the fireplace. Rather quickly, he had a small fire going, and after filling a small pot, he set it over the fire. Rushing around the small room, he quickly brought back four cups, and several different herbs. Once the water was hot, he crushed up the herbs and put them into the teapot. He stirred it around a few times, then proceeded to pour four cups. Cynthia had disappeared into the back when they got there, but now came back with a steaming loaf of bread. While Alister was handing out the tea, Cynthia cut the bread and offered it to the two boys before putting a large chunk in front of Alister and a smaller one in front of her own place.

Dawson and Jesse each took a tentative sip of the tea, then broke out in smiles at the taste. They both did the same with the bread, and quickly their teenaged appetites came in full force. Before Cynthia could finish her small piece, the three boys had destroyed what was left of the loaf.

Alister sat back with a smile on his face. "It's been too long," he said, more to himself than anyone else. Then he fixed Jesse with a long gaze, before speaking. "Jesse, I need to ask one quick question." After getting a nod of approval from Jesse, he went on. "You said you think you liked me... how serious were you?"

Jesse started to blush, but then shook his head. He had been wanting to be treated like an adult for over a year, and he wasn't going to act like a kid now. "I'm as serious about that as I can be. Alister, I don't know what it is about you, but I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you."

Dawson wasn't surprised... he knew his friend, better than anyone else. When Jesse made his mind up about something, that was it. He wasn't stubborn per se, it's just that he knew what he wanted, and he went after it.

"You know that causes some issues..." Alister said, and Jesse quickly jumped in. Dawson knew his best friend was getting upset.

"What issues?" Jesse demanded.

Alister sighed. "The biggest one is age. I am just shy of my one thousandth birthday... yet I look like I'm maybe twelve or thirteen."

"Yeah, and....?" Jesse jumped in.

"...And that means in fifty years, I'm not going to look any older than I do now... while you'll be in your sixties. THAT'S the issue."

Jesse sat back like someone had just shot him. No one said anything while he dwelled on that issue for a few moments. Finally Alister spoke up again. "Can you deal with that?"

It took Jesse a moment to respond, but when he did, he lifted his eyes and forced them to meet Alister's. The young boy smiled when he saw the look of determination in those eyes. "Yes... yes, I can deal with that. I don't know how to explain it, but the age thing doesn't matter to me. There's something about you that I just can't get enough of. You can ask Dawson; I don't care about what the person looks like, I love what's inside, and the first time I looked into your eyes, I saw something there that just drew me in. I can't seem to help it." He dropped his eyes for a moment, and then sat up straight, staring his young love right in the eyes. "Alister, I can't say it any plainer.... I love you."

Alister and Jesse's eyes were locked for almost a minute before a broad smile appeared on his face. "Okay... I need to go change... I'll be right back." With that he got up and walked into one of the back rooms.

Once he was gone, Cynthia finished her tea, then looked at the two boys. "Maybe I can put things into a bit better perspective. I know you guys think I'm his mother... but you're wrong. I'm actually HIS daughter." She let that one hang in the air for a few moments before going on. My mother was what the people here call a 'short timer'... or a 'short lifer'. The reason I bring that up is simply this. While they may not mean it, some of the people here will look down upon you simply because of how long you live. They don't mean it. It just happens."

"Okay... and that means?" Dawson asked. Cynthia was about to respond, but something behind Dawson caught her attention.

"Oh shit..." She muttered, and both Dawson and Jesse turned around. Jesse gasped as he saw Alister. He went to change.. and change he did.

Alister now stood there wearing tight crushed velvet pants, purple in color, a white cotton shirt underneath a chain mail shirt. Over that was an actual tabard bearing a black cloud on a white field, a lightning bolt zigzagging out of the cloud, striking a forge an anvil and breaking it into two pieces.

On his wrists were two leather bracers, both having obvious blade hilts sticking out the top. He also wore tight leather grieves on his lower legs. Hilts sticking out of them made everyone know that Alister was armed for bear.

At his left side were two swords, one sitting slightly higher than the other. On his right there was a smaller knife. Across his back was strapped a large two-handed sword. It looked especially huge on such a small boy. On his head was a small silver circlet accented perfectly by his straw blond hair. Both Jesse and Dawson thought that Alister looked for all the world like a medieval prince.

Jesse slowly stood and walked over to Alister. "What do you think?" Alister asked in a small voice.

"You... you look... I don't know... Regal is the only thing I can think of. You look great!" Jesse couldn't help himself, he leaned down lower and kissed Alister. He pulled back almost immediately, but Alister grabbed him, and quickly they were both lost in their first real kiss.

"Well, there goes my wearing my new dress," Cynthia said with a chuckle. "I'll be right back," knowing the only one who was paying attention was Dawson.

They broke the kiss and just stood there staring into the others eyes for a few moments before Cynthia came back out. She was dressed very similarly to Alister, with almost as many weapons.

"So now what?" she said as she sat down.

"Now we go to the castle." Alister said as he turned, taking Jesse's hand, and walking out the door.

"Oh shit... here we go," she said as she stood up and followed Dawson out the door.

Cynthia leaned down and whispered to Dawson, as they caught up to Alister and Jesse. "No matter what happens, stay close to Alister or me, and try not to say anything. Things are about to get a bit dicey."

Dawson would have responded, but something caught his attention. When they first came into the village, the place was alive with people running all over the place. Children were playing in the streets, horses pulling carts rumbled here and there, and down the street, many people were hawking their wares in a small square.

What really caught his attention was how the people were dressed. He was a bit embarrassed as he watched all the younger kids running around either nude or with small breechclouts. But then he remembered all the books he read about medieval times, and it made sense. What was surprising, though, was how the adults were dressed. He expected them to look like they stepped out of a Renaissance Faire, and some were, but others were dressed in simple Asian robes, while others looked like they should have been on the set of Braveheart, and even some that looked like they should have just stepped off of a Viking longship or something.

Now however, as Alister slowly made his way down the streets towards the castle, people moved out of his way, some of them even bowing. The children stopped playing and stared at Alister like he was some kind of living legend.

As they walked, Alister would stop and share a word or two with some of the people, some of the kids would run up just to touch him, then skitter away giggling. Alister always had a smile for everyone he met, a smile and a kind word. Dawson knew that these were Alister's people, and he loved them just as much as they loved him.

The atmosphere seemed almost festive as the small group made their way towards the castle. Jesse, who was still holding Alister's hand, was almost as much of a draw as Alister himself. At one point, an older lady called out asking Alister if Jesse was his "new partner." Both Dawson and Jesse stiffened when they heard that, but Alister just laughed and nodded. A few seconds later, a young girl of about ten ran up and pulled on Jesse's shirt till he bent a little. When he did, she reached up and draped a necklace made of flower petals around his neck. When he straightened, Alister pulled him around in front of him, and kissed him heavily right there in the middle of the street. All around them people erupted in cheers.

"Things are not the same here as they are where you come from. All the people around here have lived long enough to understand that love is something precious, no matter who it is between," Cynthia said to Dawson with a smile. Dawson could only laugh at the dopey look on Jesse's face when they broke the kiss.

By the next block, Jesse and Alister had a small crowd around them. Dawson paled a bit as a kid maybe a year or two older than he and Jesse came running up to the crowd holding a sheathed sword. He moved a bit closer, and could hear the kid say something to Alister in a language that he couldn't understand. Alister smiled and said something back, while taking the sword. The crowd backed up a bit as Alister pulled the sword free of the scabbard, which he then handed to Jesse to hold onto. Jesse also backed up and Alister started to swing the sword around, testing it.

After a few minutes of swinging the sword, he stopped and smiled at the boy who gave it to him. Reaching towards Jesse for the scabbard, he again spoke in the strange language. After a quick discussion Alister launched forward wrapping the older boy in a hug. Stepping back, the boy turned to Jesse and went down on one knee.

"My friend Erik here does not believe it would be proper for you to walk around without a proper sword on your side. He would like it if you would honor him by wearing one he made by his own hand. Trust me, it is of superb quality." Jesse didn't know what to say, but finally he nodded. A cheer went up as Alister started to strap the sword to Jesse's side.

"Ummm... I don't know if I like the idea of Jesse wearing a sword. He might hurt himself," Dawson said softly to Cynthia, who just chuckled.

"You know I'm surprised. The way Alister has been talking about you two, I thought you would have been the one to figure it out already?" Cynthia said with a bit of a gleam in her eyes.

"Figure what out?" Dawson asked while turning fully towards her.

"I know you've been dying to ask, so I'll explain it now. Alister said you two passed the first tests."

"Yeah..." Dawson said not really sure where this was going, not really sure if he wanted to either.

"Alister has already begun to train you..." She said and Dawson started to interrupt when she held her hand up. "I'll get to that in a second, but he has already started the training. Before he'll train someone, they have to pass two of his tests. The first one was simple, and you passed even before he met you. You have to genuinely care about others. Not just the people you know, but about everyone. Both you and Jesse passed that test with flying colors... just look at your Eagle Scout project."

"Okay.. I guess I can understand that one," Dawson said, a bit lost.

"The second test is a bit more complicated, yet at the same time more simple. Can your mind 'handle' the training. Both of you passed that one, you more so than Jesse. But you both passed."

"I'm lost..." Dawson said, running his fingers through his hair.

Cynthia chuckled a bit and spoke softly, much like a teacher to a student. "Your morning meditation sessions. They were more than what you seem to think. See, Alister was actually linking your three minds together, and imparting knowledge and experience to both of you."

Dawson tried to come up with something intelligent to say, but all he could come up with was "huh?"

She laughed again, but quickly stopped when she saw his indignant look. "Sorry, you have to understand though, it's something I've grown up with my entire life. Okay... do you trust me?"

Dawson had to think for a second, but finally nodded. Surprisingly, even after everything that had happened, he did trust her.

"Okay, I want you to close your eyes and clear your head. Okay?"

He nodded and tried to do as she said. "Find that spot with in you that you always clung to during the meditations."

Sinking deep inside himself, Dawson was surprised at how easily he grasped that little speck of light that always seemed to be just below the surface anymore.

"Now, holding onto that, open your eyes." She instructed with a soft voice. As soon as his eyes were open and focused on her, she lashed out with a fist, trying to punch him upside his head.

Without even realizing what he was doing, his own arm lashed out, blocking her punch, then spinning around, he retaliated with his own roundhouse kick, a kick that, had he been thinking, he'd have known he had no way of doing.

Easily she evaded and came at him again; for about twenty seconds, Dawson deflected everything she tried to hit him with. He never landed his own blow, but he did try.

When she stopped, he stood there panting as he looked at her with wide eyes. Jesse ran up to Dawson and stood in front of him. "HOLY SHIT, Daws... where the hell did that come from?"

"I.. I have no clue," he breathed, staring at his hands like they were alien to him.

"See, Cynthia.. I told you he was good," Alister said, walking up to the three of them. The crowd that had gathered was silent as they watched what was happening. "That, Dawson, was just a sample of what you've been given over the past three weeks. It's a testament to just how strong your mind is, and how well you'll be able to handle the following lessons. I'm giving you guys more than just martial arts... but we'll get into that later. For now, let's get to the castle."

Dawson numbly nodded and the four of them started off for the castle again. This time, shortly after Alister snaked his hand into Jesse's, Cynthia did the same with Dawson's. The boy gave a shy smile to the woman, but didn't pull his hand away.

They walked hand in hand for the next five minutes as they wound their way up to the castle. Both Dawson and Jesse were somewhat getting used to the celebrity-type status that they seemed to have inherited simply by being with Alister.

Dawson couldn't help but stare in awe as they came to the actual front entrance of the walled castle. As they walked across the small bridge that spanned the little stream, he looked up at the top of the huge walls, watching as people walked back and forth over them. The walls had to be more than fifty feet high. When they went through the tunnel of the wall, he figured they must be at least thirty feet thick. He gaped as they walked under the huge portcullis that hung suspended half way through the tunnel. He never thought he would actually see a castle like this up close and personal.

As they walked through the courtyard that opened up after the wall, he was again impressed by the trees and gardens inside. As they walked, once again people were smiling, waving, and some of them even bowing towards their little group. Their festive mood was contagious, and Dawson felt himself smiling and nodding to people as he went by.

Things changed though when they reached the steps on the castle. As they made their way up, the two guards standing on either side of the big opened doors watched them carefully. Both of them were huge men compared to Alister, as well as Dawson and Jesse. They were both in heavy armor with large swords at their sides, and in their hands they each held a very long, almost ten foot long, pike. As they got to the top of the steps, the two guards almost hesitantly crossed their pikes, barring entrance into the castle.

From beside Dawson, Cynthia groaned quietly, and he could see Alister's shoulders tense. No one moved for about five seconds, until Alister's hand, the one that was not holding Jesse's, moved slightly to rest on one of his swords.

No words were exchanged, but Alister's threat was received loud and clear. The guards glanced at each other, then slowly moved their pikes back, while giving Alister a slight bow. Without saying anything, Alister started walking again, and Cynthia almost pulled Dawson along to keep up.

Cynthia leaned down and whispered silently in Dawson's ear. "Things might happen in here that seem strange to you. Please try and keep your words to yourself till afterward... Alister knows what he's doing... I hope." She said the last part more to herself than anyone else.

When Dawson looked around this time, he wasn't in for many surprises. The castle looked a lot like he expected a castle to look like. Torches lit the hallway they were walking down, and as they made their way into what must have been the great hall, Dawson couldn't help but gasp as he saw the huge and ornate tapestries that hung from the walls.

The room was huge; he'd never been in a room anywhere near this size. The huge table that sat in the middle of the room had to be at least fifty foot long and maybe twenty wide. There were several smaller tables scattered about, and another table sitting, slightly raised, at the head of the long table.

Gathered around the high table were about ten boys and three adults. Two of them were standing talking to one of the boys, the other was sitting in a chair cuddling one of the kids, who looked to be maybe seven or eight. All of them were dressed as richly as Alister, although none of them looked to be holding as many weapons as he was.

From inside his head, Cynthia said, *'Don't freak on me here, but there's somethings you should know.'*

He only stumbled slightly, but recovered quickly. *'You mean you can read my mind?'* he thought to her, and he could hear her snicker in his mind.

'Just about everyone you've seen since you got here, and everyone in this room can read your mind. We don't do it all the time, but we can,' she responded.

'Oh great...' Dawson thought, thinking of all the things he'd thought about Cynthia, and his face blushed heavily.

'Don't worry.. your fantasies are yours and yours alone... I didn't read into those,' she laughed, making him blush harder, before she continued, *'Forget about that for now, there's a few things you need to know. First off, are the people here... starting with the three adults. The man and the taller woman are Thomas and Morgana, the Lord and Lady of the Castle. The woman with them is Ellen, she's the one who runs the household staff.'*

'Okay...'

'As for the kids, they're all members of our group. The oldest looking kid is Leo... He's the leader.' Dawson took a moment to size up Leo. Well built, probably about his age or a bit older, long red hair, and piercing blue eyes. The scowl on his face did not make him look friendly at all.

'The youngest looking one, the one being cuddled by Ellen, is Leander. He's actually the oldest. He doesn't get involved much with the goings on, but he is someone that the rest listen to.' She would have continued, but Leo's voice interrupted her.

"Alister! How nice to see you've come back!" With those few words, and the sarcasm dripping from them, Dawson took an immediate dislike to the boy.

The tension in the air grew much thicker as Leo's words hung on the air. Alister never stopped walking, not even acknowledging that Leo spoke, till he was in front of the two adults. He dropped to a knee, and immediately, Jesse, Cynthia, and then Dawson also went to a knee. "Lord Thomas, Lady Morgana, it is good to see you again," he said as he rose back to his feet.

Morgana stepped down from the dais that the table sat on, and embraced Alister. When she broke the hug, she held him out at arm's length. "Oh, Alister... it is so good to see you again. It's been what... almost fifty years?"

"Just about, my Lady," Alister spoke while kissing her on both cheeks.

"So who are your new friends?... please introduce us." She said, smiling at Jesse and Dawson.

Leo took a few steps till he was standing next to Alister. "Yes.. please introduce us, and while you at it tell us why their kind is here?"

Morgana gasped out "LEO!" in a shrieking tone, while Alister whirled on the older boy and got right in his face.

In a very dangerous tone, one that made Dawson shiver, the small boy spoke, venom dripping from his words. "You have crossed the line again...brother... step back over it, and I will forgive you... once again."

Leo's face turned red in anger. "How DARE you speak to me like that, and how DARE you soil our home with their presence?" Then, pointing at Cynthia, "it's bad enough with that half-breed..." Before he could say anything else, Leo was flying across the room.

Alister reached down and drew both of his swords as Leo jumped back to his feet, drawing his. Jesse stumbled back as Alister screamed out, "You DARE to question MY honor?!?!"

Jesse gathered his feet under him and drew his new sword. That's when all hell broke loose. As soon as Jesse's sword cleared its scabbard, almost all the other boys drew theirs as well, pointing all of them at Jesse. Cynthia launched herself forward, drawing her blades, and put herself between Jesse and the rest of the Storm. She was crouched down, looking ready to do battle any second. The only one who hadn't moved was Leander; he was still cuddled into Ellen's lap.

Suddenly the room boomed with the voice of a man whom everyone, excepting Dawson and Jesse, knew. "What is this nonsense!? Who says that members of MY family aren't welcome here?" Both Leo and Alister found themselves being wrapped up quickly by lengths of chain that had been lying on the floor. Now, they were lying face down on the floor with the chain wrapped around their bodies, making any movement impossible. The elderly man made his way over to Cynthia and the boys. He put his arm around the boys' shoulders. "Dawson...Jesse, since you are the newest members of my family, why don't you and all the others join me in my apartments for some tea and biscuits?" As everyone made their way out, Jesse looked at Alister, as he was a bit concerned, but found that his love had a wry smirk on his face. In fact he was noticing that everyone had the same wry inscrutable smirk on their face. "Now, Master Jesse, don't be concerned. Your boyfriend will be all right. They both just needed a time out. Now why don't you put your pig sticker away and enjoy your welcome party."

Dawson glanced at his watch as the four of them appeared just inside his garage. "Shit, guys, it's four thirty in the morning, and my parents are up. I'm in deep shit."

Alister chuckled slightly. "Don't worry, dude, that's why we came with you," he said while pointing to Cynthia.

Dawson reached out and took her hand. "I'm not sure if that's helpful or not." Everyone chuckled, then he took a deep breath and walked through the door.

"DAWSON!" They heard his mother shout. "Where have you been all night?!" She grabbed him up in a hug that almost seemed to suffocate him. His dad just stood there, leaning against the doorway into the living room, watching as he always did.

Dawson's mother was almost hysterical by this point and Dawson had to push her away. "MOM! I'm okay... but we need to talk."

"We need to talk?" she said, still a bit in hysterics. "What do we need to talk about. Oh my God.. you didn't? Thomas, I told you that's what this was about. Who did you get pregnant?"

Before he could answer her, she finally noticed the other people in the room and the fact that Dawson was still holding Cynthia's hand... her face went white. "HER?!?! you got Alister's MOM pregnant?!?!"

"MOM!!!! LISTEN TO ME FOR A SECOND!" Dawson had to holler to try and get over his mother's hysterical fit. "NO ONE IS PREGNANT!"

She quieted down and just stared at him. Finally he led her physically over to the couch and sat her down. He stepped back, ran his hand through his hair and sighed. Before he could say anything, his father spoke up. "Son, before you begin, let me say this. I... We trust you. You're almost an adult now. But I think we deserve an answer as to where you've been all night long."

Dawson looked up, and met his father's eyes for a second, then quickly looked around the room. Finding what he wanted, he rushed over to the standing globe that had been there for as long as he can remember. He spun it for a second then found what he wanted. "Here."

His father got a perplexed look on his face and started walking over when Alister cleared his throat. "Actually about an inch and a half down," he said with a chuckle.

"Oh sorry.... here," Dawson said as he repositioned his finger right when his father got there. Looking at where he pointed, his father looked up with shock on his face... "You've been... damn.. how the hell do you pronounce that place?"

He looked up, and finally saw what Alister and Cynthia were wearing, including the sword that was still hanging from Jesse's side. Dawson, being in a rush to get home, didn't give them time to change. "And what are you guys wearing?"

Silence reigned for a few seconds before Dawson spoke up. "Look, there's a lot to explain, why don't we move into the kitchen and have some tea or something."

"That sounds good," Tom said as he went over and helped his wife off the couch and into the kitchen.

Once they were all seated, Jesse and Dawson rushed around the kitchen making drinks: coffee for his mom and dad, as well as Cynthia and Alister, while he and Jesse had hot cocoa.

They sat there sipping on their coffee for maybe five minutes before Dawson's mother stood up. "I'm just happy you're home, Dawson. If you all will excuse me, I need to finally get some sleep. Tom, please make sure you call the office and let them know we won't be in." Before anyone could say anything else, she walked out of the kitchen and went upstairs.

Tom sat there looking stunned after his retreating wife. Before he could say anything, Dawson spoke up. "Dad.. I asked Alister to make mom go to bed because I don't think she could handle what we need to say."

"What do you mean Alister made her?" Tom asked, sounding VERY suspicious.

"Dad, both Alister and Cynthia are telepathic. Mom wouldn't be able to handle this... so Alister made her want to go to bed." Dawson knew he crossed a line just from the look on his father's face. He had never really seen his father angry before, but now it seemed that he was about to.

Dawson saw his father open his mouth about to explode when his head snapped around and met Alister's intense stare. For what seemed like a lifetime, the two stared into each other's eyes. Dawson was about to say something when Cynthia took his hand and shook her head.

Silently they watched over the next five minutes as neither Alister nor Dawson's father twitched a muscle. Finally Dawson's father sat back and stared in wonder, first at Alister then at Cynthia. Dawson was waiting on egg shells to see what his father's reaction would be, but Alister's next comment rocked him to the core. "Please remember, Thomas... most of what I shared with you is NOT for others. Please keep much of what we discussed to yourself."

Tom looked over at Alister and nodded, smiling slightly. "I know. Why don't you kids get some sleep? We can talk about this later." With that, the man got up and walked out to the back porch.

Dawson sat there slack jawed as he watched his father leave. "What... what did you do to him?"

"I didn't DO anything... we just had a long talk," Alister said, not being offended by what Dawson was insinuating.

"What did you tell him?" Dawson asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"I told him everything. But know this... matters of the mind, and what are said there are private. Don't bother asking cause I am not going to say."

Atlanta Georgia, Sunday Oct. 31st 2004

The big day had finally arrived. Today at one o'clock, the dedication ceremony for the Youth Center, as well as the Youth/Family Shelter, would be held. Dawson's group arrived shortly after eight in the morning, and weren't all that surprised to see that things were already hopping there. Dawson's mom ran off to hang up everyone's good clothes, while Dawson, his father, Jesse, Alister, and Cynthia went about helping get everything set up.

By ten the news crews started to arrive. Dawson's dad hadn't told him about that part, and he never even thought about it. Before he knew what was happening, his mother pulled him into the Center and handed him his scout uniform, telling him to get dressed. She then spent about ten minutes fussing over him until his uniform was on properly... in her mind, anyways.

He hadn't even made it out of the door though when Cynthia attacked him. He may have been dressed to mom's standards, but not to his now girlfriend's. Of course that made his blush real hard when she licked her fingers to comb out a bit of hair on his head.

Once he was fully outside, he saw that Jesse was also dressed in his scout uniform, and somehow, Alister was wearing one as well. He looked and saw his father was wearing one of his nicer suits, and his mother was wearing a nice fitting pants suit of the sort that lady executives like to wear. But then he saw Cynthia, and his jaw really hit the floor.

She was standing there wearing a very tight fitting pants suit that was slightly open at the top showing off her silky smooth neck. Adorned on it was a huge jeweled necklace. He literally could not tear his eyes away from her, and at that moment was rather glad he wore tight briefs so as not to show everyone his 'reaction.'

Thankfully, Jesse saw what was happening, and even though he was laughing, he grabbed Dawson by the arm and led him away. "Come on stud, there's some people you need to talk to."

"Huh?" was the best response that Dawson could make as Jesse led him over to two people who were standing not far away, one of them holding a large news camera.

"Ahhh.. so this is the young man we've heard so much about?" the female reporter said to Dawson as he came up. The guy holding the camera shifted it up to his shoulder, and held it at the ready.

"I guess so... I'm Dawson Sheridan," Dawson said, now fully recovered, and held his hand out to the woman.

She gently shook it, and then stepped back. "I'm Alice Gibbons, and I'd like to ask a few questions if I may?"

"Sure, why not." Dawson shrugged and her smile widened even more.

"Great. Okay, here's what were going to do. When Phil there gives me the signal, I'm gonna start off with a short introduction, then I'm going to ask you a few questions. Don't worry if you stumble over something, this isn't live. We can always redo it. Okay?"

"Okay.. sounds easy enough," Dawson said, then turned to look at the camera. They waited for a few seconds as Alice looked over some notes, then stood up straight and signaled to Phil she was ready.

After fiddling with the camera for a second, he gave her a hand signal and she started talking. "Thank you, Mary, and good evening everyone, this is Alicia Gibbons reporting from the soon to be opened Youth Center and Youth/Family Shelter. I'm currently standing here with the remarkable young man who made all of this possible. Dawson Sheridan has gathered together a small army of fellow scouts and local tradesman who have all volunteered their time to come and help him make his dream a reality." She turned slightly towards Dawson, and then held the mic out so as to catch what he said.

"First off, Dawson, can you tell us what you are doing this for?"

"Of course, Ms. Gibbons," Dawson stated with more self confidence than he really felt. He knew this was coming, and had talked with his dad over how to give an interview. His father had had to give many of them for his work as a lawyer, so Tom had given him many ideas on how to deal with this. He looked into the camera and took a deep breath. "I reached the rank of Life Scout a little over a year ago. According to Scout requirements, a Scout must hold the rank of Life for a period of six months before he can attain the rank of Eagle Scout... the highest rank one can achieve in scouting. For those that may not know, earning your Eagle Scout is something that less than one percent of all Scouts actually do. It is something that stays with you for the rest of your life and even gives you advancement in organizations like the military. An Eagle Scout goes into the military one rank higher than normal."

He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts then started again. "If you read the Scout Handbook, it says that... 'While a Life Scout, plan, develop, and give leadership to others in a service project helpful to any religious institution, any school, or your community.' With that in mind, I came up with this project."

Alice was surprised at how he answered that, but being a seasoned reporter, she did not let it show. "I spoke with your Scout Master earlier, and he told me that this was the most ambitious Eagle Scout project that he had ever heard of. Was that something that you intended?"

"Actually no, that never really entered my mind. I had read an article online once where Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan said something that really stuck in my mind. He said that "to ease distress is logical." I fully agree with that statement, so when I first came up with the idea, and shared it with my fellow scout and best friend Jesse, we both knew it was going to be big. For a while I wasn't even sure I could do it. But then something my father always told me came back to me. He always said 'Dawson, you can do anything you put your mind to.' When I realized he was right I went after it."

"That's some good advice, but I'm sure we would all really like to know WHY you chose this particular project," she asked, absolutely loving the way this interview was going.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Gibbons, but I am not going to answer that right now," he said and saw the look on her face, clearly not liking the answer. "It's not that I don't want to, it's just that I have a speech prepared for the dedication ceremony where I lay all that out, and I don't want to spoil it," he said with a conspiratorial smile.

She grinned back, then turned to the camera. "Who can argue with that? Thank you very much for your time, Dawson, and I personally cannot wait to hear your speech later. Mary... Back to you." No one moved for a few seconds until Phil dropped the camera, going, "Okay, we got it."

Alice turned to Dawson and stuck her hand out. "Well, Dawson, you sure know how to leave people with a cliffhanger, I personally can't wait for later."

"No problem, Ms. Gibbons, I just hope I don't screw it up," Dawson said, shaking her hand and laughing a bit.

"After that interview I highly doubt it. Well, I'll let you get back to your work. Good luck." And with that she rushed off to try and interview a few of the dignitaries that had come to the event.

Before Dawson could even turn around, his father called to him. When he looked he saw his father and mother standing there with a man in a suit, as well as two boys maybe a little younger than himself. The strange thing was that both boys were wearing uniforms that were clearly military in nature.

As he was walking over to the group, he was joined by Jesse, Alister and Cynthia. He couldn't help but smile as Cynthia gently touched his hand. Every time she touched him, it sent a bolt of electricity up his spine. He really had it bad for her.

As they reached the other group his father grinned and put his hand on Dawson's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Dawson, I would like to introduce you to Governor Hill. Governor, this is my son Dawson Sheridan."

The Governor extended his hand to Dawson who shook it. "Dawson, it's an honor to meet you. I've heard so much about you and what you've done here, and I must say I am most impressed." Dawson, of course, noticed the camera man that was there and figured out why the man didn't release his hand right away and kept shaking it for several seconds.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, sir," Dawson said, thankful that the man finally let his hand go.

"Oh yes," The man said after an almost awkward moment of silence. "There are two young men who asked that I introduce you to them. This is Commander Adam Casey, and Sub-Commander Logan Hayes, both members of Clan Short of Vulcan."

Dawson was shocked as he numbly shook both boys' hands. Adam gave the boy a wink as he turned to the Governor. "Thank you, Governor Hill. Mister Sheridan, would you do me the favor of giving the Governor and his entourage a tour of the faculties?"

"Of course, Adam," Dawson's father said, already figuring out that Adam did not like the formality of titles. "Sir, if you would like to follow me, we can leave the kids to get to know each other."

Once the men walked away Adam grinned at the group that remained. "God, I hate bureaucrats. Dawson... you wanna go grab a soda?" Everyone laughed as Dawson agreed and the entire group went off in search of drinks.

Dawson was really nervous as he walked up to the podium. He had forced it so that his speech would be last and he could go talk to his father right after. Now though, he was wondering if his father wouldn't be really pissed at what he was about to say.

He looked out over the sea of people before him and again almost lost his nerve. Seated in front of him were many of the dignitaries, as well as many of the adults that had helped make this happen. Behind them were lines of cameras and people taking pictures. Behind them were most of the kids that had helped do all the work, and a lot more people who wanted to be there to see what was going on.

His eyes locked with his father's for a moment, and his father gave him a nod of encouragement. He glanced down at his notes, then back up and began to speak. "First off, I want to thank everyone that's here today. But more so, I want to thank the many people who helped make this happen. I've been

asked many times why I choose to do this, and every time I have not answered. The reason for that is simple. If people knew what I was about to say, they may not have liked it, or may not have helped."

He took a deep breath as the audience was completely silent now. He looked right at his father and held his gaze as he spoke. "Dad, please forgive me if this embarrasses you... I'm sorry, but I think everyone should know what it was about you that gave me the strength to see this through."

He let his gaze slip from his father's before he lost his courage. "See, many of you may have either heard of or know Thomas E. Sheridan, high powered and high priced attorney. The man who graduated top of his law class at Harvard Law, and also the youngest of that class by two years. You may know him as the man who has argued in front of the State's supreme court fourteen times, and the United States Supreme Court twice. You may even have heard that he refused appointment to the position of Attorney General for the State of Georgia, simply because he was worried about the impact it would have on his family."

Dawson smiled and fought back the tears of pride that threatened to fall. "What many of you don't know, and I know I am not supposed to know, is that he has donated over half of his earnings to various charities since he first earned a paycheck. I only know of a few of the amounts, but I know for sure he has donated over twenty five million dollars to Saint Jude Children's Hospital, around nineteen million dollars to Child Watch, a group that tries to educate people on the signs of child abuse, and has singlehandedly kept many of the summer sports programs funded when the state cut their own funding to them."

Dawson paused again, finding the courage to go on to the next part. "I'm sure many of you are wondering why he does this. I know I did. About a year ago, I found my answer, and now I am going to share that with everyone. Sorry, dad, but people really need to know; maybe it will encourage them to help out as much as it has me." Dawson still couldn't look at his father, in fear he might lose his nerve.

"You see, my father didn't grow up like I have. As a matter of fact, I'm sure my father dreamed of the life I lead as he dreamt while sleeping under an overpass. Yes... My father was homeless. He ran away from a foster home that was abusing him when he was only twelve. How many people here can imagine what that was like? Having to live on the streets before you're even a teenager. I know I can't. I can't even fathom what it must have been like to go to sleep cold and hungry. I can't imagine what it must have felt like to believe deep down inside that no one loves you. I know it's terrible for adults who have to live like that, but for a kid. A kid who is only twelve? How can that be allowed to happen? It's just unimaginable to me how that can happen."

By now, Dawson was fully into his speech. He hadn't written any of this part down, he was talking from the heart, and it showed. "Can any of you adults out there look deep into your own hearts and not weep when you think about that? Can any of you kids out there truly imagine what it must have felt like to not have anyone love you? Not have anyone there to take care of you, to not have someone there to hug you when you're crying?"

He paused for a moment, more to wipe his own tears than anything else. "Unfortunately, there are people out there that can answer yes to that question. And that hurts. It hurts deep inside my soul to know there are people out there that can actually say yes to those questions. THAT is why I decided to do this. THAT is why I begged and pleaded over four hundred people to help me. THAT is why I begged for over six million dollars to make this happen. And THAT is why I am begging for anyone who needs help, anyone who is in that sort of situation to come here."

Dawson glanced over to Jesse and nodded, Jesse moved over to a large object that had a sheet over it. It had only been delivered this morning, and Dawson had made sure that no one saw what it was. He looked back out to the crowd, who were still silent as death, and spoke again. "I can't begin to say how grateful I am that someone donated the money to have the building next door also renovated so that my full dream could come true. Many people have asked what this is going to be named, and now it's time to show you. Ladies and Gentlemen I would like to officially announce the opening on the Thomas E. Sheridan Youth Center and Shelter." With that he turned just as Jesse removed the sheet, revealing a beautifully carved granite slab, with the name of the centers engraved in it.

Everyone shot to their feet and applause exploded from the spectators as Dawson's father ran up to the stage crying and pulled Dawson into a tight embrace, both of them shedding many tears.

Almost two hours later, Dawson finally got a chance to relax. After his speech was over, there was an endless line of people who wanted to shake his hand or say something to him. After the first twenty minutes, he didn't even bother trying to remember everything that was said. Once that was dealt with, then Dawson had to give a private tour for a few important people including the two from Clan Short. He really wanted to get to know Adam and Logan better, and thankfully Alister and Jesse had been hanging out with them most of the time he was busy. That way he could get another chance to meet them when he was done.

It took a few minutes to find them, but when he did, he saw that they were off by themselves. He had to grin when he saw that Cynthia was with them as well. "Damn, Dawson," Jesse said as he got close to them, "that was one hell of a speech you gave." Jesse then grabbed Dawson up in a brotherly hug.

When they separated, Adam stuck his hand out. "Dawson. That was really a great speech you gave."

"Thanks, Adam. Coming from you, that really means a lot. I just hope that we can help some people here," he said, shaking the boy's hand. He really respected Adam and the entire Clan after everything he had heard this week, and everything he was able to find out about the Clan.

"I'm sure you will... which is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about," Adam said. He gestured over to an empty picnic table with a reserved sign on it. They all moved over and sat down, Cynthia brought out a cooler and they all opened up fresh sodas.

After taking a few sips, Dawson put his down and looked over at Adam. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

Adam smiled and set his soda down. "Why don't I let Logan explain it to you. He's better at this sort of stuff than I am."

Dawson nodded and looked over at Logan. "Well... what Adam's too chicken to say is this. If you agree, Clan Short would like to totally fund your operation here, we already have a few kids from this area at our base in Utah, and would like to bring them back here." Dawson was shocked. He had been worrying about how to raise the money for this place once it got running. They had some money left over to cover expenses, but not enough. The surprise million dollar check would help, but trying to run

a homeless shelter took a lot of money, not to mention there were many programs Dawson wasn't going to be able to do... till now.

He was about to accept when Logan held his hand up. "Before you accept, there's a few things that you need to think about. More like a few things you need to know before you accept one of the offers. See, there's a few ways we can do this. The first is that you turn the entire thing over to Clan Short, which would make the property owned by the Clan and subject to our laws, not that of any Earth-based government." Dawson was awe struck and Adam jumped in next.

"One thing that is not negotiable is the fact that you and who ever else you want involved are now members of Clan Short." Adam pushed a data pad over towards Dawson who numbly picked it up. "That holds all the relevant documents you'll need as well as our protocols. It also has a communications device in it so you can contact anyone in the Clan that you need to." Dawson gaped as Jesse breathed out a "holy shit."

"I don't need to know any of the other offers... I'll take that one!" Dawson said excitedly, and everyone around burst into huge grins.

"Tell you what, Dawson," Adam continued as he got up out of his seat. "If you can swing it, why don't all of you guys come back to Utah with us, and I'll let one of the chipmunks fill you in?"

"Really?!" Dawson exclaimed and when Adam nodded, Dawson quickly ran off to find his father.

Alister chuckled from where he stood right next to Adam. Adam looked over at the younger boy with a questioning expression on his face. "You know something... you remind me of someone."

Alister grinned as he placed a hand on the taller boy's shoulder. "You know something, my young friend... that does not surprise me."

The End...

For now.